

Linus, Lucy, and Lame Excuses

A Time to Shine!

Pass the Windex, Please!

Evangelism in **Prayer and Practice** 50

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Portraits of Jesus in Revelation

The Best-Kept Secret

18 Husky



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I Lost My Pew!

BY ERIC K. THOMSEN

I lost my pew!

Okay, not really *my* pew, but the one where we sit — and have for nearly ten years. Right in front of Ann and behind Theresa and Vivian, our church buddies, the friends we greet with a smile and a hug each week, and with whom we occasionally cut up or exchange snarky but good-natured comments about the sermon. You know...the seats where we feel right at home. You probably have your spot, too.

Honestly, it might as well be our pew. There's a stain on the cushion where my red ink pen exploded and an extra hymnal or two tucked away in the corner, just in case I forget to bring mine down from the platform after leading worship, and the cushions are molded to our — well, let's just say they are quite broken in and comfortable.



But I lost it. I lost my pew!

It happened without warning one Sunday morning. Balancing my normal load of class materials and leftover snacks, music for the service, my way-too-big Bible, and a bag of canned goods for the food pantry, I struggled up the aisle toward our pew. As I reached it, I froze. Somebody was already there — several somebodies, actually — an entire family, Mom, Dad, and kids. They looked up, and I quickly hid my look of surprise with a big smile I hoped looked genuine. "Good morning! I'm Eric the music guy. Welcome to Bethel."

Shifting my load to a new yet just as awkward position, I thrust out a welcoming hand (no, really, it was) and then made my way toward the front to find a new place to sit. We finally settled on row four, left side, left end. To be honest, I

felt unsettled the rest of the service.

I've chuckled over that incident many times. How like a human to experience surprise and, to my shame, a moment of annoyance over "losing" a pew that really wasn't mine to begin with. A pew I have prayed to be filled with new converts and families whose lives have been changed by the power of the gospel.

I can't help but recall Paul's admonishment to the Philippians to follow Christ's example of humility, putting the good of others before our own comfort or ease. Really, that pew was just a place to sit. Good thing I understand that, because, within a month, I lost the new pew, too! Currently, Jennifer and I are trying to break in the second row, left side, right end. At this point, who knows *where* we will sit on big days?

However, if "losing" another pew makes the difference in someone's eternal destiny, I will happily sit in the aisle if needed. (In all honesty, I would prefer the aisle over the "splash zone" right in front of the pulpit, and those are about the only seats left.)

About the Columnist: Eric K. Thomsen is managing editor of *ONE Magazine*. Email: eric@nafwb.org.



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🚺 SCAN ME

Linus, Lucy, and Lame Excuses

BY BRENDA EVANS

Tucked under warm covers up to his chin, Linus had his excuse all figured out. "I can't go to school today. My right shoulder hurts. If I happened to know an answer, I wouldn't be able to raise my hand."

Lucy, his ever-bossy sister, wasn't buying it: "C'mon, get up! You can always raise your other hand."

Linus pushed back his covers and yelled: "You expect me to answer questions left-handed?"

I love Linus. Sure, he offered a lame excuse, but it's brilliant and hilarious. That's Linus for you. Charles Schulz once called Linus "my serious side...the house intellectual." Linus was the Peanuts® character who was "thoughtful, cautious, intuitive, funny, and the voice of reason," and I like him. I don't care if he sucks his thumb and drags around a security blanket. We all need a little comfort sometimes, especially if we must deal with bossy people like Lucy. Besides, he's Charlie Brown's best friend. That counts for a lot.

Sure, Linus' excuse was lame, but I've made lame excuses, too, plenty of them — all less funny and certainly less brilliant. The truth is his bossy sister Lucy made excuses as well. Her excuse-making skills, especially regarding her poor performance on the baseball field, out-class Linus' sore shoulder and left-handed answers. Remember the time she told Charlie Brown she missed a fly ball because "the moons of Saturn got in my eyes." Far-fetched — sounds more like some of mine.

Regarding Lucy, Schulz once said she was a crabby bully who mocks and intimidates, and "I don't especially like her, but she works. She's mean but has a way of cutting right to the truth... through a lot of sham." She can, I suppose, but it's hard for me to like her while she's doing it. Most of the time, I don't like being shown up for who I really am under all the layers of pretense.

Until Linus and Lucy, I'd not thought all that much about Bible characters who make lame excuses, but they abound.

Moses did not want to go back to Egypt to free Israel. He made five excuses at the burning bush (Exodus 3-4).

- I'm nobody; why should I go?
- They'll ask who sent me. What'll I say?
- They won't believe me.
- I'm not eloquent and am slow of speech.
- Lord, please send someone else.

All are flimsy, but the last two hit at the crux of Moses' excuses — he was worried about speaking (and this is the man we believe wrote the first five books of the Bible), plus he simply did not want to go. As God's people, we identify with both. I sometimes worry about what to say and how to say it. Other times I just want to stay home, read a book, eat a snack, watch a movie, sit on my backside — do anything except *go*.

But to me, Aaron's excuse in Exodus 32 was the most absurd. Moses was on the mountain. The people asked for a god. Aaron told them to bring gold jewelry. They did, and he made the golden calf. But later, when Moses asked him to explain himself, he said the people wanted a god, brought gold jewelry, and "I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."

What kind of excuse is that? It's a lie, and not an innocuous white one. Fact is, Aaron lied to Moses, God, and himself. Himself because he excused his part in the golden calf and blamed the people for it all. "It's their fault, not mine," he said. Then he added an implausible lie to further distance the blame. "Not my fault! Magic," he said. "Poof! Out came this calf." God must have done it. Aaron demonstrated no shame, only blame. Are we guilty of that as well?

> Blaming others is often at the root of our lame excuses. Remember Eve blaming the serpent and Adam blaming Eve? Shifting blame to her or him or them is easy. We like pointing a finger at anyone but ourselves. Jonah even pointed his finger at God. To paraphrase, he told God, "I knew you would be gracious and merciful and slow to anger. I knew you would

relent and not destroy Nineveh. That's why I did what I did." We take comfort in pointing away from ourselves: it's *her* fault, *his* fault, *their* fault, even *God's* fault, so it can't possibly be our fault. Shifting blame is a feeble excuse. It won't stand.

Some excuses have to do with weaknesses. We're quick to take up those to excuse our behavior. Remember Barak in Judges 4? Deborah, the judge from the hill country of Ephraim, summoned him to gather 10,000 men and go to war against Sisera. She would go also, another way, draw Sisera out, and give him into Barak's hand at the river Kishon. He answered: "If you go with me, I will go, but if you do not go with me, I will not go."

Why the excuse? We assume fear. Maybe fear of death, or fear of Sisera's monstrous army, or fear of failure as a commander of troops. We don't know, except we assume Barak saw some weakness in his life that provoked him to beg off.

Deborah's answer cut deep: "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." I

wonder what Barak thought about that. He may have said to himself, "So, Deborah's going to kill Sisera and get all the glory herself." That's what I would have thought. But that's not what Deborah meant.

Jael, a Kenite wife, who'd probably never gone to battle a day in her life, received the glory. Judges 5:1-31 records "The Song of Deborah and Barak." It's a powerful psalm that praises God and the tribes who followed Deborah and Barak to battle. The song also calls out three tribes Excuses, lame OR OTHERWISE, ... are attempts to Free OURSELVES FROM BLAME OR GUILT. THEY are LIES WE tell OURSELVES.

that made excuses. They "sat still among the sheepfold" with "great searchings of the heart." They mused and mused and excused themselves from going.

Then there is Jael. No excuses there! What nerve she had. "Most blessed...of the tent-dwelling women," Deborah said and graphically described Jael's gruesome execution of Israel's enemy:

He asked for water and she gave him milk; She brought him curds in a noble bowl. She sent her hand to the tent peg And her right hand to the workmen's mallet; She struck Sisera; She crushed his head; She shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet, he sank, he fell, he lay still. Where he sank, There he fell — dead.

No getting up from that nap! At the end of Deborah's song, the author of Judges noted: "And the land had rest for forty years."

Linus, Lucy, and I are not the only ones to make lame excuses. Excuses abound in Scripture. Abraham's excuse was Sarah's beauty, and so he deceived the king of Egypt. Greedy Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard and pouted until Jezebel got it for him. David lusted after Bathsheba. Jeremiah tried to beg off God's call because he was young. Gideon stalled and stalled, asking for more and more signs. Pilate washed his hands. Peter denied Jesus saying, "I don't know what you are talking about."

Excuses, lame or otherwise, deny responsibility. They defend, justify, or hide a fault. They are pretexts, pretense, or rationalizations. They are attempts to free ourselves from blame or guilt. They are lies we tell ourselves. The dramatists of Greece's Golden Age created characters who wore enormous masks to depict dramatic characters. These actors performed "under the mask," pretending to be someone they were not. Of course, that's what actors do, even today. And that's okay.

But when we give lame excuses, we also perform "under the mask," and it's not okay. Nor are we amusing like Linus. We allow fear, pride, envy, laziness, hate, lust, or greed to taint our better selves. We pretend. We excuse or even accuse. That's never okay. So, let's make up our mind to leave behind the lame excuses, even if we must answer questions left-handed. I

About the Writer: Brenda Evans lives and writes along Rockhouse Fork Creek in Ashland, Kentucky. You may contact her at beejayevans@windstream.net.



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Her Heart Could See

BY PAUL V. HARRISON

"One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25b).

According to her own words, when Frances Jane entered the world March 24, 1820, she "was born with a pair of as good eyes as any baby ever owned." After six weeks, however, "a slight touch of inflammation" prompted her parents, John and Mercy, to call for medical help. A stranger claiming some medical knowledge treated the infant's eyes with a poultice. Blindness resulted.

Five years later, hoping for a remedy, Mercy took her daughter to a famous New York City surgeon. Frances later recalled that after his examination, he patted her head and said, "Poor little girl!"

On the boat ride home, Frances said she heard the waves telling her, "Be brave . . . brighter days will come yet." Three years later, she penned her first poem:

Oh, what a happy child I am, Although I cannot see! I am resolved that in this world Contented I will be. How many blessings I enjoy That other people don't! So weep or sigh because I'm blind, I cannot, nor I won't!

The youngster's grandmother poured Scripture into the receptive young mind. Frances later reported that by age ten she had memorized the first four books of both the Old and New Testaments. She loved learning: "There was one terrible hunger that afflicted me during all these years: and that was for knowledge — knowledge — knowledge!" Daily she prayed: "Dear God, please give me light!"

At age 15, Frances enrolled in New York City's Institution for the Blind. Learning to read, she mastered every subject except math, which she called "a great monster," writing:

I loathe, abhor, it makes me sick To hear the word Arithmetic!

Her knack for rhyming expanded. Soon she was reciting poems to famous dignitaries, including several U.S. presidents, who visited the institution. Growing into adulthood, Frances stood a mere four feet, nine inches and weighed less than a hundred pounds. She transitioned from student to teacher, and her poetic abilities led to published books and collaborations with musicians and writers in New York. She produced poems for political celebrations and several times recited her work to Congress in Washington.

In 1858, she married Alexander van Alstyne, a blind scholar ten years younger than she. They once rejoiced over a child but shortly afterwards wept over their loss. The couple lived separately most of their married life, and Frances usually used her maiden name.

In 1864, William Bradbury, who had written the tunes to "Jesus Loves Me" and "Just as I Am," asked Frances to compose Christian lyrics to which he would add music. Thus began the hymn career of Frances Jane. Sometimes writing seven hymns in a day, she would tuck away the lyrics in her memory until she dictated them to someone

whose handwriting was legible. Hers wasn't. Publishers typically paid her two dollars per hymn.

Perhaps you already have identified Frances as Fanny Crosby. She eventually wrote over eight thousand hymns, including "All the Way My Savior Leads Me," "Blessed Assurance," "I Am Thine, O Lord," and "Rescue the Perishing."

Reading her lyrics, one recognizes, as Frances Havergal put it, that, though her physical eyes were closed, her heart could see. One musician named Bing eventually popped up in the Crosby family line, but even he must take a backseat to this inimitable blind hymnist.

About the Columnist: Paul V. Harrison has pastored Madison FWB Church in Madison, Alabama, since 2015. Previously, he pastored Cross Timbers FWB Church in Nashville, Tennessee, for 22 years. He was an adjunct professor at Welch College for 17 years, teaching church history and Greek. Paul is the creator of Classic Sermon Index, a subscription-based online index of over 66,000 sermons, with clients including Harvard, Baylor, and Vanderbilt, among others: classicsermonindex.com/.

Cadence BY ETHAN MCCRANEY

Life in a military family is chaotic! As my family says, "It's always an adventure!" Between moving every three to four years, deployments, and constant goodbyes to friends, my life has had one constant — never ending change.

This does not mean I resent my life. Quite the opposite! My father is an active duty, military chaplain, and because of his career choice, we have had the opportunity to live overseas and see places most only read about. I consider myself blessed to have experienced military life, partially because I believe it was training me for the mission to which God has called me.

I remember learning we were moving to Spain in 2014. To say I was excited would be an understatement! I had heard about Spain and other European destinations in class and had seen them in movies. My mind began racing with all the possible places to explore and new experiences to be enjoyed.

Another part of me was scared and sad because I realized I was moving away from some of my best friends. I was not unfamiliar with moving. At the time, my family and I were serving as church planters in Colorado, far from our extended family in Alabama. Before that, we had moved from one church to another because my dad was a pastor. But this was different. We weren't just leaving friends and family; we were leaving our



country. We would move across the ocean to another continent where we did not speak the language.

Regardless, we had to move. When we arrived in Spain and I started school, I remember being escorted by a fellow student who showed me where classes would be. Each new person I met asked the same question: "How long are you here?" Looking back, I realize what this question truly meant.

Military kids are good at goodbyes. So, when a military kid asks, "How long are you here?" we are really asking, "How invested can I become in this relationship without being hurt?" It's a defense mechanism. If you're only there for six months to a year, there's no point in getting too deeply invested in the relationship — despite how flawed this logic may be.

I also have been guilty of asking this question, and I believe it points to a deeper issue in the lives of military children, and the entire military community. The question exposes a deeper longing for intentional connections and a sense of belonging to a "lasting" community.

Military and missionary kids are often referred to as *third culture kids*. This is a term coined by sociologists to describe a child who grows up in a different culture than either parent. Third culture kids' biggest struggle is feeling they don't belong anywhere or fit into a group. To be completely honest, I still battle this. Thankfully, because I am a believer, I know I belong to a much larger family that spans the globe. However, this is not the case for a vast majority of military children and their families. This provides an open door for the gospel.

One of our first Sundays in Spain, we met the Johnson family. They were, and still are, members of an organization called Cadence International. They were living in Spain to provide hospitality ministry for military families. Their whole purpose was to live out the mission statement of Cadence: *to share the gospel and their lives with the military community*.

Nate and Louise served in the chapel weekly and opened their home to military families for home-cooked meals and Bible study. They even started a youth group that met in their house. Nate became my mentor and has continued to mentor me for a decade. In fact, Nate and another Cadence missionary named Kevin helped me answer the call to ministry. Through the ministry of Cadence, I finally felt I had a place to belong while living overseas. Because of the impact of Cadence on my life, I believe God has called and equipped me to carry out the same ministry to other military families and children.

Beginning October 11, 2024, I became a missionary with Cadence International, and I'm currently fundraising. This is the final stage I must complete before entering the field. Currently, I do not know where I will be deployed, but I know what I will be doing. I will be continuing the mission of Cadence to share the gospel and my life with the military community. I will be paired up with an existing Cadence ministry, most likely here in the United States for now, serving alongside them. I'll help in the chapel each week, assist with ministry nights, plan events and outings, teach, and open my own home to welcome service members.

My fiancé Emma will join me in this ministry once we are married. I want to focus on single service members, as many of them are away from home for the first time, making major life choices with little guidance. At Cadence, we believe in incarnational ministry, being the hands and feet of Jesus in the military community.

I ask for your prayers as I continue fundraising and when I eventually reach the field. I also ask you to pray for our military servicemembers to be receptive to the gospel.

About the Writer: Ethan McCraney is a new missionary with Cadence International, an organization focused on ministering to the military community and reaching them with the gospel. The son of Free Will Baptist Navy Chaplain Mark McCraney (Danielle), Ethan has served alongside his family in Alabama, Colorado, Spain, Virginia, and North Carolina. Learn more at cadence.org/mccraney/.



To support Ethan and his ministry to the military community, please visit:

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Seven Reasons Your Church Needs to Focus on Discipleship

BY DR. JEFF JONES

As pastors, we are entrusted with the spiritual growth of our congregations. Establishing a systematic discipleship program is one of the most effective ways to nurture this growth. I have served the same wonderful assembly of believers at Hilltop Free Will Baptist Church since 1987. Over the decades, nothing has impacted our church more than systematically going through the Word of God via Discipleship Groups (D-Groups).

At Hilltop, we utilize *Foundations: A 260-Day Bible Reading Plan for Busy Believers* by Robby Gallaty. This plan includes journals tailored to the Old Testament, New Testament, and a third that covers strategically selected chapters providing a foundational understanding of the Bible.

Currently, Hilltop Church has 26 D-Groups, each comprised of five to seven individuals who meet weekly to discuss five devotional studies completed throughout the week. Men meet with men and women with women, fostering accountability and community. Gallaty's HEAR Journal method has been transformative for us. It encourages participants to:

- **H Highlight** a text that stood out during reading.
- **E Explain** the text in one to two sentences.
- $\mathbf{A} \mathbf{Apply}$ the text to their lives.
- **R Respond** in prayer.

These weekly meetings spark challenging and convicting conversations, and our members have witnessed tremendous spiritual growth.

Here are seven reasons your church should focus on discipleship:

 People intentionally engage with Scripture. HEAR Journals provide a structured approach. Each reading includes a brief context summary to guide participants. This method fosters a deeper understanding of God's

Discipleship is not meant to be a solo endeavor but a shared journey that strengthens the bonds within your church family.



Word. We've seen lives changed. Initially unsaved, a man in our group came to Christ within four months — in a Bojangles restaurant at the end of our meeting!

- 2. Discipleship promotes accountability and community. D-groups foster accountability and build meaningful relationships. Members pray for one another and share their spiritual journeys, creating a profound sense of belonging. Discipleship is not meant to be a solo endeavor but a shared journey that strengthens the bonds within your church family.
- **3.** People are empowered to live out their faith. Daily engagement with God's Word equips people to face life's challenges with biblical wisdom. This practice impacts their decisions at work, at home, and in the community, empowering them to live out their faith authentically.
- 4. Leaders are developed. D-Groups naturally cultivate leaders. After one or two years of participation, members are encouraged to start their own groups. At Hilltop, we've seen many individuals step up and embrace the opportunity to lead, expanding the reach of discipleship within our church.
- 5. Spiritual disciplines are strengthened. Through D-Groups, members grow in spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and studying God's Word. One memorable discussion in my group centered on fasting, which

led several participants to embark on a two-day fast, deepening their understanding and practice of this spiritual discipline.

- **6.** Discipleship leads to more discipleship. Because of D-Groups, a culture of discipleship has grown in our church. People are encouraging others to get involved. It is not mechanical but vibrant and natural.
- Worship is enhanced. When people have studied Scripture, they are ready for the worship service. For those involved in D-Groups, church is not just something you do on Sunday; it is part of your life.

Investing in discipleship is crucial for the health and vitality of any church. As a pastor, I want to influence every pastor to get involved. Pastors, I urge you to consider implementing a discipleship program in your church. Church members, I urge you to get involved in a discipleship group in your church.

The spiritual growth you will witness is worth every effort. Let's prioritize discipleship and watch as God transforms lives and communities through His Word. IMI

About the Columnist: Dr. Jeff Jones began serving Hilltop FWB Church in 1987 and became the pastor in 1996. He holds degrees from Southeastern FWB College, Bob Jones University, and Liberty University. He is the outgoing chairman of the North American Ministries board and was recently appointed to serve as president of Southeastern FWB College.

SIMULCAST SPARKS DISCIPLESHIP MOVEMENT FOR GIRLS

Winter usually brings cold, dark days, but this year it was filled with shining faces, fun, and the light of God's Word at the first ever *Shine* simulcast. On February 1, over 1,100 girls ages 12 to 18 met for this virtual event, livestreamed to 29 locations across the country. Groups of varying sizes joined in from 15 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands. One attendee defined the event as "a super-fun Girl's Day Out with a spiritual purpose."

Since 2015, *Shine* has been the branch of Free Will Baptist Women's Ministries (WNAC) that seeks to disciple teen girls. *Shine*'s motto "Know Your Worth" highlights its mission to help girls see their value is in being God's creation. In an age that defines women by false and unrealistic standards, *Shine* disciples young women in the knowledge of who the Bible says they are. Regional one-day events have been held for over ten years in various parts of the U.S.

A Dream Realized

This year's simulcast was the culmination of many years of planning and prayer. Former WNAC Director Elizabeth Hodges wrote: "As I sat there today, many memories flooded my heart and mind. My heart and my eyes overflowed with Thanksgiving. God does immeasurably more than we could ask or think!"

Amy Johnson, longtime WNAC board member and chairperson, stated: "How awesome to think a dream spoken aloud so many years ago has become a reality. God is good!"

While the main event was livestreamed from The Donelson Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee, each satellite location hosted its own event with volunteers to provide decorations, lunch, crafts, and activities. The success of the simulcast was largely due to the coordinators at each site, with an average group size of 37.

The realization of this milestone is largely due to our Free Will Baptist mindset "Better Together." Women's Ministries applied for and received a generous grant in 2024 from FWB Foundation, which made this event possible. They were also aided by the expertise of the FWB Media Commission, which supplied tech support and advice. Other national departments provided resources and helped get the word out. Pastors around the denomination helped promote the ministry of *Shine*.

shining Coast to Coast

Current Director Ruth McDonald said, "One of my favorite things about the simulcast was that it was accessible to churches and groups of all sizes. We encouraged each location to make it as big or as simple as they wanted, and without exception, the volunteers brought much passion and creativity to their local event."

Here are some of the coordinator's comments:

"Thank you for all your support for hosting an event like this. We have heard nothing but amazing things!! God is working." — Jeri Morgan, Lebanon, Missouri

"What a blessing it was! From powerful worship to inspiring messages, God truly moved in our hearts."

— Amanda Jones, Ozark, Alabama

"We REALLY enjoyed it and hope to get to do it again next year!" — *Lexi Wilson, Woodward, Oklahoma*



"Our teen girls were challenged through messages reminding them their worth is found in who they are as children of God, not by the lies they hear from other voices out in the world. We praise the Lord for a great turnout of thirty teen girls with more accompanying adults. A blast was had by all!"

— Kayla Newland, Florence, South Carolina

"Shine 2025 was a huge success! Thank you to every lady who dedicated her time to make this event happen! From decorating, making food, taking pictures, working all the stations we had set up, and even cleaning up, this could not have been possible without you! Thank you to every woman and girl who attended this event! We pray that everyone left knowing their worth is found in Christ and not in this world!

— Sunshine Trimble, Ashland, Kentucky

"We had a blessed day. God was good! Our girls are already talking about next year!"

- Brittany Young, Rosebud, Arkansas

"The girls responded well to the speakers; we had a very sweet time of fellowship. It was just good all the way around!"

- Reba Thomas, Canyon, Texas

"Today our girls were a part of Free Will Baptist history! We joined the very first nationwide simulcast of Shine Conference. Hilltop FWB Church graciously hosted our location where we had a total of 65 for our area and over 1,100 nationally! The girls enjoyed a coffee and donut bar as they arrived, door prizes, lunch from Chick-fil-A, jewelry making, fellowship, and laughs. Most importantly, they learned their worth as daughters of God. They learned they are loved. They learned to turn off the outside noise and listen to God and His Word. Today was a very special day, and we are blessed our girls were a part of it." — Grifton FWB Church, North Carolina

shining on

TREASURE

Fulfill the Great Com

Looking to the future, Women's Ministries will continue to plan and sponsor annual Shine events. However, the goal is to grow Shine beyond an event into a movement. "Our dream is for Shine to become a discipleship movement for teen girls," noted Ruth McDonald. "We want to encourage small discipleship groups, daily 'Shine Time' in the Word, and a safe community where girls can ask questions and receive sound biblical answers."

Stay informed about the ongoing ministry of Shine by visiting https://shinefwb.com or by following @shinefwb on Instagram. At either location, you may access free resources for teen girls, including Fear Not: A Six-Week Guide to Knowing Your Worth written by Claire Ryan.

Treasure: Still Here!

TREASURE is a quarterly Bible study magazine for personal use, group study, or mentoring. Each issue features a missionary family in "Behind the Scenes" and offers helpful articles, columns, and the latest news and events for Free Will Baptist Women's Ministry.

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Mackies Approved as Associate Church Planters

Waco, TX — North American Ministries introduces **Caleb and Sara Mackie** (Sparta, Tennessee) as new associate church planters at Quest FWB Church in Waco, Texas.

The Mackies will join lead church planters Jim and Tracey Kilgore, who launched Quest Church in fall 2022. Since the launch, the Lord has blessed their ministry by providing a permanent church building, expanding outreach opportunities, and establishing a growing congregation passionate about reaching others with gospel.

Prior to their approval as church planters, the Mackies worked in Tennessee churches for 13 years. Caleb served as a youth pastor in two churches before his most recent ministry as pastor of the Union Grove FWB Church in Cookeville. The Mackies have two children, Benjamin (6) and Brynleigh (2). Central to Dallas and Austin, Waco is home to Baylor University, the Magnolia company, and several national museums attracting visitors from around the world. China Spring — Quest Church's target community — has a population of over 30,000 and continues to grow rapidly. The Mackies have seen the



Caleb and Sara Mackie and family

abundant spiritual needs in Waco and feel deeply burdened to take the gospel there. 🕅

NAM Hires Josh Bennett as Chief Strategy Officer



Josh and Ashley Bennett

Antioch, TN — North American Ministries is delighted to announce church planter Josh Bennett has been appointed to a new parttime role at NAM as chief strategy officer. Josh currently serves as the lead planter of Awaken FWB Church in Tifton, Georgia, which will remain his primary focus and full-time ministry.

Josh and his wife Ashley moved to Tifton in 2017 after planting The Springs FWB Church in Marana, Arizona, alongside Jeff and Heather Goodman. The Bennetts have three children, Sawyer, Finn, and Harper.

Josh is a passionate advocate for church planting and has volunteered at NAM for several years, assisting Dr. Brad

Ransom, chief training officer, in leading boot camps and training and in developing a "next steps" training program: WIN Training (What's Important Next). As chief strategy officer, Josh will develop a more intentional approach for equipping church planters for success by leading and implementing the WIN program.

WIN provides hands-on, practical training and coaching at critical stages in the church planting process. This includes a specialized strategy and support for successful launches. During the crucial and often challenging post-launch phase, Josh will work with church planters and teams to develop a WIN strategy that ensures planters have a clear and effective path for sustainability and growth.

Josh's dedication to church planting, history of faithful Kingdom service, and passion for the gospel will enable and equip him to fulfill this vital role in NAM's church planting support structure. We are excited to see how his addition to the NAM team will benefit current and future church planters in their efforts to reach the lost with the hope of Christ.

Shermans Resign Role

Ardmore, OK — Effective March 2025, Luke and Dalanee Sherman resigned as associate NAM church planters at Hilltop FWB Church in Ardmore, Oklahoma. After many months of prayer and counsel, the Shermans feel confident God is calling them to serve the Kingdom at a fellow Free Will Baptist church in Kansas.

We are thankful for the Shermans and their dedication to the revitalization work in Ardmore. We look forward to our continued fellowship with them through denominational ministry. Luke and Dalanee ask you to prayerfully consider giving to the Hilltop church plant by redirecting donations to either Matt Hanshaw or Cody Matlock. IMM



Luke and Dalanee Sherman

2025 Deep South Tournament Results



Jason Mewborn and John Pugh



Michael Kuchera and Blake Nance

Albany, GA — The 2025 Deep South Golf Tournament was a success! We had beautiful weather, great fellowship, and some incredible scores on the final day, with teams finishing as low as 10 under par.

This year's Championship Flight winners were **John Pugh** and **Jason Mewborn**, edging out second-place team Blake Nance and Michael Kuchera by just one stroke and finishing two strokes ahead of last year's champions, Tim Baumgarten and Don Dease.

In the First Flight, John Grove and Buster Brister took first place, with Caleb Franks and Chris Trieber coming in second place.

Beyond the golf, we enjoyed some great food and even better company. A big thank-you to all our hole sponsors and to First Free Will Baptist Church in Albany, GA, for graciously hosting us.

We're already looking forward to being back in Albany again next year!

Stay tuned—details on the Mid-South Golf Tournament in Amory, MS, are coming soon! IM



Buster Brister and John Grove



Caleb Franks and Chris Trieber





BY SAM SMITH

Memorial Day weekend 2013 is one I will always remember. Big summer holidays are often deadly around our area of Grand Lake, and this holiday was no different. I received a phone call just after supper that a chaplain was needed. A couple of young adults home from college had died in a boating accident, and a chaplain needed to accompany a lake patrol officer to inform one of the families.

The family was quite well-known in our community. All death notifications are hard, but we knew this one would be especially difficult. The parents had no clue what to expect as we knocked on their door, but they knew it was bad news when they opened the door and saw the word "chaplain" on my badge.

As the officer and I explained the situation and tried to deliver comfort, another more seasoned chaplain showed up from the local hospital to offer some assistance. I was grateful.

In January 2008, my family moved to a small town in the northeast corner of Oklahoma to start a church. It was my wife, my eight-month-old son, and me. We knew no one in Grove, Oklahoma. I had never pastored before and had never planted a church.

I reached out to other church planters for advice. One was church planter Howard Gwartney. He had been an Okie for many years, so he was familiar with our area and its unique culture.

When you move to a new community and have no real "place" of employment, or any other way to engage with new people, connections and inroads can be difficult. Pastor Gwartney suggested I serve as a law enforcement chaplain in my new town. I had never done that before either, so I asked other local pastors if there were any chaplains. I quickly learned the local police chief was Roman Catholic and was told he was not interested in a chaplain corp. Having already scheduled a meeting with the chief, I decided to speak with him anyway. To my surprise, he was excited about helping me get the training I needed to serve as a chaplain. We soon became close friends while serving the community together. I have been able to grow in my ability to minister to *all* types of people people who don't look like me, who don't see things the way I do, and who might never come through the doors of a church on Sunday. Serving as a local law enforcement chaplain opens the door for ministry to a multitude of hurting people in the community. Most of the time I deliver news about a deceased loved one and help the survivors cope with the shock of death and take the necessary next steps. Sometimes, I'm there just to provide a listening ear for an officer who needs a safe place to share about challenges on the job or at home. Serving as a chaplain has helped me connect with my community better than I ever could as an outsider.

Chaplaincy also has opened doors for me to help my community beyond my role as a police chaplain. I helped start and now serve on the county sheriff chaplain corps. I serve as the chaplain for our local Civil Air Patrol Squadron, providing the opportunity to meet more local young people and their families. In addition, I am on call regularly as a chaplain for the local hospital.

I believe working as a chaplain can make you a better pastor. I have been able to grow in my ability to minister to *all* types of people — people who don't look like me, who don't see things

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the way I do, and who might never come through the doors of a church on Sunday.

Working as a chaplain truly has given me the inroad into my community Pastor Gwartney said it would. After 17 years, I often run into those I have helped through my chaplaincy ministry. Some connections even helped plant our church.

I must be honest; a chaplain's work isn't easy. I can still hear the cries of those parents when I told them their daughter wasn't coming home after the boating accident. Nobody likes seeing the chaplain at their door during times of tragedy, but later, they are grateful. I have been able to accomplish some tremendous ministry through this unexpected door God opened.

I know local chaplaincy isn't the right fit for everyone, but what about you? How is God is calling you to serve your local community? I hope you will obey His leading.

About the Writer: Sam Smith is the founding pastor of Foundation Free Will Baptist Church in Grove, Oklahoma. He is an alumnus of Southeastern Free Will Baptist College, devoted husband to Jennifer, and proud father of Colton (18) and Savannah (15).

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BY CRISTINA PRICE

PASS the DEX, PLEAS

I still remember how I felt when I accepted Jesus as my Savior. I was seven, crying and trembling in the pew beside my dad. The preacher had just delivered a terrifying sermon about Hell, and I knew I didn't want to go there. Sensing my anguish, my dad took my hand and led me to the altar, where I knelt and asked Jesus into my heart. When I stood a few minutes later, I felt something I never had felt before — lightness, purity, and joy — all inexplicable. True, at the ripe old age of seven, I had not committed any horrific sins, but that "washed-clean" feeling lasted for weeks. But it didn't last forever. Inevitably, the emotional high ebbed away, and I faced a hard truth. The Christian life is not lived on an emotional mountaintop; often, it is lived in the valleys.

Over the past four decades, my Christian life has been a mix of mountaintops, valleys, desert paths, and garden walks. I often find myself trudging through a wilderness, looking back fondly to my last high point, wondering when the next will arrive. What would seven-year-old me have thought if 40-something me could have shown her this reality? What if she knew I sometimes struggle to communicate with God on a heart level, that sometimes He feels distant, and I don't know why? And occasionally, I struggle to muster up the gumption to pray, read my Bible, attend church, extend hospitality, and love my family well.

Why is that? What has tarnished my relationship with God? Do you sometimes feel this way? (Please tell me I'm not the only one!) What do we do when our relationship with God has become dull, unexciting, and uninspired? Is this the moment to give up the fight altogether or throw up our hands in defeat? Absolutely not. First, determine if sin has come between you and your Father. Examine your heart and be courageous enough to ask, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: Try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24). Be brutally honest with yourself and God. Confess and repent of any sin that has wormed its way between you and Him. Ask God to restore your relationship.

At times, though, an honest self-evaluation does not reveal unconfessed sins. We are in communion with God, but for some reason, our fellowship with Him has become lukewarm, maybe even downright cold. Like spouses who have lost the enthusiasm of their love, and their relationship grows hohum and perfunctory. They would never dream of separating, but the tepidness has gradually dragged their communion into ruts of apathy. Intimacy with our Savior can suffer the same fate. What causes a relationship to cool? Laziness, fatigue, distractions, addictions, busyness, lack of discipline or purpose, grief, or doubt. The reasons are legion. Any one of these can creep in and cause us to fall into complacency and apathy. Is complacency a big deal? It is not, after all, listed as a "thou shalt not" in the Ten Commandments. As far as I know, no one was ever stoned to death because of apathy. But by no means does this mean it is harmless. Apathy can cause just as much harm as intentional sin.

In Amos 6:1-7, God issued a warning to His apathetic people. Because of their apathy, the Israelites were the first to enter exile. While these people were guilty of other sins such as idol worship and neglected worship, above all, God condemned their complacency. Feeling "secure on the mountains of Samaria," they stopped relying on God for deliverance. They no longer feared or respected Him. Like a wayward spouse, they allowed the fire of their first love to cool to ashes. Content with the status quo, the Israelites saw no need to change anything until it was too late.

The reason for the dullness that crept into your life may be an idol of a different sort: smartphone, tablet, social media, Netflix, online games, or chat rooms. Perhaps even gambling or pornography. Anything that comes between us and God or distracts us from what truly matters can dull our relationship and result in lukewarmness and complacency — the very opposite of Jesus' command to love the Lord with our hearts, souls, bodies, and minds (Matthew 22:37).

Do you have a war going on inside you? Our culture has a deep-rooted problem. It tells us it's not cool to care about things that matter; being indifferent or laid-back is better. Social media has conditioned us to become numb to the truly remarkable and alive to the trivial.¹ This paradox is increasingly challenging. Our days become a vicious cycle of running to social media to escape uncomfortable feelings. There, we are fed a steady diet of sensationalism, conflict, and comparison.

I don't know about you, but I want to get off this roller coaster ride. But how? We can't talk ourselves out of apathy. The key is to take a hard look at the root causes and commit to weeding them out. Remember that list earlier? Laziness, fatigue, distractions, addictions, busyness, lack of discipline or purpose, grief, or doubt? The treatment for these symptoms is to cultivate practices and attitudes that counteract these inclinations. The Apostle Paul reminded his readers in Romans 13:14 and Galatians 3:27 we are to "put on Christ" to defeat the sinful tendencies of the flesh.

LAZINESS & LACK OF DISCIPLINE AND PURPOSE:

These go hand-in-hand with procrastination. I, for one, am an expert at putting off till tomorrow what I don't feel like doing today. This boils down to a lack of self-discipline, which leads to less Bible reading, praying, attending church, meeting with our small group, reading good books, and so on. Proverbs 6:6-11 is unmistakably clear about what God thinks of laziness. After praising the ant for her industriousness, the writer switches gears: "How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man."

If you feel a lack of purpose is behind your apathy, perhaps a change in mindset is the cure. In Colossians 3:1-2, Paul

1 Uche Anizor. Overcoming Apathy: Gospel Hope for Those Who Struggle to Care (Crossway, 2022).

WHAT DO WE DO WHEN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD HAS BECOME DULL, UNEXCITING, AND UNINSPIRED? instructed the church to set their hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Aligning our priorities on what matters in light of eternity will motivate us to do good work.

FATIGUE: Whether we like it or not, our souls are firmly attached to our bodies until God calls us home. Consequently, our physical health constantly influences our emotional and spiritual lives. Fatigue, hunger, thirst, illness, arthritis, head-aches, and more contribute to an overall sense of well-being. If your body is perpetually tired, your spirit will feel the consequences. Do not feel guilty about prioritizing adequate sleep and proper nutrition. Taking care of the body God gave you is part of your worship of Him and is just good stewardship. Being more rested will also help you concentrate better when reading your Bible and not fall asleep while praying!

DISTRACTIONS, ADDICTIONS, BUSYNESS:

I've lumped these together because I believe they are interconnected. Our always-on, hyper-connected society never shuts down. I remember when television channels went offair at midnight, forcing night owls to go to bed or find entertainment elsewhere. Today, hundreds of cable TV channels broadcast around the clock, and streaming services provide 24/7 access to every movie and TV show. Social media lures us with titillating glimpses of other peoples' lives. Texting,

WE BECOME APATHETIC IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD WHEN WE GET STUCK THINKING THESE SHORT YEARS ON EARTH ARE ALL THERE IS, WHEN WE LOSE SIGHT OF ETERNITY. ads, notifications, games, apps, and more vie for our attention. We never have downtime to allow our souls to quieten. Shutting out the noise takes real effort and self-discipline.

If screen addiction, constant distraction, and busyness are coming between you and God, I recommend a hard reset. Memorize Hebrews 12:1-2 and make it the lock screen on your phone: "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with

patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." **GRIEF AND DOUBT:** These are often hushed up or swept under the rug. While I suffer occasionally with the other symptoms listed, grief and doubt are most often the reason for the distance between God and me. Over the past two decades I have experienced some very high mountains and equally deep valleys. For years, I fasted and prayed fervently for an answer to a single request, only to feel as though God were ignoring me, or my prayers were bouncing off the ceiling, while others received miraculous answers to their prayers. I've suffered soul-crushing grief, which caused me to beg God to tell me why He allowed such a thing to happen. Not surprisingly, I never received a direct answer. Apathy comes easily when it feels we are praying in vain, or that God is not intervening as we hoped. "Why bother praying?" we ponder. "Why put in the effort if nothing will come of it?"

The Bible shares numerous examples of people who prayed, begged, and waited for a very long time. I love the example Jesus gave in Luke 18:1-8 of the persistent widow. Despite the callousness of an unbelieving judge, she kept pestering him with her request for justice until he finally responded. Jesus concluded, "And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him?"

Abraham and Sarah, Hannah, Job, Elizabeth, Noah, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel - each of these heroes of faith (Hebrews 11) had long periods when they continually cried out to God for justice, deliverance, children, or answers. The Lord did not always grant their requests. Job never received direct answers to many questions he asked. Instead of miraculous deliverance, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel saw Israel go into exile. Sarah had all but given up on her dream of becoming a mother. Before she finally conceived Samuel, Hannah endured years of teasing and ridicule from her husband's second wife. Under questioning stares and ridicule of a befuddled community, Noah labored a century building a boat in the desert. All these heroes have one thing in common: they never allowed the unanswered questions to interfere with their relationship with God. They kept praying, asking, reaching, and pursuing God despite their burden. Some received answers in their lifetime. Others didn't. But they never gave up.

These examples of faith help put our own questions into perspective. Unanswered prayers can easily become a stumbling block in our relationship with God. When we focus on what He *hasn't* done, we lose sight of all He *has* done, and the latter far outnumbers the former. I am certainly not belittling the suffering unanswered prayers can cause. I know firsthand how brutal that can be. But I want to encourage all of us not to lose sight of the big picture. We become apathetic in our relationship with God when we get stuck thinking these short years on earth are all there is, when we lose sight of eternity.

C.S. Lewis discusses this lack of perspective in *The Weight of Glory*. When discussing the desires of our hearts, he observes, "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

You know that request you've begged God to answer? The questions you've been asking? The blessing you are craving? All are "mud pies" compared to the glory awaiting us. If we could only catch a glimpse of that glory, we would not doubt God's goodness again. Remember when Moses was allowed to see God's back (Exodus 33:17-23)? From his physical appearance to his ministry, that glimpse changed Moses completely because he now had eternity in view.

What is the cure for dullness in our relationship with God, the apathy and complacency that get in the way?

Focus on the true goal. Let's fix our eyes, not on the finish line, but on what lies *beyond* the finish line — eternity. We all want to finish well, to run our race worthy of our calling. But the finish line is not the end. It is the beginning. If we could only glimpse eternity, our grief over unfulfilled desires and unanswered questions would vanish.

My goal is to hear the Lord say, "Well done, my good and faithful Cristina. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter the joy of your Master." I can hardly wait to experience His joy and feel His approval of the mud pies I offer Him. Will He one day reveal why I had to go through certain valleys? Maybe. But it doesn't matter in the end. Friends, let's stay focused on what really matters.

About the Writer: North Carolina native Cristina Price and her husband Matt have been IM missionaries to France for 21 years. They have twin 14-year-old daughters, Madeleine and Emilie.

Mary Ruth Wi

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Change That Lasts

BY BARRY RAPER

2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-18

I don't think I'll ever forget seeing my best friend when he came back from Marine Corp boot camp. I could hardly believe my eyes. Chubby when he went into the Corp, he returned a perfect specimen of strength and health. And the transformation was not only physical but also in the confident way he carried himself — a total transformation.

Perhaps you have had this experience of encountering someone who has undergone a significant life change, and he or she looks like a totally different person. However, the most difficult and most important type of change does not come in our external appearance, but in our internal spiritual condition. This is where most change and transformation need to happen.

We quickly discover inner transformation is even more challenging than physical change. How can a person experience real, lasting, internal change? This text reminds us real, lasting, internal change comes only through the work of the Holy Spirit. Consider three results of the change God wants to produce in your life.

Real change produces freedom. Paul declared the Spirit of the Lord brings freedom. Sin enslaves us, chains us to damaging and destructive habits, which ultimately lead to death. We can point to many sinful choices taking place in our culture, often in the name of freedom. However, selfish choices do not lead to freedom but into bondage. This is true of any decision to move away from God's design for us. We think, as fallen human beings, that freedom is being able to do whatever we want. However, true freedom only comes in living in accordance with God's intent for us — true humanity. This is the work of the Spirit: to restore what was lost in the Garden of Eden.

The Spirit's work in our lives shines the spotlight on Jesus. He turns the focus away from Himself and toward the Son. Of course, we are beholding this glory of the Lord imperfectly. As Paul described it in another passage, we see through a glass darkly or dimly. This fallen world and our sinfulness cloud our vision. We walk by faith and not by clear sight. Yet, as we keep our eyes of faith on Jesus, we behold the glory of the Lord, allowing the Spirit's work to produce His fruit in our lives.

Even as Christians, we aren't free of sin. To make that claim would be to deny the Bible, because the Bible says if we deny our sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth isn't in us. But if you are a Christian, you have been set free from the enslavement of sin. You have the power of God, the Holy Spirit, within you to choose to obey God.

Just recall the Gerasene demoniac who lived among the tombs. His demonic possession was so severe he broke all restraining chains, cried out in torment, and cut himself in agony. Everyone feared him. He was a man totally out of control, held captive by his sin and Satan. Then he met Jesus. After casting the demons out, the story ends with the man sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind. What a beautiful picture of the freedom Jesus brings!

Real change is both instant and progressive. Verse 16 is clear: whenever anyone accepts Christ, the veil is taken away. Paul described two veils or coverings. One was a reference to unbelieving Jews who (still) refuse to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. But another veil covers a person's heart. Whenever anyone turns to Christ, that veil is removed. This is the language of instant change, of salvation. This is the change that takes place immediately at conversion.

I'm reminded of the story in Exodus when the Israelites were judged for their sin through a plague of poisonous snakes. God instructed Moses to make a brass serpent and set it upon a pole. Anyone who looked to the serpent in faith would live, healed instantly. In the same way, anyone who looks to Jesus in faith will live. Has this ever happened in your life? Have you made a decisive turn toward the Lord?

However, Paul also described ongoing transformation or sanctification. This is the lifelong process of cooperating with the grace of God, who then works through the Holy Spirit to help us become more like Jesus. He's refining our character; He is shaping our minds; He is working on our attitudes; He is helping us become more like Him. The progress usually doesn't come in a straight line thanks to our sinful nature. It often feels more like a roller coaster ride — ups, downs, twists, and turns.

Paul noted one degree of glory to another. The image of God in man remains, though damaged and marred by the Fall. Humanity has dignity and glory in this sense: Christ is working to restore the image of God in man, transforming us from one degree of glory to another. This process takes place slowly and steadily but — make no mistake about it it is transformation.

The verb used in this passage to describes this process appears in English as *metamorphosis*. My mind immediately returns to elementary school and learning about the caterpillar emerging from the cocoon as a beautiful butterfly a remarkable transformation. This is a wonderful metaphor for the Christian's ongoing transformation into the image of Jesus.

How I wish all this change was instant. I want it this way, even more so in a culture where most things are instant and efficient. But, when it comes to spiritual growth, most progress takes place gradually. Our sanctification is not like microwave popcorn!

Real change conforms us to the image of Christ. I may not know God's detailed will for your life in terms of where you will work, who you will marry, or all the other decisions you will face in the twists and turns of life. But I *do* know God's will for all who trust in Christ is to become like Christ. Paul used this same language in Romans 8:29, and we also read a similar statement in 1 John 3:2.

Growing up, I displayed posters of my sports heroes on my bedroom walls. I hoped to become like them, and determined to work to get there. But hard work will only take you so far. At some point, genetics either take you to stardom or take you down. But God has much bigger plans for my life (and yours) than becoming a star athlete. He has the goal of making my thoughts, my attitudes, my actions like Jesus. And though He requires my effort in this process, it is His Spirit working within me that secures the finished product.

We've all seen before and after photos — perhaps a picture of a rundown house transformed into a showplace. But we don't see the in-between, when things didn't work out, when the project ground to a halt, or when money ran short. Christ is working to restore the image of God in man, transforming us from one degree of glory to another.

So often, when we look at ourselves, we see only the change that still needs to happen in our own lives. Yet, God is at work, refining our character, renewing our minds, helping us put off sinful habits and attitudes, and replacing them with kindness, gentleness, and patience. One day, in glory, the before and after picture will be complete.

Real, lasting change comes through the work of the Holy Spirit as we look to Jesus. Are you allowing Him access to every part of your life? Are you working toward this goal of becoming more like Christ?

If you are, remember you won't see transformation by looking inside yourself. True transformation — real, lasting change — takes place within us as we look to Jesus. So, keep looking to Him. Keep your gaze fixed on Him. Let nothing divert your attention from Him, for we know that one day when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. IMM

About the Columnist: Dr. Barry Raper is pastor of Bethel FWB Church near Ashland City, Tennessee, and teaches ministry at Welch Divinity School.



BY ERIC K. THOMSEN

"Eight slim...12 regular...10 slim...."

My elementary school teacher's voice droned on and on as she called out the name and size of each boy's costume for the annual Christmas play. Suddenly, she paused. I've often wondered if she realized, too late, the impact her next words would have and hesitated to say them. But, after a moment, she continued. (The pause somehow made her announcement even more dramatic.)

"Eric Thomsen...18 husky."

The response was instantaneous: giggles, laughter, and gasps. One boy, a good friend, reached across the aisle, poked me in the belly, and said good-naturedly, "Eric's a biggin!" Everyone laughed at his joke except me.

The teacher immediately snapped, "That's enough!" The class quieted down, and the day settled into routine. But the damage had been done. For the next four decades, those simple words dominated my life: 18 husky.

By junior high school, I had already settled into a pattern that would become all-too-familiar: embrace the latest fad diet for months, lose enough weight for people to notice, snap a few pictures to mark my accomplishment, and then gain all the weight back in a few short weeks when my self-control snapped.

Food became my enemy, but it also became my guilty pleasure, my reward, my comfort. Though high school sports helped for a time, I quickly returned to the pattern as an adult. In my early forties, after three months of the latest crash diet, a friend asked how much weight I had lost. I quipped, "About 1,200 pounds, but it always comes back."

It was true. The struggle with weight had become an endless roller coaster of ups and downs. I was ready to get off the ride. An Achilles tendon injury in 2008 only exacerbated the problem when my physical activity was limited for months. As I watched the scale numbers climb and climb, I simply gave up and accepted life as "a biggin." Graduate school, late night homework (and accompanying snacks) piled on more pounds. As the years passed, I ballooned far past 18 husky.

Then, one morning in early 2016 at age 46, a simple phrase from my daily Bible reading hit me like a ton of bricks: "Let us lay aside every *weight*, and the sin that doth so easily beset us..." (Hebrews 12:1). Ouch! Though I had read that familiar passage hundreds of times — even preached from it — the words suddenly took on new significance. I realized my weight problem was more than a physical problem. It was a spiritual problem. Even more, I was setting a bad example for my family and those to whom I ministered.

As the months continued, the conviction grew intense, and in August 2016, I confessed to my wife I needed to make a change — a lifetime change. Not a fad diet. Not another theme-park ride. No target weight to haunt my every waking hour. Instead, I wanted to develop good, healthy habits that would follow me the rest of my life. If I developed these habits, whether I lost weight or not, I could once again live with a clear conscience. I gave myself four years to make this gradual transition and set a goal to be healthy by my 50th birthday.

All glory to God, it happened!

By age 50, I had lost 85 pounds, far beyond any diet goal I would have set for myself. These days, I exercise regularly, enjoy an active lifestyle, and am grateful for good health. My doctor says "my numbers" look 25 years younger than they once did, and I feel good — really good, with more energy, more endurance, and more enjoyment of life in general.

"How did you do it?"

It's the question I hear more than any other these days. The answers related to my healthy habits and weight loss are relatively simple, and I am happy to share them with you here. But first, I must offer four disclaimers.

First, consult a doctor. Not all weight issues are caused by overeating. Health conditions can be the culprit: hormonal issues, sluggish thyroid, Cushing's Syndrome, menopause, diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, sleep apnea. Rule these and other health conditions out first. In many cases, your doctor may offer treatment or advise you regarding the best way to make changes.

Second, stop looking for a short-term solution. To be blunt, shortcuts to weight loss rarely work long-term. Instead, settle in for the long haul. Be realistic. Prepare for setbacks (and occasional utter failures). Prioritize good health over weight loss

and let the pounds come off as a result. Find what works for you. Every body, metabolism, and personality is different. Find what will work for you for a lifetime!

Third, acknowledge the addictive nature of overeating. Treat overeating like the addiction it is. Seek accountability and even intervention where needed. Track eating habits until the addiction is under control. Replace overeating with another (preferably active) behavior such as exercise, gardening, hiking, or some other new hobby. Learn to celebrate success with something other than food! Obviously, you can't stop eating, which makes you susceptible to overeating. Manage intake carefully to avoid falling into old habits.

Finally, remember you can't do this by yourself. Scripture makes it clear human nature is weak at best. However, I am so thankful for the promise of 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in [your] weakness." **With God's help, you** *can* **do** this! As you prepare to begin your journey to better health, enlist prayer partners. (Ten people prayed for me every day through the first 60 days of my own health journey, and it made all the difference.)

Now, back to the question: "How did you do it?"

I sought help from my doctor and a personal trainer in my Sunday School class. Based on their advice, I developed the following extraordinarily simple (though not easy) plan, coupled with regular, moderate exercise.

- CLEAN. Avoid preservatives, processed foods, and all canned/boxed "convenience" foods such as macaroni and cheese and hamburger helper. Limit fried foods only to those prepared in an air fryer with light oil. Avoid sugary (and often salty) drinks, cereal, and snacks.
- LCAN. Eliminate all junk meat (hotdogs, deli meats, canned or cured meats). Instead, purchase lean cuts of fresh meat

 again grilled or baked, not fried. When possible, select free-range, hormone-free meats.
- **GREEN.** Consume regular servings of fresh fruits and vegetables. Again, not fried or canned.

And a bonus: after hitting a plateau where further weight loss was difficult, I reduced salt. To my surprise, the final 15 pounds melted away in a few short weeks.

Like I said, simple...not easy. But with the Lord's help, you can do it, whether it is my simple plan or another plan that works better for you. So, lay aside the weight, for His sake and for your own. I'm cheering for you!

About the Writer: Eric K. Thomsen is managing editor of ONE Magazine.



UPPU UPPU Keeping Health a Priority as You Age BY JOHN BRUMMIT



Over the last decade, I have tried to maintain good (though not perfect) physical fitness. I ran regularly, worked out, and tried to follow good nutritional habits. Five years ago, however, the difficulty level increased after our first son was born. Then, three years ago, the challenges reached a level I never knew existed following the birth of our second.

Aging has made it more difficult to recover from physical activity, and my metabolism has slowed with age, which means I can't be as free with my diet as I once was. Combine that with two young boys and a demanding schedule, sometimes, it feels as though there are not enough hours in the day to finish the to-do list, let alone squeeze in a workout, prepare healthy meals, or do other important things for my health. I will be the first to admit I have failed in this area more than I would like, but I strive to keep my health and fitness a priority for several reasons.

First, as I have written in the past, if our bodies are the temple of God, and we fail to keep our bodies healthy, what does that tell others about God? Please understand, I do not suggest we need to have zero body fat or be peak athletes. But it is crucial to be able to move and be active without undue stress on our bodies. Ben Franklin once said an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Caring for our bodies on a regular basis keeps us functional as we age and allows us to keep working and serving in whatever opportunity God sets before us. I never want to reach the point where God has a ministry for me, and I cannot fulfill that ministry because I failed to steward my physical fitness and health.

Remaining physically fit also has positive effects on mental health. Often, a problem with either impacts the other. According to a study in the National Library of Medicine, research has shown direct and indirect benefits between physical health and mental health. Interestingly, these benefits increase as we age.¹

Remaining active and in good physical condition contributes significantly to mental function. And physical fitness differs from weight loss in terms of mental benefits. While GLP-1 RA drugs (weight loss drugs) have been in the news for the last year or so, drug-induced weight loss fails to produce the same mental benefits as physical activity for weight loss. According to studies, GLP-1 RAs help with antidepression and anxiolytic effects but also carry a risk of increased depression and suicidal thoughts.² Knowing the potential risks for *any* treatment or activity is important. Don't look at anything as a shortcut to correct bad habits and poor choices. Time and effort are required to bring about lasting change.

Staying physically fit is also crucial for our finances. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), an estimated 41.9% of Americans over age 20 are considered obese (study conducted from 2017-2020). That is an 11.4% increase since 1999 to 2000, when it was 30.5%.

Adults with obesity have a higher likelihood of experiencing other chronic diseases. Over half of obese American adults have high blood pressure, which increases the risk factor for heart disease. A quarter have diabetes. These health conditions also create a significant financial impact. For comparison, health care expenses for a healthy adult average \$1,861 per year but \$3,097 for adults with severe obesity. The average retirement savings per year is around \$5,900 (including employee and employer contributions). The dollar savings from health care alone could put you on better financial footing.

As we age, and as our schedules demand more and more from us, it is essential to take care of ourselves. Making time to stay in good physical condition is critical spiritually, mentally, and financially. The approach, however, must be life-long change. If we pursue the latest fad or crash diet to get back in shape, the improvement likely will not last and may cause additional stress. A yo-yo of weight gain and loss causes not only physical but also mental stress.

God has provided our bodies as precious vessels to carry out His work. We only get one, and stewarding it well is commanded in Scripture (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 and Proverbs 23:2, among many others). In today's world, this can be difficult. But the easy path isn't always best. So level up! Become intentional about making healthy choices for a lifetime of God's work.

About the Writer: John Brummitt became director of Richland Ave Financial in January 2016. He graduated in 2011 with an MBA from Tennessee Tech University. A 2004 graduate of Welch College, John has served with Richland Ave Financial since spring 2006. Learn more about retirement options: www.RichlandAveFinancial.com/.

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WORKING TOGETHER TOGETHER TOGETHER

BY CHRIS COMPTON

Free Will Baptists have a rich heritage. Our denomination has always been defined by our commitment to biblical truth, evangelism, and service. As believers, we are called to live out our faith in obedience to God, but we are also called to work together as a body of believers for the greater purpose of expanding His Kingdom.

Unity among believers is a central theme in Scripture. From the early church to today, God has called His people to work together, support one another, and partner in His mission. As Christians, we are not meant to live in isolation but to be part of a larger body that works in harmony for the glory of God.

BIBLIGAL FOUNDATION FOR UNITY

The Bible emphasizes the importance of unity in both the Old and New Testaments. Psalm 133:1 declares, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." The Apostle Paul prayed in Romans 15:5-6, "Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

His prayer teaches us unity glorifies God. Jesus also prayed for His followers to be one, saying, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:20-21). Here, Christ's prayer demonstrates unity among His followers is essential for their witness. When we unite, it is good, it glorifies God, and it strengthens our impact on those around us.

WHY WORK TOGETHER?

We need each other. The Body of Christ is unique. Though we have many members in the Body of Christ, not everyone has the same gifts or functions. As different parts of the human body work together, we should work together, too. The church in Acts is a perfect example of unity in action. Acts 2:44-45 says, "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need." Their willingness to share and support one another enabled the gospel to spread rapidly.

The world will see God's love. Unity among believers showcases God's power and love to the world. Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). In all the Bible, we have only one description of how the world knows we are Christians. If you love one another, they will know. When we set aside personal differences for the sake of God's mission, we bring glory to Him and hope to the world.

We can do infinitely more together. Working together enables us to accomplish more than we ever could alone. The early church in Acts 4 came together with one heart and soul. They shared everything they had. That's crazy love! They took their possessions, sold them, and gave the money to the church, so needs could be met. In Philippians 1, Paul praised the Philippians for their partnership in the gospel. When believers unite in purpose and mission, they become a powerful force for God's Kingdom.

HOW WE GAN WORK TOGETHER

Working together requires humility, recognizing we are part of one body with a shared mission to glorify God. The relationship between our churches and the denomination should be reciprocal. Our denomination, through its national agencies, provides prayer support, educational opportunities, teaching resources, investment opportunities, coaching, and a multitude of other resources for pastors and churches. Pastors and churches support national agencies through financial giving, volunteer efforts, and active participation. Supporting our denomination and utilizing the resources provided ensures our churches and ministries are equipped for effective service, the good work can continue, and we extend Kingdom work both locally and globally. When we humbly serve, give, and pray together, we demonstrate the love of Christ and magnify our collective impact for His Kingdom.

As Free Will Baptists, we are stronger together. God calls us to unity for His glory and for the advancement of His Kingdom. By working together, partnering in ministry, and supporting one another, we reflect His love and make a greater impact in the world.

As we strive to live out the biblical call to unity, may we remember we are one body, serving one Lord, with one ultimate purpose — to bring glory to His name. IM

About the Writer: Chris Compton is the CFO for Richland Ave Financial. He graduated in 2007 with an M.A. in Bible Exposition from Columbia International University. A 1998 graduate of East Tennessee State University, he has over two decades of administrative and financial experience in various fields, along with seven years in pastoral ministry.

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Fa-Do-Mi-Ding!

BY MATT PRICE

"It's like the musical notes — Fa Do Mi!" exclaimed a French lady, new to the little wooden church in St. Nazaire, France, in 2018.

As she presented her husband to me, she could see I had no idea what she was saying. It was not the first time she had to explain her husband's name. Fadoumi and Beatrice had recently moved to our area and were seeking a church. At the time, we had no idea what a gift God had given us by sending this precious couple.

Soon after that introduction, we had a workday at the church. As I was writing the list of chores on the chalkboard, there was one I hoped I would not have to do. "Weed the gravel parking lot."

Give me all the windows to wash. Give me the toilets to scrub, but please do not make me weed the parking lot. In France, you cannot buy weedkiller. If you weed your lawn, it must be done by hand. If you miss one weed, the whole lot will be covered again in a few short months.

You can probably guess which chore no one else wanted. Weeding! I grumpily walked out the door of the church and began my task. I was having an Elijah moment. No, not a calling down fire at Mt. Carmel moment. I'm talking more about the time Elijah found himself in the cave in 1 Kings 19. "Lord, why am I the only one who has to pull weeds?"

Yes, missionaries can have pity parties, too. As I questioned my *raison d'être* in France, a voice called out to me. And no, it was not the Holy Spirit. It was my new friend, Fadoumi, who asked if he could help me finish the task.

We began telling our life stories, how we each arrived in Saint Nazaire. Fadoumi's father had been a powerful witchdoctor in Togo. As the eldest son, he should have followed his father's path to become a witchdoctor as well. But God, rich in mercy, had other plans for Fadoumi. One by one, his entire family turned to Christ, even his father, the witchdoctor. That is a story for another day.

God began weaving our lives together as we pulled up weeds. To be honest, we probably talked more than we weeded. I knew God had not only given me a brother in Christ, a prayer warrior, an encourager, but also a true friend.

Then we began to talk about Togo. He told me he directed an association to help underwrite educational costs for orphaned children in his country. For about \$100 a year, a French family could supply tuition fees, books, a daily snack, and a uniform for a Togolese child through his association, Operation Togo.

My mind started racing. How could we motivate the little wooden church to get behind a project like this? Then he mentioned Daniella to me. Daniella was a newborn in a village near Atakpamé. She lost her father before she was born. Her mother died in childbirth, leaving a malnourished Daniella and her twin brother, Daniel. The twins were taken in by a pastor's family, but the milk they needed cost \$35 a month, equivalent to the pastor's entire monthly salary. With four children at home, he could not provide for the newborns. I told Fadoumi the church would pay to meet their needs. As a dad of twins myself, this one hit home. We had to get involved! Our church rallied around Daniel and Daniella. Sadly, Daniel died six weeks later due to an intestinal issue. However, we bombarded Heaven asking the God of the universe to spare Daniella's life.

On a Wednesday night in 2022, Fadoumi came to Bible study extremely frustrated. I had never seen my brother like this, so Dennis Teague and I pulled him off to the side to find out what was wrong. He explained the prosperity gospel was ravaging his country. Pastors were getting fat as they pocketed every dime their church members gave to receive "a blessing from God."

True transformation occurred as many recognized their cultural understanding of leadership was not biblical. Fadoumi wanted these pastors to simply preach God's Word as authority and not for financial gain. He looked at us and asked, "What can you do to help?"

In January 2023, I flew to the West African country of Togo for the first time. Our goal was to meet local pastors, find a location for a pastor's conference, meet some of the orphans sponsored through Operation Togo, and meet Daniella. As we explored this beautiful yet poor country, my heart broke. We met believers trying to further the Kingdom with little to no means. I heard pastors say, "We have been praying to be trained for over five years!" A village

chief told me they needed \$2,000 to repair the holes in the roof of their school. So many needs! Frankly, it was overwhelming.

That night, as I reflected over the sights and sounds I had experienced, I began praying. I told the Lord I felt He was leading Free Will Baptists here, but surely someone more qualified should lead this initiative. Why was I here? How could I raise the money needed to underwrite all this? The needs were too many, and I was too small.

DING!

Have you ever been praying, and God interrupts you with a DING? To be honest, God does not usually answer my prayers in real time. I quickly said "Amen" and turned to check my messages.

Want to be more personally involved in Togo? Join the THP construction team!

To apply, visit **www.hannaproject.com/** where-we-work/apply-for-a-team/. The message was from my friend Josh Baer, pastor of Cramerton Free Will Baptist Church in Cramerton, North Carolina. He wrote, "Matt, we just tallied our Christmas offering, and we have \$2,000 to give to a project of your choosing!" Remember the school with the leaky roof I had seen earlier that day? Tears flowed as God reminded me none of this depends on me. He has it all worked out. I just need to trust Him.

In October 2023, we held the first pastor's conference in Notsé, Togo. In partnership with Pastors Paul Amiezi and Samuel Ouattara from the Ivory Coast, and Kenneth Eagleton from IM, twenty pastors and lay leaders attended the four-day conference. God truly moved in the hearts of those pastors as we asked them to look at a different model of leadership.

Pastors in Togo are regarded as kings, and the church is to serve the pastor. We wanted to show them the model of Jesus as the Humble Servant, and it was earth-shattering for some. True transformation occurred as many recognized their cultural understanding of leadership was not biblical. After the week, the hotel staff told us they had never seen a group like us before. The change was evident to all who encountered these men.

At the next conference in 2024, we began examining biblical doctrine through a Free Will Baptist perspective. This was the first time many of these men received training on how to examine God's Word. Again, they realized the tremendous influence their culture had on their understanding of the Bible. Some asked for God's forgiveness for preaching things not in line with Scripture.

At the end of the week, we gave each pastor a study Bible provided by Legacy Church in Gastonia, North Carolina. This was the first study tool many of these pastors had ever owned. They were like children on Christmas morning.

Today, 15 pastors have decided they want to be part of the Free Will Baptist movement in Togo. These men worked independently for a long time, but now they understand it is better to work together to expand God's Kingdom. They want to know how to pray for the spiritual needs in India, Japan, and other places Free Will Baptists live and serve.

In Saint Nazaire, Fadoumi coined an oft-repeated saying: "It's only the beginning!" For free Will Baptists, we truly believe that statement is as valid in Togo as it is in Saint Nazaire.

I want to ask you, the reader, Fadoumi's question: "What can you do to help?" We desire your prayers, obviously, but if you would like to help financially, you can give through the IMpact France Togo Project at **pushpay.com/g/imimpactprojects/.**

About the Writer: Matt and Cristina Price are in their third term of service in France. Learn more about their ministry at www.iminc.org/.

The Hanna Project Changes Lives

BY DANNY GASPERSON

The Hanna Project (THP) teams perform numerous projects around the world to offer help, hope, and healing in practical ways. THP addresses a wide variety of needs. We have built schools, remodeled hospitals, and constructed playgrounds in under-resourced communities. We have introduced quality education for children and skill training for adults where it did not exist, and have provided relief and recovery assistance in places negatively affected by disasters like fires, floods, famine, storms, or warfare. Safe, clean water flows in villages or communities without previous access. Through these efforts, The Hanna Project strives to make a positive difference in the world.

While we are grateful for each of these worthy endeavors, they are not the reason we do what we do. The Hanna Project is never about projects. It's always about people. Lives are changed through THP.

THP CHANGES THE LIVES OF THOSE WE SERVE.

Our teams travel and serve people living in desperate, hopeless situations. We offer compassionate, appropriate, and practical help, hope, and healing that produces effective and eternal life-change for individuals, families, and communities.

"Mr. P" and his family lived in a remote, brick-kiln village in Southeast Asia. Their simple life was anything but easy. Their living quarters, provided by his employer, consisted of a small, single-roomed brick structure. With no furniture, family members slept side-by-side on a cloth covering the dirt floor. Simple meals were prepared outdoors on a makeshift cookstove heated with fire fueled by a combination of straw, sticks, and trash. Every day was the same for Mr. P. He headed to the field each morning at 4:00 a.m. to begin his labor. The pile of dirt he had excavated by hand the previous day was mixed with the correct ratio of water carried in buckets from a distant canal to make clay. He shoveled the clay into wooden molds to form bricks, which were lined up in rows to bake in the sun. He moved quickly and skillfully as he repeated the mindless task he had performed innumerable times over the years.

Mr. P's meager compensation was calculated by the number of bricks he produced, so his pace was rapid, and his breaks few. The temperature climbed with the midday sun, making the back-breaking work even more taxing. He worked until noon, ate a small lunch, rested for a couple hours, and then made his way back to the field. The afternoon was spent digging more dirt and carrying water to prepare for the next day's bricks. The sun set long before Mr. P ended his workday and returned home for dinner.

Work, eat, sleep, repeat. One day was exactly like the one before and identical to the next. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. The routine never changed. How does one end up here? Mr. P inherited this fate from his father and would pass it on to his children. His family was part of a nomadic tribe scratching out a living in the wilderness area of his country.

His mother experienced a medical crisis requiring care his family did not have the means to meet. A seemingly benevolent owner of the brick kiln offered to help. He loaned them the money needed for her care, provided them a shelter in which to live, and allowed Mr. P's father to make bricks to pay off the debt.
In desperation, Mr. P's father agreed to the terms. However, the wage was insufficient to ever repay the loan. Additional crises created more loans, deepening the pit of indebtedness. For the remainder of his life, Mr. P's father made bricks. The debt passed from generation to generation, rendering the family in perpetual servitude. Financial pressure forced Mr. P to require his sons to work in the brick kiln rather than attend school — extinguishing any hope for a better future.

After THP learned of Mr. P's plight through our partners in the area, he received funds to repay his debt and grant freedom for him and his family. A simple but adequate house was constructed for the family, and other projects helped provide a quality school in the area. Now his children could hope for a brighter future. A THP-sponsored well in his new village gave them access to pure, healthy water.

THP helped change the lives of Mr. P, his family, and his entire community.

THP CHANGES THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO SERVE.

The Hanna Project team members volunteer their time, talents, experience, and resources to benefit the lives of others. But typically, they find they receive far more than they give.

Neva Herrera served on the 2025 THP Cuba team. I asked her to describe the impact participating in THP made on her life.

I am a few months short of 60 years old and went on my first humanitarian trip with The Hanna Project to Cuba in February. It is now a month since I returned, and I am still processing everything. The countries that welcome humanitarian trips do not have easy access to simple, basic needs. This completely different way of

The Hanna Project is never about projects. It's always about people. Lives are changed through THP. life sent my senses on a rollercoaster. I am still processing them a month later.

Of course, you might expect a language barrier. However, today's technology helps with that. I am "muttering efficient" in Spanish, so language shouldn't have been a sensory rollercoaster, but it was. It is an oddity when an American speaks the local language, so I was a curiosity. My muttering speech was an enjoyment to them. Everyone was eager to help me practice their language. However, for most people, and I am no exception, when you communicate with people, you build a bond with them. This opens your emotions as you build relationships; you care about the individuals.

Because of these emotions, I noticed just how caring and nice they are. They welcomed us entitled Americans into their world and gave us the best they had. I don't mean financially, because THP is adamant about being a blessing to the countries we visit and not a burden. They made us feel appreciated and respected every minute we were with them. They let us know they were thankful for anything we helped them accomplish during our visit. AND the food presentation for each meal would have pleased Gordon Ramsey. I miss them! WhatsApp is often used!

I noticed how strong and resilient they are. They get things done without having easy access to the basic tools sitting in American's garages unused. I realized this after forcing myself not to have a meltdown because I couldn't just drive into town and buy another shovel and wheelbarrow to help move gravel into the Grand Canyon-size holes of their mile-long driveway — even though all of us brought money and could pay for it.

Since I couldn't have a shovel or a wheelbarrow, the one and only rake became my tool of choice. Well, my second choice. Two young men politely asked for and never returned the machete I was using to clear brush. Oh well, I have a good picture of me and my rake.

My first humanitarian trip was a reality check. It was the most rewarding and yet most depressing time of my life. Rewarding because I saw how pleased they were we finished the task they had asked THP to accomplish. That small part of their world just got better. Depressing because I was leaving them in a country vastly unlike America. Their lifestyle did not get smoothed out like their road.

So where is this rollercoaster taking me? Lord willing, back to Cuba next February! Their lifestyle — the one I can't change makes them attentive, respectful, caring, nice, resilient, and a guardian of an old woman with a machete. I will have Cuban friends the rest of my life! That is the definition of rewarding.

The Hanna Project changes lives through our projects and our teams. This cannot happen without our generous supporters and faithful volunteers. We would love to have you join us in this effort.

THP WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE.

About the Writer: Danny Gasperson is director of The Hanna Project. Learn more: https://hannaproject.com/.

Who's Going to Hold the Rope?

BY BRIAN SPARKS

In Mark 2, we read about four men who helped their friend in desperate need of help, hope, and healing. They carried him to a house where Jesus was teaching, removed a portion of the roof, and lowered their friend to Jesus. He received his healing. Their names were not mentioned; we can only refer to them as "they." I find it interesting Jesus blessed their paralyzed friend based on "their" faith!

In Acts 9, Luke recounts how unnamed disciples lowered Paul out of a window to save him from capture and potential death at the hands of an angry mob. Paul's awesome work truly began only after a nameless few acted.

The Hanna Project has "held the rope" for men, women, and children across the globe who otherwise had little hope for a future. These well-known accounts offer great examples of those willing to anonymously "hold the rope" for the greater good and success of another. Over the years, The Hanna Project has "held the rope" for men, women, and children across the globe who otherwise had little hope for a future.

The Hanna Project welcomes "they" from all walks of life. I've been fortunate enough to join in these endeavors with "they" including retired tradesmen, engineers, law enforcement, bankers, farmers, ministers, students, salesmen, factory workers, etc.

"They" have come together to offer help, hope, and healing to those in isolated, difficult, or dangerous places. The group bonding (sometimes through dad jokes) of

the cross-section of "they" volunteers is a bonus to the joy of laboring for our greater cause — serving our fellowman across the world by "holding the rope" for those in need. It has never been about who the "they" are, but rather about the joy of accomplishing tasks that would be improbable or impossible without the assistance of THP.

"Holding the rope" may be taxing, time consuming, blistering, straining, emotional, and just downright sweaty. However, the thrill of accomplishing the project is worth it all!

So, put on your gloves, flex your muscles, and grit your teeth!

"Who's ready to hold the rope?"

About the Writer: A retired administrator for the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Brian Sparks serves as worship leader at Mavity FWB Church in Catlettsburg, Kentucky. In addition to multiple efforts in Mexico, he has taken two trips to Cuba with THP.



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IM Board Continues the Mission, Moves Toward the Horizon

Antioch, TN — On April 14-15, 2025, the IM board met and celebrated how IM is moving toward a new horizon while continuing the mission.

Clint Morgan, IM general director, presented a strategic plan outlining IM's 10-year Horizon Goals:

- 1. Commission 100 new missionaries
- 2. Achieve IM's three major financial goals
- 3. Double the number of Free Will Baptists outside of North America

In alignment with these goals, the board approved two new IMpact projects: Togo Child Education Scholarship and Hope Alive Ikebukuro Church Planting Fund.

The board provided the pathway for Josh Provow and Bea Fernandes to pursue ministry in Bulgaria as non-ordained missionaries, following their marriage on July 5, 2025.

Six people met with the board and received approval for the following roles:

- Silas Houser (Chesterfield, VA) will join the team in Bulgaria.
- **Bradley and Madison Mercer** (Columbia, MO), who work with international students at the University of Missouri, were appointed to career status.
- **Robert Newton** (Ashland City, TN) will serve a two-year internship with the Hope Alive team in Tokorozawa, Japan.
- **Reece Rooke** (Russellville, AR) will join the Hope Alive team in Tokorozawa, Japan.
- Lauren Williams (Lancaster, NY) will join missionaries working in France.

Curt Holland, director of field ministry personnel, affirmed, "This group of new IM missionaries will take us past 100+ missionaries as we look forward to our 100th anniversary in ten years. They will be reaching unreached people groups, working with international students, helping plant churches, and serving in restricted access areas where the gospel is desperately needed around the world."



Two interns, Tyler Justice (France) and Taylor Pate (Japan), submitted their resignations, thanking IM for the experience of serving for the past two years. The board expressed appreciation for their ministries.



The board elected officers for the coming year: Rodney Yerby (Chairman), Cameron Lane (Vice-Chairman), and Darren Walker (Secretary).

The 2024 audited financial statements, prepared by Blankenship CPA Group, were received and reviewed by the IM board. The board received and approved the 2026 framework operational budget of \$11.2 million.

Clint Morgan invited, "Join IM in prayer for these new missionaries, projects, and goals as we look toward the horizon. It's about the gospel!"

THP Board Adds Couple to Southern France Team

Antioch, TN — The Hanna Project (THP) Board met and announced the commissioning of **Shane and Megan** to serve in Southern France on April 17, 2025.

Danny Gasperson, director of THP, stated, "We are excited to have Shane and Megan join our team in Southern France. I am confident their training and experience will be great assets to our work there." III

Carmel Don Robirds, known

as Don, died Saturday, March

8, 2025, in Nashville, Ten-

nessee, at age 89. He never

California natives. Don

and his wife Carol (War-

ing, deceased 2010) became

Christians shortly after their

marriage. They attended Free

fully recovered from a stroke almost a decade earlier.



Shane and Megan

Three Brazil Missionaries Receive Their Rewards

Antioch, TN — Three former missionaries to Brazil died within a few days of each other in March.



Don Robirds

Will Baptist Bible College (now Welch College), moving from Modesto to Nashville, Tennessee. After college graduation, they returned to California where Don taught and pastored. In 1964, they responded to the call of missions in Brazil. Don translated the Free Will Baptist Treatise and other literature, books, and curricula into Portuguese during the family's seven-year stint in Brazil.

The family returned to Nashville in 1971, at the request of the Foreign Missions Board. They asked Don to use his journalism training to serve, temporarily, as the director of communications for Free Will Baptist Foreign Missions. For the next 32 years, he told the stories of international missions and missionaries through *HeartBeat* magazine, literature production, film, and video. He retired in 2003, but continued to support and promote missions, even returning to Brazil for a year to teach at the Bible institute in Campinas.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Carol; daughter, Judy Robirds Burnett; and grandsons, Chad and Jason Burnett. He is survived by his wife, Diane; daughter, Terri (Steve) Osborne; sons, Steve (Rhonda) and Mike; and seven grandchildren. Former missionary to Brazil and current Director of Global Partnerships for IM Kenneth Eagleton officiated the service on Wednesday, March 12.



Bobby Hugh Aycock, 89, passed away late Tuesday evening, March 11, 2025, at Kitty Askins Hospice in Goldsboro, North Carolina. Edith Sue White Aycock, his faithful wife, joined Bobby in their Savior's presence days later, on Saturday, March 15.

Bobby and Sue Aycock

Sue, 87, was also a resident of Kitty Askins Hospice.

Bobby and Sue were appointed as missionaries to Brazil in 1960. During their 40-year tenure, Bobby served as a teacher and pastor and hosted a radio program ministry. They began their ministry in Araras, establishing a church though strongly opposed by the Roman Catholic clergy. They worked in the Bible institute in Jaboticabal. Most of their ministry was spent in Barbacena where they saw seven churches planted and established a Bible institute.

Bobby and Sue served in Brazil until 2007, with a hiatus from 1982 to 1988 when Bobby taught missions classes in the States. Prior to their retirement, they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary (about six weeks early) and renewed their vows before more than 300 people.

Following their retirement, they returned to Bobby's

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EVANGELISM IN PRAYER AND PRACTICE

BY JOSHUA COLSON

A recent Lifeway Research study confirmed what pastors and church leaders already know to be true: "Most Christians say they're ready, willing, and praying to have conversations about their faith with others, but many admit they haven't gotten around to actually having those conversations recently."¹

More specifically, the survey revealed that while over 80% of believers expressed an openness to discussing their faith with others, fewer than 40% actually explained the gospel to someone at any point in the preceding six months.² The reasons for this discrepancy are not entirely clear, but speaking anecdotally, I know many believers struggle to share the gospel because of fear of rejection, fear of sounding ignorant, or simply lack of intentionality. These sorts of impediments are nothing new, however, nor do they affect only laypeople.

Perhaps no passage better illustrates this challenge than Colossians 4:2-6, where the Apostle Paul requested prayer for his own evangelistic work before offering pointers for the Colossians. Both Paul's prayer requests and pointers are instructive for believers today and can help close the gap between those open to sharing the gospel and those who do so.

Praying in Preparation for Evangelism

Before Paul requested prayer for his own evangelistic work, he instructed believers, "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving" (4:2). Prayer is vital for Christian disciples because it acknowledges our total dependence upon God and expresses our gratitude for all He has done for us.

In consideration of Paul's evangelistic prayer requests that follow, his general exhortation to pray ought to remind us evangelism does not begin in our own

1 "Christians Say They're Seeking but not Having Evangelistic Conversations," *Lifeway*, May 24, 2022: https:// research.lifeway.com/2022/05/24/christians-say-theyre-seeking-but-not-having-evangelistic-conversations/.

2 "Christians Say They're Seeking but not Having Evangelistic Conversations."

strength but in God's (Acts 1:8). Indeed, Paul's three prayer requests acknowledged all evangelism begins and ends in the power of God, which is instructive for us as we prayerfully prepare ourselves for evangelism.

First, Paul asked the Colossians to pray for *open doors*: "Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of ut-terance, to speak the mystery of Christ" (4:3). In other words, he requested prayer for opportunities to share the gospel effective-ly with others.

When was the last time you prayed for the Lord to give you or others an opportunity to share the gospel? If we begin praying for the Lord to open these doors, He will open them. In fact, it could be that when our hearts are attuned to His in this manner, we will start seeing the opportunities He has already placed before us when our hearts were unprepared to take advantage of them. The Lord even opened opportunities for Paul to share the gospel with his captors and fellow captives during his imprisonment (Philippians 1:12-14).

Second, Paul requested prayer for *open hearts*. Paul asked God to open not only doorways of physical opportunity but also people's hearts to receive the gospel just as He had prepared

Lydia's heart during one of his missionary journeys (Acts 16:14). John Calvin drew attention to an implicit prayer for the Greater Preacher's work here, explaining our words apart from the Spirit's power in both us and the hearer are as effective as trying "to break through a

When was the last time you prayed for the Lord to give you or others an opportunity to share the gospel?

door that is barred and bolted. For [conver-

sion] is truly a divine work."³ The Lord opens hearts — not us. Therefore, we should pray for His gracious work in us and in the hearts of those to whom we speak. We should trust He is always working ahead of us.

Third, Paul requested prayer for an *open mouth*. Specifically, he asked the Colossians to pray he would make the message of Christ "manifest, as I ought to speak" (4:3-4). Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul's request this way: "Pray that every time I open my mouth, I'll be able to make Christ plain as day to them" (*The Message*).

How many people fail to share the gospel with others because they are afraid they will say the wrong thing? Yet how few pray God will give them the right words to say? We would do well to pray that, when God provides opportunities to share the gospel, our mouths might be opened to speak clear, true words about Jesus.

Having given the Colossians direction about how to pray for his evangelistic efforts, Paul shared direction regarding their own evangelism.

Principles for the Practice of Evangelism

First, Paul pointed to the importance of one's *walk* in evangelism: "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without" (4:5). Paul employed the verb *walk* here and many other places in his writings as a metaphor for one's conduct. Here, however, he specifically described one's conduct with reference to unbelievers. We all know stories of people who have negative opinions of Christ and the church because of hypocritical Christians. Paul called believers to be people of integrity before one another *and* before outsiders. Christians ought to be known as honest, hardworking, and loving people; we ought to be known for our compassion and our good works. As Matthew Henry puts it, we must "not hurt [unbelievers] or increase their prejudices against religion." Rather, we must "do them all the good [we] can...by

3 John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 224. all the means [we] can, and in the proper seasons recommend religion to them."⁴ Our conduct is our chief credential to speak to unbelievers.

I know all of us make mistakes. We say things we wish we had not said, and we do things we wish we had not done. However, I have found apologizing to those wronged and telling them you are doing so *because* of Jesus is an effective way to communicate the gospel. Part of following Jesus is being humble enough to say, "I'm sorry," and seek forgiveness for the sake of Christ's name among those we have wronged.

Next, Paul reminded the Galatians *the clock is crucial* when it comes to evangelism. He encouraged them to "redeem" the time or to "make the most of every opportunity." Given its entire evangelistic thrust, the passage certainly seems to indicate Paul was still speaking about making the most of every opportunity to do good and share the good news. When the Lord answers our prayers for gospel-sharing opportunities, we must not let those opportunities slip by us. Life is too short and eternity too long for us to drag our feet about sharing the gospel.

Finally, Paul wanted these believers to know their *talk* was important. In Colossians, he said: "Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (4:6). You have likely heard the quote attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." The point of the quotation is obviously to realize your Christian conduct is important.

However, it is ultimately *impossible* to share the gospel without words. Bad deeds can destroy the credibility of our gospel

4 Matthew Henry, *Acts to Revelation*, vol. 6, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 618.

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College Choir and *Rejoice!* Enjoy Successful Spring Tour

GALLATIN, TN — The Welch College Choir conducted a four-state spring tour March 12-18, according to Todd Parrish, vice president for institutional advancement. The 28-member choir, directed by Dr. James Stevens, dean of the Welch College School of Music, ministered in six churches and two Christian schools scattered across Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

The tour program, *Songs of Grace and Praise*, consisted of sacred choral selections and gospel songs designed to edify, encourage, and evangelize those in attendance. "Welch College choirs have toured annually for sixty years. These young men and women continue a long tradition of ministry through music to our churches," Parrish noted.



ministry team finished out the spring tour season with services in California.

Watch the choir program, featuring *Rejoice!* ministry team at www.youtube.com/live/zp8x6Sa73Y0/.

Following the conclusion of the choir tour, *Rejoice*!

Welch Ranked Third in Teacher Education Among Tennessee Colleges and Universities

GALLATIN, TN — The School of Education at Welch College scored third overall among teacher education programs in Tennessee colleges and universities on the annual Educator Preparation Report Card, according to Dr. Stephen Beck, undergraduate dean of teacher education.

The Report Card evaluated teacher education programs at 33 colleges and universities and six other teacher preparation programs in Tennessee. Welch was one of seven colleges and universities that "Exceeded Expectations," joining Christian Brothers University, Union University, Tennessee State University, Lipscomb University,



University of Tennessee-Knoxville, and Vanderbilt University. Other categories included "Meets Expectations" and "Does Not Meet Expectations."

"Our students exceeded expectations on nationwide pedagogical and content assessments," Beck said. "Welch's recent graduates scored among the highest in Tennessee on evaluations by their school principals. Based on Tennessee standardized testing of pupils, Welch graduates are also among the highest in the state in enabling their students to grow beyond grade level expectations. We are extremely proud of our teacher education students and graduates."

Welch College has offered a teacher education program since 1976. The program now includes teaching licensure programs in Mathematics, Special Education, English as a Second Language, Biology, English, History, Music, Physical Education, Elementary Education, and Instructional Leadership.

Hundreds of Welch graduates have taught not only in Tennessee but also across the nation and around the world. For more information on bachelor's and master's degrees in teacher education at Welch, please contact Dr. Stephen Beck at sbeck@welch.edu.

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witness, but good deeds will never be sufficient to introduce someone to saving faith in Christ. Elsewhere, Paul made this point clear when he wrote, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?...So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:14, 17). The gospel must be communicated with words. People might notice something is different about our lives by our conduct, but they will know *why* it is different only by our words.

Still, we must not be harsh or flippant. We must speak with grace, even when the one we are evangelizing mocks the Lord or brings up ridiculous objections. "Grace," writes Matthew Henry, "is the salt which seasons our discourse, makes it savoury, and keeps it from corrupting."⁵ Just as salt preserves meat from corruption and makes it appealing to the taste, grace preserves our speech from corruption and makes it appealing to those who hear. In other words, gracious speech keeps conversations going; malicious speech shuts them down.

Moreover, we ought to answer people with loving wisdom. "If we are to deal with people where they are (whether they can express their position in a sophisticated way or not), we have got to have enough genuine love for them and concern, as a human being, that we would take seriously what they are preoccupied with," wrote Francis A. Schaeffer. "We tend to give a person a prepackaged answer instead of having the compassion of Christ, which is to take the person where they are and actually step into their world in order to talk in a meaningful way to them."⁶

Our speech should meet people where they are, answer their objections seriously, and lovingly point them to Christ. Of course, we have been praying for this sort of speech all along. We ought to trust God to hear our prayers and help us to act wisely, speak graciously, and make the most of the opportunities He presents for us.

About the Writer: Joshua R. Colson pastors Angelville Community Church (IL) and teaches as an adjunct instructor at Welch College.

6 Francis A. Schaeffer, The God Who Is There (Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity, 1968), in The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: Three Essential Books in One Volume (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 177.

5 Henry, Acts to Revelation, 618.

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portraits of JESUS IN Revelation

BY MATTHEW STEVEN BRACEY

I remember the joy with which I consumed the Word of God as a teenager and new believer. It was new, exciting, and instructive. I also remember the important role Bible reading plans played in helping me read all 66 books and in teaching me about the importance of consistent Bible reading. Even so, one downside of those plans (for me) was that I was unable to linger over individual passages because of the need to press on to others.

Add the time and care required to grasp the vast landscape of Christian theology, and I discovered I had left some areas unattended. For these reasons, I have not developed certain aspects of eschatology compared to other branches of theology. However, the fact remains that the all-wise God has chosen to include apocalyptic literature in His Word (e.g., Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Revelation). Consequently, I cannot rightly disregard even those aspects of Scripture if I would be faithful to its entirety.

In recent months, I have been excited about the book of Revelation. Undoubtedly, this interest has resulted partly from what I have been reading and listening to. Some years ago, I promised myself I would read some good fiction after finishing my doctoral dissertation. Not wanting to make a liar of myself, I began reading J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, a story replete with a creation mythos, angelic-like beings, and wars between the great powers of the world.

While its narrative form can be challenging, the book offers great riches to those who invest themselves in it. I had no idea this decision would inspire my present interest for Revelation. Its form, like that of *The Silmarillion*, can be difficult, to say nothing of its strange images (e.g., horses, dragons, and beasts), but it can be infinitely rewarding to those who make the difficult journey through it.

Additionally, I have found myself listening through Andrew Peterson's musical catalog. While his songs have long inspired me, they have recently resonated with me in a special way. As anyone familiar with his music knows, the themes of Revelation make frequent appearance. "Is He Worthy?" is perhaps the most well-known example. The song tells of the Lion of Judah and Root of David (5:5; cf. 3:7; 22:16) who is worthy to open the scroll (5:1-9). "Carry the Fire" testifies to the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7-10) and the new Jerusalem that descends from Heaven (3:12; 21:10-11), among others.

So, partly resulting from the literature and music in my life, I have found myself reflecting broadly on the themes in Revelation (and other apocalyptic books in the Bible). However, in this brief article, I aim only to capture something of the wonder and enchantment of Revelation's depiction of Jesus.

Readers familiar with the Gospel accounts are accustomed to imagining Jesus in terms of the babe in the manger or the man on the Cross. Certainly, such portraits are true and worthwhile. But Revelation invites us to broaden our understanding of Christ considerably.

PORTRAITS IN REVELATION*

Revelation 1 pictures Jesus as One like a Son of Man (1:13) coming on the clouds (1:7; cf. Daniel 7:13; Acts 7:56) with hair like white wool, eyes like fiery flame, a face like the shining sun, and feet like glowing bronze (1:14-16; cf. 2:18; 19:12). He wears a robe reaching to His feet with a golden sash around His chest (1:13), and in His right hand He holds seven stars (1:16), the seven angels of the seven churches (1:20).

When He speaks, His voice is like a trumpet (1:10; cf. 4:1) and thundering waters (1:15). Out of His mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword (1:16), an instrument of both revelation and judgment. He reveals He is the Living One because He is the firstborn from the dead (1:5; cf. 2:8) who conquered death, lives forevermore, and holds the keys over death and Hades (1:18; cf. Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27, 31), that is, over the rider of the ashen horse and his followers (6:8; cf. 20:13-14).

Revelation 12 pictures Jesus as the male child born to the woman Israel (cf. Genesis 37:9) clothed with the sun and crowned with 12 stars, under whose feet is the moon (12:1-2). The great red dragon Satan seeks to devour the child (12:3-4, 9), but God protects Him who would rule all nations (12:5) and His mother who flees into the wilderness (12:6). This passage is nothing less than the Christmas story of Revelation. Revelation 14, continuing the imagery of Revelation 1, also pictures Jesus as One like a Son of Man sitting on the clouds with a golden crown on His head (14:14; cf. 19:12). But rather than having a sharp sword in His mouth, He holds a sharp sickle with which He reaps (judges) the earth (14:15-16). As part of this judgment, an angel appears, also with a sharp sickle, who gathers the ripened grape clusters (14:17-18). Then, the wrathful God presses the clusters into wine, which spills like blood (14:19-20; cf. 19:15), and causes those who worship the beast (14:9-10) and belong to Babylon (16:19) to drink it. Again, God's wrath is pictured over the subsequent chapters as seven deadly plagues or seven golden bowls (15-18).

Revelation 19 pictures Jesus as the rider on a white horse who appears in Heaven. He is called *Faithful* and *True* (19:11; cf. 3:14; 21:5; 22:6); again, He is called *The Word* of *God* (19:13). As in Revelation 1, He has fire in His eyes and diadems on His head (19:12), and He is wearing a robe (19:13), except that here we learn the robe has been dipped in blood (cf. 7:14) because He is the Lamb of God who was slain (5:6, 9, 12; 13:8; cf. 12:11). Following Him are the armies of Heaven, also on white horses, clothed in fine linen that is white and pure (19:14).

Whereas Revelation 14 pictures Him with a sickle, Revelation 19 renews the imagery of the sword. From His mouth comes a sharp sword (19:15; cf. 1:16; 2:12, 16) with which He judges the nations and wages war against the beast, the false prophet, and the ten kings and their armies (17:12-13; 19:11, 19-20; cf. 2:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:8). On the Lamb's robe and thigh is written King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16; cf. 15:3; 17:14; Deuteronomy 10:17; Psalm 136:1-3; 1 Timothy 6:15). He rules over His enemies (cf. 1:5; 15:3; 17:14) with a rod of iron (19:15; cf. 2:27; 12:5), and He treads the winepress of God's wrath (19:15), killing His enemies with the sword of His mouth and preparing a great supper for the birds of midheaven who feast upon their flesh (19:17-21).

STRANGE AND SUBLIME

Such portraits present a Jesus equal parts strange and sublime. Yet this Jesus has loved us and freed us from our sins by His blood (1:5) — believers from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (5:9). He was pierced, so we might become a kingdom of priests who serve God the Father (1:6-7; cf. Zechariah 12:10). He has overcome the great red dragon, the accuser of the brethren (12:3, 9-11). He invites us to wear fine linen that is bright and pure to the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7-9). He is the shepherd guiding us to the river of the waters of life (22:1; cf. 7:17).

While the strange and the sublime may scare us, they are the doorways through which we experience the wonder and enchantment of God's Word — indeed, of God's Son. Yes, Jesus is the babe in the manger and the man on the Cross, but He is also the Son of Man descending from the clouds on a white horse with a sword in His mouth, a sickle in His hand, and the armies of Heaven behind Him. We need the *whole* picture of Jesus, both the Jesus of the Gospels and the Jesus of Revelation. Incredibly, this Jesus invites us to be counted among the blessed:

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near....Bless-

ed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.... Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.... Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city (1:3; 19:9; 22:7; 22:14).

No wonder this Jesus is given blessing, dominion, glory, honor, might, power, riches, thanksgiving, While the strange and the sublime may scare us, they are the doorways through which we experience the wonder and enchantment of God's Word – indeed, of God's Son.

er, riches, thanksgiving, and wisdom forever and ever (1:6; 5:12-13; 7:12). No wonder our great God is given a fourfold hallelujah from the multitude in

Heaven (19:1-6). Hallelujah and Amen!

* This reflection is not intended to present the full scope of interpretation of the passages with which I interact. I recognize many of them likely mean more than what I suggest but (to the extent my interpretations are correct) not less than what I have suggested.

About the Writer: Matthew Bracey, Ph.D., works at Welch College, where he serves as vice provost for academic administration and as a faculty member, teaching courses in history, law, and theology. He is a co-founder and senior editor of The Helwys Society Forum. This article is an adaptation of an essay that appeared first on www.HelwysSocietyForum.com/.

WNAC Celebrates 90 Years of Fruitfulness

Antioch, TN — WNAC invites all Free Will Baptists to attend the organization's 90th "birthday party" in Kansas City during this summer's National Convention.

"In the Bible, the number nine often symbolizes fruitfulness," noted director Ruth McDonald. "Since 1935, God has brought an abundant harvest through the self-sacrificing labors of FWB women. In 2024 alone, they gave \$482,605 to missions, church planting, and other ministries worldwide."

The department will mark this milestone through the **GIVING90** campaign to raise funds for future ministries.

WNAC offers these opportunities to celebrate and give:

• Laughter & Latte, Monday, July 21: come "dressed to the nines" by adding a fun accessory, hat, or fancy

trimming. A card and donation box will be provided for **GIVING90** gifts of \$9, \$900, or more.

- **Celebration Service, Tuesday, July 22:** bring a **GIVING90** donation for our ongoing ministry. The department is asking God for an offering of \$9,000.
- The WNAC Exhibit will also be set up to receive GIVING90 donations.

If you are unable to attend the National Convention in Kansas City, you may join online (nafwb.org/convention) or contribute to **GIVING90** by visiting wnac.org/pushpay/.

"As we celebrate 90 years of fruitfulness," McDonald concluded, "it is our prayer God will bring many more years of faithfulness." IMM

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hometown, Goldsboro, North Carolina. They continued serving at Faith FWB Church for many years.

The couple is survived by their children: Debra Roach of Goldsboro; Rebecca (David) Davies of Nashville, TN; and David (Annette) Aycock of Brazil. They are also survived by seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. They were preceded in death by a grandson, Jeremy Roach. Bobby is survived by a sister; Rose (Gene) Hales of Goldsboro. He was preceded in death by his parents; Hugh and Debbie Cuddington Aycock and a brother, Royal Aycock. Sue is also survived by a sister, Sarah Smith of Texas, and a brother David (Terrie) White of Alaska. She was preceded in death by her parents, Stanton and Helen Sloan White, and a brother, Aaron White.

A joint funeral was held Tuesday, March 18, 2025, with Dann Patrick and Christian Powell officiating.

Herbert Waid Joins Heaven's Hosts

Antioch, TN — Herbert Lee Waid, 92, passed peacefully on Saturday, April 5, 2025, at Colquitt Regional Senior Care and Rehabilitation Center in Moultrie, GA.

Born November 12, 1932, in Bloomington, IL, Herbert grew up in Detroit, MI. He married Geraldine Gay July 23, 1954, in Nashville, TN.

After graduating from Free Will Baptist Bible College (now Welch College) in Nashville, TN, Herbert was ordained to preach and pastored for several years in North Carolina. Herbert and Geraldine were then appointed to missionary service in Tokyo, Japan, where they served for 17 years.

Upon leaving Japan, Herbert pastored multiple churches in Georgia. In 1985, he accepted the position of executive secretary of the Georgia State Association of Free Will Baptists, serving until his retirement.

After retirement, he pastored Fellowship FWB Church in

Albany, GA, for 25 years. He served the church until January of this year.

In addition to his parents, he was preceded in death by his brother Stanley; sisters Donna Darlene Alder and Glenda; daughter-in-law Anne Coad Waid; and son-in-law Daniel McVety. He is survived by his wife Geraldine; children Nancy (Royce) Thiessen, Peter,



Herbert Waid

Darlene McVety, Penelope (Kevin) Wilkinson, and Amy (Jacob) Dykxhoorn; 15 grandchildren; 25 great-grandchildren; and numerous extended family members.

Reverend Randy Jackson officiated the graveside service April 9, 2025.



You just can't miss the commercials popping up everywhere these days: "Do you have cracks in your drywall? Sticking doors? Uneven floors? These may be symptoms of a bigger problem. Your house may have cracks in its foundation."

Far more concerning, many families today also have cracks in their foundations. They build their lives on shifting values, lucrative careers, sports, leisure, and a thousand other things that crumble quickly when the weight of life settles upon them. In contrast, the Church is built upon the solid foundation of Jesus Christ, and discipleship builds individual believers on Him — *The Right Foundation*. The 2025 D6 Conferences brought together people who have a passion for making disciples and for drawing church and home together with that single focus. D6 Family Ministry hosted two conferences: D6 Northwest in Seattle, Washington, March 21-22, and D6 Southeast in Orlando, Florida, April 22-24.

D6 Northwest | Seattle, Washington

MAIN STAGE

Russ Ramsey, author of *Van Gogh Has a Broken Heart,* compared discipleship to the training, practice, and eventual mastery of the artist striving to perfect his or her craft who then inspires subsequent generations of artists to take their own work to another level. When it comes to discipleship, the church plays an "important role in 'blowing on the embers' of the next generation," Ramsey concluded.

Tim Goodyear, COO of D6 Homepoint, described discipleship as "passing the baton of faith" to the next generation. He urged church leaders not to confuse the role of the church in this process, reminding listeners that parents are the runners, passing the baton, while the church is the track coach.-Both church and parents work together to ensure the baton isgrasped firmly by the next generation.

Ron Hunter shared "bookend" passages of discipleship: Deuteronomy 6:5-7 (teach them diligently) and Ephesians 6:4 (bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord). Noting the second passage was directed to fathers, Hunter challenged listening dads to develop their ability to nurture. Going further, he encouraged the church to heal broken families by *becoming* their spiritual family, bringing hurting people into God's family. "Only when we have relationships can we build influence, and only when we have influence can we reach them with the gospel," Hunter concluded.

Linc Taylor, minister to next gen and families, shared two "Aha!" moments from his ministry. The first was realizing the complexity of family discipleship (D6). The second came when he realized changed hearts are reflected in changed lives (Romans 12:1-2). He challenged church leaders to help parents embrace needs-focused parenting over wants-focused parenting to meet deeper longings, concentrate on healthy relationships, be guided by purpose and focus, and remain sensitive to God's plan for

our children. Finally, needsfocused parenting teaches children to embrace the careful balance between ministry and Sabbath rest.



Gary Lindsay, executive pastor of Northshore Community Church, asked listeners if they are "glass half full or half empty" kinds of people. Families need a half-full attitude in discipleship ministry. Part of this is learning to create a partnership with parents who may seem combative at first but "sometimes become the strongest allies in our ministry."

John Mark Yeats, president of Corban University, challenged listeners to create "healthy structures" for each stage in life by establishing basic practices in our family and ministries to keep Christ the priority. What are those basics? A set time for God and His Word, daily prayer, worship, Sabbath rest, and physical exercise, among others. Most important, we must constantly ensure Christ remains the Chief Cornerstone in our lives.

Shelly Melia, associate dean of the Graduate School of Ministry at Dallas Baptist University, challenged churches to work hard to bring generations together in their church experience, rather than putting them on separate paths. Generations can shape one another through shared experiences, meaningful rituals, and intentional presence.

Matt Hanson, leader of the National Rite of Passage Council and developer of the Aion Path, reminded listeners that parents — dads specifically — play the most important role in the discipleship of the next generation. He challenged the church to bring fathers back together with their children and to create a multi-generational culture of discipleship.

Scott Turansky, head of the National Center for Biblical Parenting, encouraged churches to help parents become the primary counselors for their children. "We are in the business of bringing change to the hearts of children," he told listeners before offering strategies to help parents embrace character development over punishment and to reward and develop a mission-oriented view of life.

As **Jim Burns**, president of HomeWord, tackled the difficult topic of parenting adult children, he summed up the topic with the quip, "Keep your mouth shut and the welcome mat out!" He offered parents simple (yet difficult) advice for parenting adult children: let go of control, avoid offering unsolicited advice, become a student of their culture, promote independence by refusing to enable, and remember they are responsible for their own choices.

Russ Ramsey returned to the main stage three additional times throughout the conference to share brief vignettes from the art world describing gifts that God shares with believers: the gift of a sad story, the gift of mastery, and the gift of limitation.

BEYOND THE MAIN STAGE

In addition to Main Stage sessions, D6 Northwest offered **48 breakout sessions** with a broad range of discipleship topics. Leading voices in family ministry shared new ideas and resources, challenged listeners with inventive discipleship strategies, and introduced tools and resources to help equip churches and families for discipleship.

Speaking of resources, exhibitors and sponsors packed the Resource Center at every possible break, with conversations bubbling over about tools and techniques. The conversations carried over into mealtimes (with food provided by food trucks) as attendees processed the flood of information received.

Emcee **Arlene Pellicane** guided attendees through the packed schedule, introducing main stage speakers, interviewing speakers, asking probing questions to help listeners process content, and prompting the audience to interact and give feedback.

Jon Forrest brought his high-energy, wacky fun and games back to the D6 Conference, interjecting each session with games, crazy questions, goofy prizes, and a non-stop barrage of humor.

First-time attendee **Natalie McEathern**, from Kirkland, Washington, expressed her enthusiasm about the conference. "It was so affirming as a parent to be reminded my ministry starts first for my daughters and then moves outward from home. I would recommend others attend D6 in the future. It was worth

















the time and investment. The speakers were very qualified, and their hearts were in the right place. They invested in those of us who listened."

Throughout the conference, attendees enjoyed worship led

D6 Southeast | Orlando, FL

MAIN STAGE

The D6 Southeast Mainstage was packed with powerful reminders about truth, discipleship, and community:

Russ Ramsey emphasized the power of storytelling: "It's how we reveal truth, invite connection, and reflect the hope of the gospel." He also reminded the audience that in every storm, "the storm is real, but so is Jesus' presence."

Dannah Gresh challenged us to live in truth. "Scripture speaks freedom over the bondage that holds you." She called abiding a lifestyle: "Stay, dwell, return."

Tim Goodyear stressed generational faith transfer. "We must create a place where families can pick up the baton of faith even if they're limping across the finish line."

Austin Fruits spoke about vulnerability, asking, "Do you allow yourself to be seen even when you fail? That's the foundation of real freedom."

Linc Taylor reminded listeners: "Wants are loud, but needs are deep. If we listen with love, we'll hear what's beneath the surface."

Corey Jones reframed ministry as worship, noting, "Ministry is about doing ministry with God."

Rich Griffith focused on home leadership: "Discipleship isn't just something we teach in public — it's something we must live out at home."

Jonathan Denton called for full commitment to Scripture. "Discipleship calls us to anchor to the whole truth of God's Word."

Brianna Edwards emphasized the importance of repair. "It's never too late to build a new template."

Northshore Community Church, which hosted the conference. It seemed appropriate for the conference to close with attendees joining their voices in song to affirm Christ as our sure and faithful foundation.

by Kiki Edwards and Brendan Sanders, worship leaders at

Ron Hunter closed with a key truth: "Discipleship is not a solo sport — it's a lifelong walk together toward Jesus."

Corporate worship at D6 Southeast was led by Michael Boggs. General sessions were lead by two emcees, Christina Embree and Kevin Jones. To help breakout up the seriousness of the main stage topics, attendees were treated to times of fun and games by Jon Forrest.

This year's D6 Mainstage made it clear: ministry, parenting, and leadership all flow from the deep work of abiding in truth, which is essential in establishing the right foundation.

BEYOND THE MAIN STAGE

In addition to these main stage talks, D6 Southeast attendees had the option to choose from over **70 breakout sessions** in the areas of family ministry, parenting, children's ministry, student ministry, parenting, leadership, special needs, discipleship, and special topics. One conference attendee made the comment that "the real value of attending a D6 conference is the wide variety of breakouts that give you needed tools for your ministry."

MOVING FORWARD

D6 Family Ministry is excited to announce the dates and locations for both D6 Conferences in 2026. D6 Northwest will take place March 6-7, 2026, in Seattle, Washington, at Northshore Community Church. D6 Southeast is changing locations, and will take place April 23-25, 2026, at Brentwood Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. To find out more information on both of these events and to purchase your tickets, visit www.D6Conference.com/. DNE

Toxic, Unfit, or Just Done?

BY RON HUNTER JR., PH.D.

After responding to a question during a pastors and principals conference surrounding valid reasons to terminate an employee, several attendees noted the answer alone made the entire conference worthwhile. So, I thought it worth sharing in this column.

Every leader eventually faces the difficult question: *should this person stay on the team?* Four categories help sharpen that decision — immorality, toxicity, incompetence, and a subtle fourth: a misaligned heart. You face the hidden costs of keeping the wrong person.

- 1. Immorality. Moral failures demand swift, decisive action. If the issue involves ethical breaches or (especially) anything sexual, leaders must assess whether the behavior is redeemable or disqualifying. When minors are involved, the decision is non-negotiable. Organizational integrity and the protection of the vulnerable overrides all other considerations. Immorality usually presents the clearest path to termination.
- 2. Toxicity. Toxic behavior erodes culture from the inside. It's not always visible to everyone, and sometimes only to a few. It may show up as gossip, persistent negativity, or private alliances that undermine leadership. Toxic team members stir unrest, drawing others into their discontent. Left unchecked, toxicity spreads like cancer. Unlike immorality, it often hides behind charm or competence, making it harder to confront until damage has already been done.
- 3. Incompetence. Surprisingly, incompetence can be the hardest to recognize. It often grows slowly, camouflaged by loyalty or personality. Sometimes, the organization outpaces the team member's growth. At other times, the role evolves beyond skillset. Technology changes, responsibilities shift, or interpersonal demands increase. Once-thriving individuals may struggle, and their likability can blur the truth. Leaders must discern whether training can bridge the gap, or if the role now requires more than the employee can give.
- **4. Plus one: a misaligned heart.** This category is the quiet disruptor. The team member performs well but has lost passion for the mission (or has become misaligned



with leadership). Competence remains, but the heart has drifted. These individuals subtly resist direction, second-guess leadership, and perhaps believe they could lead better themselves. If unresolved, misalignment mutates into passive sabotage: withholding effort, secretly hoping others fail, or no longer championing team success. While less overt than toxicity, misalignment is just as dangerous.

These four categories make it clear why wise leaders sometimes make painful decisions. The weight of leadership includes knowing things others don't or can't. Team members, church families, or outside observers may never grasp the full context behind a departure. Still, leaders must carry the burden of discernment without the comfort of full explanation. It's not secrecy; it's stewardship.

About the Columnist: Ron Hunter Jr. has a Ph.D. in leadership and is CEO of D6 Family Ministry. You may contact him at ron.hunter@d6family.com.



Proverbs 22:10 Luke 16:10

LEADERSHIP QUOTE

"It isn't the people you fire who make your life miserable; it's the people you don't."

-Harvey Mackay



buck a week offering

2025 Buck-a-Week Offering Tuesday Evening Service

NAM Recipient: Armon and Yvette Jorden Hilo, Hawaii

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SUNDAY AM AARON PONTIOUS (MISSOURI)



SUNDAY PM BRADLEY MERCER (MISSOURI)



MONDAY DALE HUDSON (MISSOURI)



TUESDAY JOSH HAMPTON (MONTANA)



Tickets are \$10 during pre-registration and \$20 onsite.

verticalthree.com

BY W. JACKSON WATTS

The Best-Kept

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of what may be the least known annual denominational event: the Theological Symposium. What began as an experiment has become a fixture on the calendar for the Commission for Theological Integrity, and the site of some of the most important presentations and discussions among Free Will Baptists. How did this happen, and why does it matter?

The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Free Will Baptists

Thirty Years of Loving

Free Will Baptists have sometimes endured a fraught relationship with education and scholarship. The 1911 merger with Northern Baptists profoundly shaped that relationship. The liberalization of institutions lingered with simmering effect for generations on the remaining churches. That we founded an institution like Free Will Baptist Bible College (FWBBC) in 1942 seems miraculous. Nevertheless, suspicions toward higher education, academics, and, in some cases, "book-learning," remained in certain areas of the denomination.

The formation of the Commission on Theological Liberalism in 1959 demonstrates the uneasy relationship between our denomination and ideas. On the one hand, some leaders valued loving God with our minds. Such love demands taking ideas seriously. On the other hand, the liberalization of mainline denominations proved that fondness for ideas and education can easily erode faithful doctrinal foundations. Free Will Baptists were on high alert. They were determined to resist the two extremes: yielding to the spirit of the age in the form of "intellectual respectability" and theological error, while also not abandoning the discipleship of their minds and the discipline of learning.

Around the same time the Commission formed, some encouraging signs demonstrated that some of our evangelical brethren were successfully navigating the extremes. People like Carl F. H. Henry, Harold John Ockenga, and Billy Graham made a tactical decision to promote Christian higher education. This led to the development of many well-trained, scholarly,

God With Our Minds

thoughtful pastors, missionaries, professors, and authors. Free Will Baptists lagged, but some were committed to catching up.

A New Perspective

One organization pivotal in this "catching up period" was the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). Founded in 1949, ETS is a professional society of scholars, teachers, pastors, and students committed to the exchange and publication of theological thought and research. While ETS only has two official theological commitments — the Trinity and inerrancy — its members tend to be more conservative.

Robert Picirilli and Leroy Forlines were active in ETS for many decades, particularly the Southern Region (now two regions). People gathered on various campuses to share papers, hold discussions, and sometimes collaborate on research. Eventually, Forlines felt this serious, theological exercise was one the Commission could emulate.

In fall 1996, a momentous event transpired when the first Free Will Baptist Theological Symposium was held on the old Welch College campus. Thirteen papers were read, covering a range of substantive topics. The event was successful, and plans were made for it to be held at Hillsdale Free Will Baptist College (now Randall University) the following year.

One commissioner fondly recalls the energy surrounding the new Symposium: "Those were heady days. Mr. Forlines' dream was to promote Free Will Baptist theology and provide a means by which to mentor younger, theologically-minded pastors and lay leaders so that the intellectual level of the Free Will Baptist church might be improved."

Pivot to the Mind

The diversity of presenters grew, as did the topics. Pastors, professors, students, and others participated. Treatments of Calvinism, evangelism, Hell, postmodernism, numerous Bible passages, and the church fathers populated subsequent programs. While paper quality varied, conversation was stimulated, and people were encouraged to dig deeper.

One former pastor-professor commissioner aptly noted, "You can't help but get stirred up to scholarship when you're exposed to scholarship." He added, "Preachers are dealing with eternal souls, advising people and so forth, and so we best have our ducks in a row. [Thoughtful people and their work] motivated me to pursue the academic aspects inherent to Bible study, sermon prep, and so forth."



One might say the Symposium has been a platform or clearing house for *prospective* scholars. A long-time presenter observed, "It has encouraged more careful research and the writing that represents that research." Some presenters simply had an idea they pursued and wanted to share with others, without further academic or vocational plans.

Others were engaged in training, whether for the pastorate, the academy, or both. Whatever the case, the Symposium provided an opportunity to share and refine their thinking through fielding questions and suggestions. Even the water cooler conversations between presentations have often been as constructive as the Q&A time.

The Impact

Approximately one hundred presenters have given roughly three hundred presentations over three decades. Many presenters have eventually excelled in higher education. Some papers formed the basis of theses or dissertations. Some have become articles or even books. Last year, *Jonathan Edwards: A Reformed Arminian Engagement* was published by a major evangelical printhouse. It originated as a set of Symposium papers. Many of longtime Chairman Leroy Forlines' Symposium papers formed the basis of Secularism and the American Republic and The Quest for Truth.

Current Commission Chairman Kevin Hester captures the Symposium's impact in both a big-picture and personal way:

The biggest benefit of the symposium in my mind is to provide our pastors and leaders with engagement in a wide variety of theological work and theological thinking. It helps to keep us all informed. It also provides a wonderful opportunity for young, blooming scholars to receive input on their scholarship and to see Free Will Baptist scholarship modeled before them. I personally benefited greatly from this as a young Ph.D. student. It provided a way for me to maintain my theological and historical connections with Free Will Baptists and Free Will Baptist thinking when studying at a Presbyterian seminary and later a Roman Catholic graduate school.

Many attendees mention Leroy Forlines, Robert Picirilli, and Matt Pinson as being among their favorite presenters. However, each program typically features at least one-first time presenter, often a graduate student discerning their way vocationally and academically. Thus, the Symposium is for newcomers and veterans alike. The diversity of past presenters is striking. The names include our curriculum writers, missionaries, professors, authors, pastors, and more.

Why It Still Matters

It's difficult for younger Free Will Baptists to understand the unique educational environment of 2025. One former commissioner recalls that higher education — certainly beyond Bible College — wasn't encouraged when he was coming of age. While more and more of our college graduates pursue graduate degrees in Bible, Theology, or Ministry, this is a relatively new development.

Another former commissioner captures the change well: "Socalled scholarship was not exactly as valued as maybe winning souls, so you were always dealing with that....There was a lack of understanding of how the integration of that into the local church could make a difference."



During public remarks last fall, Dr. Robert E. Picirilli echoed that sentiment. He said we desperately need pastors, youth pastors, music ministers, and more. But, he said, "We need a few scholars, too."

Ultimately, *all* believers should love God with their minds. Pastors and teachers will likely require more rigorous training for increasingly complex times. We must *learn* to *grow*. We can learn *without* growing, but we surely cannot grow without learning. One commissioner recalls hearing, "The eggheads are meeting," with reference to the Symposium. This will not do. It grossly misunderstands the discipleship of the mind.

Recall the refrain of Jesus to the apostles: *Be wise as serpents, harmless as doves; love the Lord your God with your whole self, including your mind; guard the deposit of truth entrusted to you.* Admonitions like these populate the New Testament. We need the Symposium and related learning opportunities to maintain doctrinal integrity and clarity.

A former commissioner illustrates this. He said when he introduces newcomers to his church, he explains we are a theologically conservative denomination. He then mused, "Without the Commission, I don't know if I would have been able to say that in the last 35 years."

Perhaps he exaggerates. It's a relief we didn't have to find out.

In possibly the most memorable Symposium presentation, Dr. Picirilli touched on this concern. In "A Plea for Scholarship" (2002), he identified reasons Free Will Baptists hadn't produced any true scholars. He cautioned against being reactionary against academic and scholarly learning: "I am well aware that education and learning of the wrong kind are dangerous. But I also know that ignorance is at least as dangerous." Moreover, he laments one reason we have lost some of our youth to other movements: we haven't fostered a climate or context to *nurture or reward* intellectual pursuits. His is a sobering claim to ponder.

Past programs include the atonement, worship, Arminius, ancient Near Eastern thought, ministry changes, gender, and more. But when the Symposium convenes this October, new presentations will inform, stimulate, and challenge. I can't wait to see what and who God will use to make us wiser in our service to His people.

About the Writer: W. Jackson Watts (Ph.D., Concordia Seminary) is the pastor of Grace FWB Church in Arnold, Missouri. He serves the denomination at several levels and has served on the Theological Commission for 12 years. He and his family live in Pevely, Missouri. Follow his writing at www.churchatopia.com.

Free Will Baptist Foundation Makes Leadership Adjustment

Antioch, TN — On May 6, the Board of Directors of Free Will Baptist Foundation made the following statement:

The Board of Directors of the Free Will Baptist Foundation has made the difficult but necessary decision to dismiss our Chief Executive Officer (General Director), effective immediately. This action follows the confirmation of conduct that violates our organization's ethical standards and leadership expectations.

A leadership transition plan is in development, and the Foundation continues to operate with the mission entrusted to us. We ask for your continued prayers and support as we move forward in humility and resolve, dedicated to honoring Christ in all we do. — Scott Coghill, Chair III

Free Will Baptist Foundation Awards \$600,000 in Grants

Antioch, TN — This year, Free Will Baptist Foundation received 48 grant applications totaling \$1.9 million. The organization is grateful to the many ministries that took time to apply.



After deliberation, the Foundation awarded

\$425,000 toward 18 grants and \$175,000 toward eight infrastructure grants. Congratulations to the 2025 grant recipients and infrastructure grant recipients! Find the full list of recipients at fwbgifts.com/.

NAFWB Recognized by Visit Tampa Bay

Antioch, TN — The National Association of Free Will Baptists (NAFWB) was honored to be recognized by Visit Tampa Bay's "Meeting the Moment" program, which honors exceptional meetings and conventions





making a positive impact on the city. The prestigious award celebrates the denomination's commitment to leave a positive impact on the National Convention host city, leading by example in the meeting industry.

The "Meeting the Moment" program annually highlights organizations that go beyond traditional event planning to prioritize sustainable practices and community engagement. The NAFWB was honored in the category of Community Engagement Excellence for dedication to IMPACT Tampa projects and the positive impression left by our attendees.

"We are incredibly honored to be recognized in Visit Tampa Bay's 'Meeting the Moment' program," said Ryan Lewis, convention manager. "Our team is committed to creating events that benefit not only attendees but also the community and the host city."

Learn more about the 2025 National Convention at nafwb.org/convention/.

WILL YOU ACCEPT THE MISSIONS 89th NATIONAL CONVENTION

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI | JULY 20-23, 2025

What is our mission as believers living out our faith in this upside-down world? This is the question Free Will Baptists will come together to answer when they gather in Kansas City, Missouri, July 20-23, for the 89th National Convention. "This year, we seek to answer the call God has placed upon us, both as individuals and as a denomination," said Executive Secretary Eddie Moody. "Are you ready and willing to answer that call?"

Sunday morning, during a joint service with teens and adults, representatives from Truth & Peace Student Leadership Conference will teach the Sunday School lesson before **Aaron Pontious (MO)** explores the commands to build, plant, and seek peace when you find yourself in a world turned upside down (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Sunday evening, **Josh Bush (KS)** will challenge listeners to accept the mission when God calls (Jonah 1). Monday, **Doug Earls (MO)** will offer the warning that disobeying God's call will sink you (Jonah 2). Tuesday, **Shiloh Hackett (TN)** will encourage the reluctant to say yes to God's call (Jonah 3). Wednesday, following the commissioning service for new church planters and missionaries, **missionary Joel Teague (France)** will challenge every believer to answer the call to love people like God loves them.



Aaron Pontious (MO) Sunday Morning



Josh Bush (KS) Sunday Evening



Doug Earls (MO) Monday Evening



Shiloh Hackett (TN) Tuesday Evening



Joel Teague (France) Wednesday Evening



While worshiping with other Free Will Baptists from across the nation is the highlight of the National Convention, the meeting goes far beyond the services. Delegates handle denominational business during the annual sessions Tuesday and Wednesday. Attendees of all ages have an opportunity to attend 90-plus seminars, workshops, panel discussions, and activities presented by the various departments and agencies of the denomination on a broad range of topics.

The **Exhibit Hall** will feature resources from departments, colleges, ministries, and vendors. Women will gather for a missionary service, swap stories and laughter over coffee, and hear from guest speakers. Students will participate in the Vertical Three Conference with worship services, games, and events put together especially for them. And the CTS Expo national competitive finals will put the God-given abilities of Free Will Baptist students on display.

To get regular updates, scheduling information and changes, and city information, visit **nafwb.org/convention/.** We can hardly wait to see you in Kansas City.

IMPACT KANSAS CITY

The annual, one-day service and evangelism event hosted by Master's Men will be held **Saturday, July 19.** Volunteers have three opportunities for service during this year's event. Those at the Esperanza FWB Church will distribute invitations to receive free school backpacks. These volunteers also will prayerfully look for opportunities to share the gospel with those they encounter. Volunteers at Berean FWB Church will deliver small gift and invitation bags to homes in neighborhoods near the church. No door knocking — just a simple drop-off on porches or front entrances.

At Church Faith, volunteers will participate in literature distribution or landscaping/yard work on the church campus.

To register for IMPACT or to learn more details about these events, visit **FWBMastersMen.org**/.

CONVENTION MUSIC

The **Convention Choir, Orchestra,** and **Praise Team** will be guided once again by the Convention Worship Team. Worship Service Coordinator Kevin Justice encourages all musicians to visit the following webpages for more details and updates regarding convention music.

> fwbworship.com/choir fwbworship.com/orchestra fwbworship.com/praiseteam

AROUND THE TOWN

Kansas is a fantastic convention city, with many great food and entertainment options near the city center. The convention center is conveniently located between the Power and Light District and central downtown, and the **Kansas City**



Streetcar offers transportation throughout the city. The free, jump-on, jump-off service covers two miles and 16 stops.

Hours of Operation:

Monday to Thursday: 6:00 a.m. – Midnight Friday: 6:00 a.m. – 1:00 a.m. Saturday: 7:00 a.m. – 1:00 a.m. Sunday: 7:00 a.m. – Midnight

For more information, visit kcstreetcar.org/route/.

AROUND THE TOWN

Families will find many activities from the outdoor adventures at **Swope Park**, which offers a zoo, playgrounds, and walking and hiking trails, to the **River Market**, a local farmer's market with over a hundred vendors. Catch a ballgame at Kauffman Stadium, home of the **Kansas City Royals** baseball team. Visit dozens of **great museums.** Need some suggestions to get your planning started?

- + Swope Park Zoo and Activities: kansascityzoo.org
- + River Market: kcrivermarket.com
- + Kauffman Stadium: mlb.com/royals/ballpark
- + Shoal Creek Living History Museum: kcparks.org/places
- + National WWI Museum & Memorial: theworldwar.org
- + National Airline History Museum: airlinehistory.org
- + National Toy Museum: toyandminiaturemuseum.org

In 2025, the National Association will pass a milestone as we celebrate 90 years together as a denomination (1935-2025). However, being nine decades old hasn't kept us from trying something new. This year, the states of Kansas and Missouri are *working together* to help underwrite the cost of the convention. We offer our thanks to our host churches and leaders.

As he anticipates the upcoming meeting, Convention Manager Ryan Lewis notes, "Kansas City is a great location for Free Will Baptists. It promises to be a memorable week, and we hope you will be there to enjoy our time together."

FIND THE LATEST UPDATES: NAFWB.ORG/CONVENTION

CITY INFORMATION: VISITKC.COM

Top CRAVES in KANSAS CITY

1. KC BBQ

2. Carrot Cake

3. KC Cheesy Corn

4. Burnt Ends

5. Russell Stover Chocolates



Value Your Pastor

BY EDDIE MOODY

Before each flight, the attendants warn passengers, "In the unlikely event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will deploy from the panel above your head. Please put your own mask on first before assisting others."

Travelers must be okay before they can help others. I think of pastors that way, too. They take care of many people, but who cares for them? Without pastors, churches begin to fade away. Without churches, our colleges will dwindle, along with funding for missions, students, missionaries, and church planters. It is important to value our pastors! How do we do that?

Pray for and thank God for your pastor (2 Thessalo-

nians 3:1-2). When you pray for your pastor regularly, you are more likely to notice a need. It is also unlikely your pastor will be effective without your prayers. Moses' intercession for Israel during the battle with the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-16) is a good example. Without prayer, battles will be lost (Ephesians 6:12-18).

Give faithfully. Congregations share the responsibility to meet the financial needs of the church. Encourage others to give by sharing about the importance of tithes and offerings (Malachi 3:10). Pay your pastor as well as you can, remembering inflation impacts him, too. Also think about his future by supporting his retirement through Richland Ave Financial. Consider the housing needs of your pastor, especially if his family lives in a parsonage. Help him prepare to purchase a home in retirement. Help others be mindful that



we do not want to be guilty of failing to support the pastor (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

Brag on him. Tell friends, neighbors, and co-workers about your pastor (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). Retell his stories. Share a great sermon quote on social media. Honor the one who is there for you in the good times and the bad (Romans 13:7).

Be a joy to pastor (Hebrews 13:7). A common complaint from church hoppers is, "I'm just not being fed." Scripture describes these people in Hebrews 5:12-14. Rather than seeking to be served, get busy serving! Show up at church with a smile (Proverbs 15:13). Bite your tongue and avoid complaining on Sunday morning. When you do share concerns, balance criticism with praise, and identify ways you can help.

Help your pastor fulfill his calling. Start by inviting others to church and sharing your testimony. Advance the gospel. Read the pastoral epistles and note the job descriptions of pastors. Think of ways to help your pastor preach the Word and fulfill your role in building a healthy church (Acts 2:42-47).

Give him a break. Help your pastor have Sabbath rest, noting even Jesus encountered times when He had to get away (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 5:16, 6:12).

Value pastoral candidates. If your church is making disciples, a future pastor is likely in your midst. Look for men who meet the criteria of 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Encourage them to follow God's leading. Tell them what you see in them. As a teen, someone in our church gave me *Spurgeon's Lectures*, another the *New Testament for Christian Workers*, and yet another *Unger's Bible Handbook*. Some simply asked, "Are you called to preach?"

I am thankful my church taught me the value of being a pastor. It's time for us to value pastors.



Eddie Moody Executive Director, National Association of Free Will Baptists



Read more From Dr. Wisehart in **At the Feet of Jesus.** This limited-edition, year-long devotional book was made possible by a grant from FWB Foundation. It will be released at the 2025 convention in Kansas City.

A Legacy of Faith...

Mary Ruth Wisehart (pictured, age 24), longtime Welch College professor and WNAC director, was a woman of great faith. She once wrote:

Andrew Murray said to beware of limiting God in prayer by asking too little or thinking you already know what God will do. Sometimes, we are tempted to put words in God's mouth or to lay out our plan for Him to follow. We serve a great God. He has promised to work in answer to our prayers. Do we expect great things from Him? Then ask great things in prayer! The task of bringing Christ to the world sometimes seems overwhelming. But God still answers prayer. He still says, "Is anything too hard for me?" (Jeremiah 32:27). God still specializes in the seemingly impossible. He has promised us great and mighty things. Are your prayers too small? Is your faith too puny?

Why not make your own faithful investment in God's Kingdom work with an endowment through FWB Foundation to benefit WNAC?



NEW RELEASE: CTS 2026



CTS Ministry Expo Guidelines 2026

The 2026 revision of the *CTS Ministry Expo Guidelines* includes some new entries and clarifies some existing entries. This is the guidelines book that will be used for next year, so be sure to get copies for your coaches and team leaders. They will be available to purchase at the Vertical Three Conference or online at verticalthree.com/cts-store/.

CTS Bible Study Pack 2026

The CTS Bible Study Pack 2026 includes the Bible study material for all Bible events as well as some sample games and templates for you to create your own practice material. The study pack will be available to purchase at the Vertical Three Conference or online at verticalthree.com/cts-store/.

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T O O R D E R



Celebrating **90YEARS** of Women's Ministry!

WNAC organized in June 1935, six months before the National Association of Free Will Baptists came into being. Since that time, WNAC has been essential to denominational ministry, supporting missions and church planting, colleges, and young people. WNAC additionally has helped multiple generations of Free Will Baptist women identify and carry out their role in fulfilling the Great Commission.

In honor of this milestone year, **would you consider GIVING 90?** WNAC is asking all Free Will Baptists to support the ongoing, faithful work of WNAC through a gift of **\$9, \$90, or \$9,000**.

Let's help WNAC finish its first century strong and growing!

Learn more: wnac.org/giving-tree