

The Agenda: ***8 Lessons from Luke 4*** **Students Guide**



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For additional biblical background study, download free at www.ethicsdaily.com *The Agenda: 8 Lessons from Luke 4* Bible Commentary written by faculty from the School of Religion at Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee.

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Introduction

An historic celebration will occur in Atlanta, Georgia, January 30-February 1, 2008. North American Baptists will gather under one tent with a unity of spirit and a burning hope for a new future together. We will reflect the enormous theological, racial, ethnic, economic, ecclesiological and political diversity found within the 20-million member Baptist family. We will share a common commitment to advancing the common good in the public square.

No greater challenge will face the New Baptist Covenant Celebration than the Bible, specifically the chosen text of Luke 4:18-19, upon which the gathering is built.

The struggle to be faithful to that text, which contains Jesus' mission statement, will make all other issues pale in comparison. Worship styles, political loyalties, wounded relationships, unstated judicatory apprehensions and all the other matters will be secondary to the primary goal of hearing and pursuing Jesus' mission.

Luke 4:18-19 is one of the most ignored, watered down, spiritualized or glossed-over texts in many Baptist pulpits, evading or emptying Jesus' first statement of his moral agenda.

A noted English Baptist preacher, John Gill, provides one of the early examples of how Baptists have spiritualized Luke 4:18-19. Gill wrote in 1748: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . because he hath anointed me . . . to preach the Gospel to the poor: in Isaiah it is, to the meek; which design the same persons, and mean such as are poor in spirit, and are sensible of their spiritual poverty; have low and humble thoughts of themselves, and of their own righteousness . . . to preach deliverance to the captives; who are

captives to sin, Satan, and the law; from which there was deliverance by him; who saves his people from their sins."

At the beginning of a new century, we need to recover Jesus' moral vision as our moral vision. When we shift our emphasis from Jesus' moral agenda, when we pivot away from his prophetic voice, we wrongly identify our prevailing culture as the Christian culture.

When Luke 4 was the lectionary reading for the sermon, a noted preacher I once heard skipped right over Jesus' rendering of Isaiah 61:1-2. He focused on God's grace. And while we all affirm God's grace and express gratitude for such unmerited goodness, the text is really about Jesus' moral agenda.

In his commentary on Luke 4:16-30, the very popular William Barclay allocated roughly a third of his ink to a discussion of Nazareth, a third to the Sabbath service in the synagogue and a third to the reaction of the people. Barclay wrote, "It was a gospel—Good News—which Jesus brought." Barclay, who has been the inspiration for countless Baptist sermons, skipped right over the core of the message, which contributes no doubt to why many Baptists hippy-hop away from the text's real meaning.

Baptist scholar Malcolm Tolbert, author of the Lucan section of the Broadman Bible Commentary, wrote that the reference to the poor and the captives "describe the spiritual bankruptcy and distress to which the good news brought by Jesus answers." While Tolbert admitted that Jesus was speaking to the excluded and that God was moving toward liberation on their behalf, he still framed the text in terms of spiritual matters and dealt with it in a single paragraph.

Whether Jesus chose the text or read from an assigned text is a matter of some scholarly disagreement that amounts to little earthly good. The fact is that when Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth—or Valdosta, in parlance of the Baptist prophet, Clarence Jordan, Jesus read from Isaiah.

Clarence Jordan translated the passage:

“The Lord’s spirit is on me;
He has ordained me to break the good news to the poor people.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the oppressed,
And sight for the blind,
To help those who have been grievously insulted to find dignity;
To proclaim the Lord’s new era.”

How we, goodwill Baptists, read the text matters.

In *Kingdom Ethics*, Baptist ethicist Glen Stassen wrote that in Jesus’ citation of Isaiah he connected his foci with God’s focus on delivery of justice to the poor, the powerless and the oppressed, a significant theme in Isaiah.

In *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, Baptist ethicist Miguel De La Torre warned about two kinds of Bible readings.

The spiritual reading calls for a heart-conviction rather than for physical action. The material reading necessitates critical analysis and concrete action.

In the Luke 4 text, Jesus said the gospel was for the poor and oppressed, speaking to those at the margins of society. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized—the impover-

ished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners. Jesus came to turn the economic structures upside down, instituting the year of Jubilee when crushing debts were forgiven and slaves were freed.

But the spiritual reading evades Jesus’ clear words. It guts the message of its prophetic power, making Jesus’ message acceptable to the rich and powerful and those who want to be rich and powerful, who know what it means to be poor in spirit and do not want to be troubled by how they obtained their position and what God expects from them.

Emphasizing an emotional or psychological condition in a pharmaceutical and therapeutic culture is palatable. Focusing on spiritual lostness is far easier than forcing Baptists to grapple with our legacy of slavery and segregation, the potency of institutional racism and structural poverty, the state of constant war with prisoners denied rights and the misuse of global power.

The material reading, however, calls for biblical justice—justice that delivers the poor from oppression and restores the powerless to full membership in the good community.

The Baptist Center for Ethics’ Bible study on Luke 4 takes a material reading of the text. We begin with Jesus’ struggle in the wilderness with the economic, political and religious temptations to power. We then move toward Jesus’ statement that he would pursue moral power. We explore how the people heard and responded to his vision. Finally, we conclude that Jesus moved forward undeterred by opposition and steadfastly in faithfulness.

Our hope is that Baptists across North America will use these lessons in preparing their hearts, minds and hands to pursue Jesus’ mission statement. We hope that we will be

hearers and doers of the word (Jas 1:22), that our minds might be transformed (Rom 12:2) and that we might become known as those who do good for and with others (Matt 7:12).

Now is not the time for the faint-hearted. Now is the time for goodwill Baptists to concentrate on the text, discerning how we live out together Jesus' agenda.

Written by Robert Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tennessee.

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The Power of the Spirit

Text: Luke 4:1-15

Theme: Jesus struggled with which power option to use in his mission.

Introduction

The World Bank, whose mission is reducing global poverty and offering financial and technical assistance to developing countries around the world, recently found its work compromised when its president, Paul Wolfowitz, apparently abused the power of his office.

Wolfowitz's concerns were far from humanitarian and global when he secured a large pay raise and promotion for his girlfriend, Shaha Riza, also a World Bank employee

Riza had been at the World Bank eight years when Wolfowitz joined the organization in 2005. To avoid a conflict of interest, she was moved to a position at the State Department yet remained on the World Bank's payroll. Her promotion and pay increases prompted allegations of favoritism from Wolfowitz. Her annual compensation increased by more than \$60,000 within a brief period of time. Her 2007 salary exceeds that of the Secretary of State.

Interestingly, Wolfowitz had embarked on an anti-corruption drive, tackling government corruption in certain countries receiving aid.

As the scandal surrounding Wolfowitz and Riza unfolded, the World Bank's 10,000 employees worldwide no doubt mentally calculated the potential good Riza's \$193,500 annual salary could have done among those who lack adequate food, water and health care.

Wolfowitz ultimately resigned his position.

Power always exists in tandem with the capacity to use it to render good and the temptation to misuse and abuse it. History and current events offer examples of both.

As he was set to begin his public ministry, Jesus struggled with temptations to power and how to use the power available to him. His response set the course for his ministry and offers critical instructions for Baptists committed to pursuing justice and serving the needs of the world.

The Biblical Witness

The opening verses of Luke 4 record the account of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, which preceded his first public statement. In examining Jesus' temptations/trials and their applications in our lives, the following points are key.

Temptation and trial refer to the same experience. Both words can equally translate the Greek word *peirasmós*. Perhaps the only way to distinguish between temptation and trial may be our response to the experience. If we concede to it, we call it temptation. If we withstand it, we call it a trial.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined *peirasmós*—temptation or trial—as “a concrete happening which juts out from the course of life,” as well as a “dark bond in which God let[s] the devil do his will.” Indeed, *peirasmós* is a time when we

are forced to examine our deeply held values and priorities. Such was the case for Jesus.

As it did for Jesus, temptation/trial comes to us in a desert experience, in solitude, in need, in famish. It attacks us as pirates in the sea. We cannot choose when it will come. It comes unexpectedly. Anyone who has reflected on temptation knows that more than being lead into it, we are left to face it.

Temptation/trial is not to make us sin, but to capacitate us to conquer over sin. It is not for our ill being, but for our well being. It is not to debilitate us, but to fortify us, to make us nobler, purer, more similar to Jesus. It is not the disgrace of being human; it is the glory of being human. We have to thank God for temptations and trials, because they mean we stand in freedom to decide the course of our lives.

Having set up this sort of framework for our reflections, consider the three paradigmatic temptations of our Lord in the desert.

Luke 4:1-2 In the Wilderness

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

As in both Matthew and Mark, Luke's gospel places the temptation period of Jesus immediately after his baptism. Obviously, the gospel writers pointed to a time when Jesus seriously reflected over the direction his earthly ministry would take.

The forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted identify him with three great characters from Hebrew scripture who in their own ways were tempted or tested. Adam did not withstand temptation in the garden of Eden (Gen 3:1-24). Moses did not eat for forty days and forty nights while receiving from God the commandments (Ex 34:28). Elijah, after fleeing for forty days and forty nights, hid himself in Horeb, the mount of God (1Kings 19:8).

Like Adam, Moses and Elijah, Jesus was tempted and tested. Unlike them, Jesus victoriously succeeded in treating these temptations as they deserved. He was “full of the Holy Spirit”—a reference to his recent baptism (Lk 3:22)—and had the power and the courage to triumph over temptation.

Luke states clearly that Jesus “was tempted by the devil.” While Luke identifies this character as “the devil” only in this passage, he reveals his identity in other names he uses for him: Satan (10:18, 11:18, 13:16, 22:3, 22:31); Beelzebul (11:15, 11:18, 11:19) and “the ruler of demons” (11:15).

Luke 4:3-4 **The Trap of Economic Power**

³*The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”*⁴*Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”*

Luke had previously stated that Jesus is the “son of God” (Lk 3:38), a declaration the devil used to begin his first temptation. The devil did not doubt that Jesus was God’s son; he recognized this relationship as a way to incite Jesus to use his peculiar relation to God in an ungodly

manner. A better translation might be, “Since you are the Son of God, then ...”

At the very outset of his earthly ministry as the Messiah, Jesus was confronted with what kind of Messiah he was going to be. The devil did not try to convince Jesus to put away his Messiahship; instead, he tried to tempt Jesus to be a certain kind of Messiah. The devil is never against religion per se; he just would like always to be the central object of worship.

The temptation of bread represented a double temptation for Jesus: to use his power for his own benefit, and to use miracles (in this case, turning stone to bread) as a method to conquer the hearts of human beings to himself.

The Latin poet Juvenal popularized the phrase *pane et circences*—bread and circus. It represented a mechanism of strong power, the formula that Roman emperors used for centuries to gain political power through easy popularity.

In withstanding the first temptation, Jesus refused to abuse his unique relationship with God to serve his own needs. He also refused to use popularity as a way to the Kingdom.

Baptists face a similar temptation to use our unique relationship with God to serve our own needs and keep for ourselves more than we need. God designed the church with a spendable purpose. The church is to be used, given away and expended in the purposes of God.

We also may be tempted to use populist methods to attract people. On two recorded occasions, Jesus multiplied bread to feed a great multitude, but he never used this power to attract people to him. On one occasion, he retract-

ed from the multitude because he knew they wanted to make him king (Jn 6:15), and later reprimanded them saying they were looking for him because of the bread (Jn 6:26-27).

Our relationship to God does not depend upon the amount of things we have, and the advance of the Kingdom is not accomplished through populist power games.

The answer of Jesus—quoting Deuteronomy 8:3—is exact. Only the one who has learned to depend on God completely for everything has found the way to satisfaction of all the desires of life. As Augustine said: “Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”

Luke 4:5-8 **The Lure of Political Power**

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Here the devil shows a tacit recognition of Jesus’ relationship with God. His offer was sustained in two lies: One, that all the glory and authority over the world has been given to him; and the other, that he would give all that to Jesus when Jesus worshiped him.

It is very probable that Jesus, who declared that the devil “is a liar and a father of lies” (Jn 8:44), immediately recognized these lies. Anyone who has made a deal with the devil

knows the devil never gives anything to anyone; he only takes away.

Had Jesus worshiped him, the devil would only have taken from Jesus the power and authority that had actually been given to him. The devil is the prince of darkness and deceit. Jesus is the prince of light and truth. Jesus is the actual owner of the world. All glory and power and authority have been given to him forever and ever (Rev 5:12).

The devil was not cutting a deal with Jesus. He was tempting Jesus with the allure of political power. In a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, in 1887, Lord John Acton birthed a phrase that has been popularized since: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” We most probably agree completely with him, except for Jesus.

Jesus, who declared that “the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10), was in the process of deciding how he would fulfill his mission. Politicians work through deals, arrangements and compromise, gaining power and influence as a result. While some of these deals might be right, indeed many of them favor either the politicians or their special interests or kin.

Jesus had another view: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matt 16:25-26).

There are two masters, said Jesus—either mammon (riches) or God (Matt 6:24, Lk 16:13). Each of us makes a personal decision. When temptation came, Jesus made his

decision. Quoting again from Deuteronomy, he rapidly answered: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." True faith is not based on compromises, but on commitment to the true God.

Luke 4:9-12

The Deception of Religious Power

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and ¹¹'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

For a third time the devil approached Jesus with words of flattery, appealing to his unique relationship to God. The third temptation was related to religious power. As with other forms of power, the problem with religious power is its abuse.

At a critical time in Jesus' life when he was determining the kind of messiah he would be, the devil flung the dazzle of religious power at Jesus and tempted him to become something other than what God intended.

The concept of a messiah developed in Israel during the exile. Most Jews in Jesus' time expected a messiah who would lead a war against Rome and set up a renewed throne of David to exalt Israel over all the other nations of the world.

Jesus' view of the kingdom and messiahship, however, was not a political one (see Jn 18:36). Jesus identified

himself with the suffering servant of God, the king who would come not mounted on a vigorous horse, but on a humble donkey; "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice" (Is 42:3).

When the people later asked Jesus for a sign proving he was the Messiah they had long anticipated, he said, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Lk 11:29).

There in the desert, Jesus deliberately determined he would not use signs and wonders as hooks to trap people into God's kingdom. He wanted people to enter the kingdom willingly and by faith, without force, coercion or strings attached and apart from fear.

So, in a last answer to the tempter, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus correctly answered, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Luke 4:13-15

Sealed Destiny

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. ¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The devil abandoned Jesus, but not for long. Jesus, however, began his Messiahship in the power of the Spirit. Fame and praise followed him, not because he had followed the advice of the tempter, but because he sustained himself with God's word and began doing God's will.

Jesus made his decision in the desert. He decided he would not use *paine et circences* to gain the will of the people. He decided he would not use political power to make inroads into the lives of the people whom he would invite into the kingdom. He decided he would not be the political Messiah popular religiosity was expecting.

In deciding these things, Jesus sealed his destiny: the cross. Jesus knew the outcome, but he decided to take that road. It was the road of full and absolute surrender to the will of God. It was the road of impartial service. It was the way of death to achieve resurrection.

Doers of the Word

If goodwill Baptists are to have a part in the advance of God's kingdom in this world, we too must make up our minds. We must remember who we are, and why we are who we are. We must resist the Constantinian temptation of becoming a State church. We must not set foot into the riches of this world. And we must stand firm in our commitment to the love and grace of God, which can empower us for a true service of love to "the least of these" (Matt 25:45). We must remember our heritage from radical reformers like the Anabaptists and Mennonites.

Among the many who embodied this vision and these values was George Blaurock (1491?-1529). In his excellent book *The Anabaptist Story*, written "from the conviction that a study of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists can be instructive to those of us who seek to follow Christ in obedient discipleship," William Estep tells the story of this "Hercules of the Anabaptist," as he calls Blaurock, a renegade Catholic priest who went to Zürich attracted by the Swiss reformation.

In 1517, the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli accepted the call to Zürich as people's priest, a religious-political post at the Grossmünster. Some years later he had gained full control of the city and in January 1525, the Great Council of Zürich, resolving a dispute between Zwingli and some of his students—Conrad Grebel among them—proclaimed Zwingli the victor and denounced the radicals. The little group was given three options: conform, leave Zürich, or face imprisonment. They choose the latter.

A few days later a dozen or so men, led by Grebel and Blaurock, got together in the house of Felix Manz, another radical reformer. In the middle of the night, defying snow and chilly weather, Grebel baptized Blaurock and proceeded to baptize the others in a night that Estep calls "the birth of Anabaptism." Nine days later they were arrested and imprisoned, but at his release Blaurock continued his itinerant person-to-person evangelism in Zürich and Zollikon.

By March 16 Blaurock was imprisoned again. On January 5, 1527, Manz was executed by drowning, and Blaurock was stripped to his waist and beaten with rods until the blood ran down his back. Upon his release from prison he went to Bern and to a church in the Adige Valley whose pastor had been burned at the stake. He continued to preach and to attract large crowds for a couple of years until he was taken into custody by the Innsbrook authorities on August 14, 1529.

Three weeks later, on September 6, 1529, Blaurock was burned at the stake near Klausen (now Chiusu, Italy). The charges, as recalled by Estep, were: "Because he had abandoned the office of papist priest; because he did not maintain infant baptism, and preached a new baptism to the people; because he had rejected mass and confession

as instituted by the priests; because he disallowed of invoking or worshiping the mother of Christ.”

Commitment or compromise: that is the question. Blaurock died for not compromising. Baptists of our age not only have abandoned the zeal of people like Blaurock, but also, as small Zwinglis, have been calling each other to conform or to abandon the church.

Years of disagreement among Baptists have left many of us vulnerable to temptations to abuse and misuse power against our own sisters and brothers. We need to abandon that immediately, and begin focusing in Jesus’ approach to the kingdom: a suffering servant.

Only if we respond to temptation as Jesus did will we learn how to depend on God to meet our needs, commit to an uncompromising pursuit of justice and serve the needs of the world rather than pursuing our own selfish agendas.

Wealth and political preponderance have made some of us prone to nationalistic ambitions, to racial and class segregation, to political domination. We tend to think that because we have a connection with the powers that be, we have God-given rights to determine the futures of peoples. That fundamentalist sense of manifest destiny is foreign to the egalitarian kingdom vision of Jesus. We must struggle with and determine what to do about the fact that while many of God’s children suffer and live in poverty, others enjoy prosperity and good health.

While it is true that the choices we face are not black-and-white—they were not either for Jesus when he had to confront them—it is also true that if we are faithful to God we will be given the spiritual resources we need to overcome our temptations (see 1 Cor 10:13). In all of our moral

and political decisions, God calls us to life faithfully, even when we cannot fully understand the implications of our actions.

Wrong ways will never lead to the right place.

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Community at the Core

Text: Luke 4:16-17

Theme: Jesus provided a text for his mission statement in the context of the faith community.

Introduction

Community is a central feature of life for Christians. One of the core characteristics of Christianity is community. We are the family of God. We are a faith community born of the Spirit that reflects the presence and power of God in the world. We follow the example of Jesus who epitomizes what we believe and how we live.

Jesus provides the pattern that shapes the involvement we have in the world. We learn from what he said and how he lived what people who are part of his family are expected to be and do. Believers in Christ are to follow him in service with a ministry to God that changes the world, transforms lives and improves the quality of existence for everybody.

A vibrant example of Christian community is the Second Baptist Church of Los Angeles. We are a church family that seeks to witness to the reality of the pervasive presence and power of God through Christ in our lives and the world. Organized in May 1885, this congregation of believers in Christ has maintained an uninterrupted presence in the Los Angeles community for the past 122 years.

With a multifaceted ministry, this congregation serves its membership as well as the broader community, offering opportunities for worship, prayer, study and fellowship. As part of understanding its role in the world, this congregation of believers extends its ministry beyond the sanctuary to include a child development center; a preschool program; shelters for homeless women and children; affordable housing for large families, the handicapped and the elderly; a credit union with financial literacy classes; investment opportunities through an economic development corporation; estate planning seminars; positive parenting classes; grief recovery classes; opportunities for employment and skill development and a live Sunday radio broadcast to the greater Los Angeles area.

This congregation of believers in Christ receives its impetus, imagination and interest for ministry from its understanding of the life of Jesus, who was born into and nurtured by a faith tradition for which community was important.

The Biblical Witness

Jesus developed the custom and habit of attending the synagogue on the sabbath day. When he began his ministry, he went to the place where he had been nurtured. There he had learned about the faith of his ancestors and how their customs, rituals and traditions emerged and evolved. There his understanding about life had been shaped, his vision about the world fashioned and his passion about his purpose for living clarified.

Following the custom of his community, attending the synagogue on the sabbath, Jesus discovered himself and announced the nature and purpose of life. Jesus was a

product of his circumstances, culture and conditioning. All of them factored into the person he came to understand himself to be.

Luke 4:16 **Jesus' First Faith Community**

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

Jesus announced his purpose for living in the context of the faith community in which he was raised. He went to those who had known him just about all of his life. They had seen him grow from a child through the tumultuous teen years through the troubling adolescent phase to adult maturity. They knew him and he knew them. He was one of them and used what he had been taught to describe and define his mission in life.

In his community of faith, he learned about the basic obligations of life and living. He was taught “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:4b-5). He learned how to live in the context of contact in community with others.

Jesus learned about the Decalogue, which provided principles for living a God-honoring life, a life that expressed itself in reverence to God and respect for one another. He studied the prophets, who with their insight came to clarity of understanding about the activity of God, the will of God and the purpose of God in the diverse changing scenes and times of life. Of course, he learned the Psalms, the song and prayer book of the faith community that probed with deep intensity the fundamental concerns of life.

From these seminal teachings in the Hebrew scriptures, seeds were sown into the life of Jesus, who would later become the expositor of their meaning with a kind of poignancy that left indelibly etched in the minds of his hearers the pictures he painted with words that left no room for misunderstanding.

Jesus enlarged and broadened the understanding of the faith tradition in which he was nurtured. He expanded the *Shema* to say, “This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:38-39).

Jesus would later explain what it meant to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your strength, and with all of your mind; and your neighbor as yourself by telling a parable about a Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37).

Luke 4:17 **Rooted in Scripture**

¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

Jesus linked his understanding of his purpose to the Hebrew prophetic tradition by reading from the prophet Isaiah. He rooted his mission to the world in scripture that denounced oppression of the poor, thus affirming a moral vision and commitment to justice, righteousness and peace.

Jesus was handed the part of the scroll that contained the book of the prophet Isaiah. He turned to the portion from

which he read, which is found in the 61st chapter, and read it with a slight modification, omitting the portion about the day of vengeance.

This was the defining moment in the life of Jesus as he would declare to those who knew him what he had been anointed to do.

Additional references from the prophet Isaiah affirm that Jesus' mission was of the same shape, scope and moral quality as that of the prophet whose words he used to define his purpose. Matthew says after the healing of many at Peter's house, "This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'" (8:17).

Matthew, again speaking about Jesus as the chosen servant of God, lifted the words of Isaiah 42:1-4 in chapter 12:18-21:

"Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope."

Surely the references of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 depict the sacrifice of Jesus as making a covenant with his blood, which is poured out for the many for the remission of sins (Matt 26:28; Mk 14:24); his sufferings and being treated with contempt (Mk 9:12); his being strengthened by an angel to face what otherwise would have caused him disgrace (Lk 22:43); and in his resurrected state heightening the awareness of the two on the road to Emmaus about

how it was necessary that the Messiah would suffer (Lk 24:25-27).

Much of Jesus' life, teachings, healings, death, burial, resurrection and ascension are mirrored in the book of Isaiah. Providentially, it would seem, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath on the very day the scriptural reading came from the book of Isaiah. He would later create a community of believers/disciples providing a relationship model for people of faith to follow his example.

Doers of the Word

A sign on the entrance to the sanctuary of some churches reads, "Enter to worship." On the opposite side of that passage is another sign people see as they exit that says, "Depart to serve."

We are encouraged as we enter to gather to celebrate God's liberating activity in our lives and world, reflect on the goodness of the Lord and be inspired to be involved in the challenging, convicting, converting and comforting presence of the Lord in Christ. We are reminded as we leave that we are to take what we have received to make a difference in our lives and world. We are not to leave as we came, but we are to go home another way.

A wise maxim says, "Service is the price you pay for the space you occupy." There are no free rides in or through life. We pay in service for the privilege of having a place in time and space. The writer of Romans reminds us to present ourselves "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (12:1b-2).

We go forth as transformed nonconformists, to use the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., to turn a topsy-turvy world right side up. That is the legacy of the Baptist faith tradition and has been since its inception. As a community of believers in Christ, Baptists see the Bible as the supreme standard for faith and practice in the Christian faith and Christ as the perfect example of what God is like as well as what we can become in him. With our congregational form of polity, we unite ourselves in associations, state and national conventions as well as international alliances in order to do collectively what we cannot do individually so that our witness can have a greater impact on the world. In coming together to do jointly what we cannot do separately, we fulfill the prayer that Jesus prayed to the Father in the gospel of John:

“I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they maybe one, as we are one” (17:9-11).

We have an opportunity to come together as Baptists to reclaim the best of our tradition, calling for peace, justice and freedom from oppression. Now is the time for a witness in the world that reflects the harmony and unity Christ prayed for believers to manifest in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Written by William Epps, senior pastor, Second Baptist Church, Los Angeles, California; editor in chief, National Baptist Voice, magazine of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

First Things First

Text: Luke 4:18

Theme: Jesus’ moral agenda welled up from the Spirit of the Lord.

Introduction

Living under the anointing of the Spirit of the Lord yields significant impact for the sake of those who live in vulnerability in the world. It leads us away from self-orientation and opens our lives to the wide opportunities of service, relief, release and redemption among those who are bound, blind and bruised.

Just as the Spirit of the Lord drew Jesus into ministry in difficult places, the Spirit of the Lord draws us into similar ministry settings today.

Perhaps it was the Spirit of the Lord that led Arkansas Congressman and Baptist Brooks Hays to support the integration of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1958, a decision that subsequently cost him his seat in Congress. History reveals Hays’ unwavering commitment to his faith. It records how critics and sometimes even friends found fault with his politics, his ideas about race relations and his deep-seated loyalty to the South, but they never had reason to question the sincerity of his faith.

Recalling his unopposed run for the Fifth District congressional seat in 1942, he said that the only hint of opposition

he heard during the campaign was concern that if he was elected, he would use his position to alter the social status of black Americans. Undeterred, he firmly established himself as a “moderate” on race relations.

Within a week of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision that struck down racial segregation in public schools, Arkansas announced it would begin immediately taking steps to comply with the new law. The city of Little Rock planned a carefully developed program to break down the barriers of segregation in its schools, with desegregation set to begin in high schools in 1957, followed by junior highs the following year and elementary schools after that.

But on September 2 of that year, the night before school was to begin under this new plan, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called on the state’s National Guard to surround Little Rock’s Central High School and not allow any black students to enter. He claimed protestors were headed in caravans to Little Rock, and he defended his actions by saying he was trying to protect citizens and property from violence by these protestors.

The National Guard troops were withdrawn on September 20 after a federal judge granted an injunction against Faubus’s use of them. Black students entered the school quietly with police escorts through a side door on September 23 when classes resumed, but when a crowd of protestors outside learned this, they began moving toward the school in a threatening manner. School administrators removed the black students from the school, again through a side door.

Congressman Hays and Little Rock’s mayor, Woodrow Mann, called on the federal government for help, and the black students again returned to the school on September

25 under the protection of 1,000 members of the US Army, 101st Airborne Division.

Hays, up for re-election in 1958, prepared to defend his congressional seat. His firm stand on desegregation, however, had left him quite vulnerable. Eight days before the general elections, a Little Rock school board member, Dale Alford, filed as a “write-in” candidate and gained tremendous public notoriety for his support of Governor Faubus’s actions. He defeated Hays by 1,256 votes, out of some 60,000 that were cast.

Later, at a testimonial dinner given in Hays’s honor, Oklahoma Senator Mike Maroney said, “We are here because we know Brooks Hays for what he is—a man who will not leave the path which conscience sets. His loyalty to those ultimate virtues of love and courage has set a high mark in our political life. . . . Brooks Hays has lost nothing. It is his nation and colleagues in Congress who are the losers—for he has brought into our lives the example of a courageous Christian leader.”

The Spirit of the Lord draws people into life-impacting service on behalf of others. The Spirit of the Lord enables us to be voices for the voiceless, to protect the vulnerable and to defend the victim. The Spirit of the Lord upon our lives prepares us and propels us into service in the name of Christ and to the glory of God.

The Biblical Witness

While scripture reveals few details about Jesus’ early years, Luke’s gospel tells us that he “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (2:40).

At his baptism, God publicly blessed Jesus, giving him the Holy Spirit: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (Lk 3:21-22).

It was this same Spirit of the Lord that Jesus declared as the source of his stated moral agenda. Having successfully withstood the devil’s temptations for him to abuse his power, Jesus gathered with his hometown faith community to declare how God had anointed him for his unique role and announced his priorities. At the outset, Jesus put first things first.

Luke 4:18a
Power and Wisdom

The spirit of the Lord is upon me,

Jesus used language familiar to those who attended synagogue when he declared that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Having been honored to read the lesson for the day, “He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...’” from Isaiah 61.

After he read the text, he sat down to give a short interpretation about how Israel had looked to the day of their deliverance from Babylonian exile, but the prophecy of national renewal had not yet happened.

So what is significant about him reading about the Spirit of the Lord upon his life?

Hebrew scripture includes many references to the Spirit of the Lord being upon God’s servants. Unusual capacities surfaced in the lives of those upon whom the Spirit fell. They would receive amazing capacity for defending God’s people against those who would do them harm. They would be given extraordinary capacity for leadership. They would demonstrate remarkable degrees of wisdom.

When the Spirit of the Lord came upon God’s servants, they were empowered and enabled to do more than commonly expected of even the noblest of people. The Spirit brought to humans power beyond normal ability and wisdom above ordinary aptitude.

That Jesus declared that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him signals to all who heard that he was empowered beyond what people could expect of him and that he would accomplish beyond what they would be able to imagine or fully comprehend—until the Spirit of the Lord enables them to do so later.

Luke 4:18b
Good News Indeed, and In Deed

because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

Anointing was familiar to the Jewish people as an act of separating people or things for special purposes. Kings, prophets and priests, as well as altars and special objects, were anointed.

Jesus’ reference of the Spirit of the Lord having “anointed me” indicates that God was with him in a way that separat-

ed him for a specific purpose. This was not a new experience; rather, it was an affirmation of what had been essential to Jesus' life all along. At his baptism, for example, "the Holy Spirit descended upon him..." (Lk 3:22).

So what did Jesus understand his life to be empowered to do in ways that were beyond normal capacity? He had been anointed to "bring good news to the poor. ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."

The good news Jesus brought was not a drug to anesthetize people so that they could escape the abuses and exploitations to which they were subjected. The good news that Jesus brought was not an escape from reality where the shades were pulled on the demands and distractions of the world.

Jesus' good news was more than spiritual rhetoric. In his day, the term signified a public proclamation, such as an announcement that a war had been won or a new king had ascended to the throne. For those who lived vulnerably and on the fringes of community because of the disproportionate distortions of power, this good news of Jesus was good news, indeed. But it was also good news in *deed*.

Luke repeatedly portrays Jesus in fellowship and community among those who were marginalized by the religious establishment: the sick, possessed, sinners, outcasts, those without resources to provide for themselves, women who faced amazing discrimination in their paternalistic societies, and the like. They were especially vulnerable to being mistreated by those with political, religious or social power. They were unwilling victims of the norms established by those committed to protecting their places of privilege. They were voiceless in terms of having their cases heard

and heeded by those who had authority to rectify their problems. To them, the good news of Jesus was indeed good news.

People sometimes ask whether Jesus was referring to the spiritually or the physically poor, captive, blind and oppressed. The answer is yes and yes!

Jesus was committed, and is still committed, to those who live without full spiritual power and insight. People live in darkness, and most of them are not aware of it. They have become so accustomed to the darkness that it appears light to them. For them, Jesus is the light of the world.

Jesus was, and is, also committed to those who live with physical and social disease, distress and dislocation. Jesus did not choose either one realm or the other. He operated in the reality of the "both/and." For example, when friends brought a paralyzed man to Jesus (Lk 5:17-26), Jesus first declared that the man's sins were forgiven. Then he told him to stand, take his bed and go home. The man received physical healing immediately and went home glorifying God.

Asking whether the church should primarily be committed to the physical or spiritual condition of people is a false dichotomy. God created people with body and breath, flesh and spirit. We must be equally committed to the wellbeing of the whole person and the whole human family.

Just as Jesus embodied the good news of God to bring compassion and capacity to live full and meaningful lives to those who suffered and struggled, we are called to do the same. No excuses allowed.

What good news do we have for the poor, captives, blind and oppressed today? Is there any good news for them in Baptist churches in North America?

Are we so preoccupied with affirming our seductions to material excesses and our appetites for popular and political affirmation that we fail to follow the lead of Jesus to shape our personal and community priorities to bring compassion and capacity-building to the poor?

Do we work to release those who are captive?

Do we proclaim sight to those who cannot see?

Do we free the oppressed?

Doers of the Word

Jesus' moral agenda was clear. At the outset of his ministry he identified the poor, prisoners of war and politics, those in ill health and the oppressed as his chief concerns. The good news Jesus brought was intended for those whose only hope was that God would act on their behalf and free and heal them. The remainder of Luke's gospel portrays a Jesus who chiefly identified with those who were socially, religiously and economically excluded.

To follow Jesus faithfully and completely, Baptists must pick up this agenda to carry good news to the world's marginalized, displaced, impoverished and imprisoned people. The good news Jesus brought is more than individual, private and spiritual, and when we make it exclusively that, we cheapen it and lessen its meaning.

Most churches in the early twentieth century seemed satisfied with the status quo, focusing on individual repentance and conversion. Walter Rauschenbusch actively disagreed. He began speaking out and writing against materialism and capitalism and became the Social Gospel movement's most influential theologian.

As pastor of the Second Baptist Church in New York City's Hell's Kitchen, Rauschenbusch witnessed abject poverty and suffering and ministered to people who lacked life's basic necessities. The plight of impoverished parents helplessly watching their malnourished children die grieved him deeply: "When I saw how men toiled all their life long, hard toilsome lives, and at the end had almost nothing to show for it; how strong men begged for work and could not get it in the hard times; how little children died—oh! the children's funerals! They gripped my heart—that was one of the things I always went away thinking about—why did the children have to die? . . . And in that way, gradually, social information and social passion came to me."

This kind of witness can happen to you when the Spirit of the Lord is upon you.

Written by David Emmanuel Goatley, executive secretary-treasurer, Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention, Washington, D.C.

God's Acceptable Economy

Text: Luke 4:19

Theme: Jesus prioritized the moral agenda of economic justice.

Introduction

Martin Luther King, Jr., the preeminent twentieth century public theologian, understood that economic justice was not just about racial justice. For King, economic justice was deeply rooted in the mission of Jesus Christ.

King was more than a civil rights leader. He was in fact, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist pastor, rooted in the African American tradition. The son and grandson of prominent Baptist pastors, King earned degrees at Baptist institutions—Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia and Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. While completing his doctoral degree at Boston University and serving as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, King became the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

King is best known for his “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered in August of 1963. Then, he envisioned a nation where the particularities of race were erased and people were judged instead by the content of their character.

Americans are now fondly drawn to the King of the “Dream.” That wasn’t always the case. During the mid

1960s, national magazines and network television graphically portrayed police dogs attacking Southern blacks who had sought the right to vote. They also showed bullwhip-toting police officers beating black youth for seeking to sit at public lunch counters.

What America saw then changed the public mood regarding segregation. By 1964 and 1965, major civil rights acts were passed.

King refused to stop there. Behind his dream was a nation of people living a nightmare. He began to see that compassion for life’s victims on the Jericho road was not enough. The whole Jericho road needed reconstructing if justice was to prevail.

In his last months of life, King began organizing his most ambitious project: the Poor People’s Campaign, where “a multiracial army of the poor” would descend on Washington, engaging in civil disobedience until Congress enacted a poor people’s bill of rights. Those rights would confront a nation that had demonstrated “hostility to the poor.” They would challenge a nation that appropriated military funding generously, while providing “poverty funds with miserliness.”

Within months, King, the Baptist prophet of economic justice, lay dead, assassinated on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to fight for the economic rights of sanitation workers. As a result of King’s murder, the Poor People’s campaign was never fully launched nor implemented.

Jesus too embraced an economic agenda. His stand with and for the poor may have just gotten him killed.

The Biblical Witness

Reading Luke, we note that the positioning of the story about the sabbath day declaration in the synagogue at Nazareth is quite different than that of Matthew's (13:54-58) or Mark's (6:1-6a) account. While these writers locate the event later in their gospels, Luke places this story just after the birth, baptism and temptation narratives.

For Luke, it was important to portray Jesus who, right from the beginning, announces who he is, what his ministry is about, what his followers will be engaged in and what will be the reaction to both him and his church. The issue for Luke was not chronology, but program and priority. For Luke, Jesus has a program that must be understood and priorities that must be embraced and emulated by his followers.

As we have seen in previous studies, bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, announcing the recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free are all part of the Jesus and contemporary church agenda. A properly apportioned, Spirit-anointed church liberates harassed and humiliated humanity in the name of Jesus Christ. In spite of the Spirit, liberation activity never comes easily.

Perhaps the most difficult liberation action that the church can engage in is found in the last phrase of Jesus' sermon before he sat down, rolled up the scroll and declared that in him, the text had actually been fulfilled. The ancient Hebrew challenge, the Jesus question and the contemporary Christian church dilemma is how to best "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Luke 4:19

Jesus and the Isaiah Agenda

¹⁹"... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

As we have seen, Luke 4:18-19 is Jesus' recitation of Isaiah 61:1-2. Considerably striking is that Jesus did not quote the Isaiah passage in its entirety.

According to Luke, Jesus rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant with the concluding words "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" and then sat down. Jesus did not go on to quote the following phrase from Isaiah when Isaiah wrote, "and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa 6:2b).

It appears that Jesus was far more interested in justice than he was in retribution.

The ears of Jesus' listeners perked up when he declared that his mission was the proclamation of "the year of God's favor". This language was a part of their deep cultural consciousness. They would remember that Isaiah initially uttered these words during or soon after the Exile. These promising words were meant to bring comfort and courage when they were written centuries before.

Now, out of the mouth of Jesus and spoken to oppressed people who were daily burdened by the occupation by Rome, Jesus was reminding the people of the promised future God had for them.

What powerful good news! According to Jesus, "the year of the Lord's favor" meant that the time had come to liberate the impoverished and the oppressed. Isaiah had pronounced that the year of the Lord's favor would "... provide

for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit” (Isa 61:3).

Echoing Isaiah, Jesus’ stated moral agenda, declared at the synagogue in Nazareth, included social concerns like righting economic wrongs. Through the mouth of Isaiah, God said, “For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them” (Isa 61:8).

For Isaiah and for Jesus, the poor, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives and the prisoners were all people of worth and dignity. Their humanity and personhood was to be affirmed and protected.

Isaiah had said of them, “They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations” (Isa 61:3e-4).

This is a great reversal! The world’s despised and disdained will become those through whom God displays God’s glory, as oppressive social and economic conditions are crushed and we recognize the need to create the social and political systems where all can be fully engaged in community and in creating community.

Leviticus 25:1-24 and Deuteronomy 15:1-18 Rest, Relief and Release

The promises of Isaiah 61 and the pronouncement of Jesus in Luke 4:19 proclaiming the year of God’s favor are based on Leviticus 25:1-24 and Deuteronomy 15:1-18. Here we get deeper understandings of the year of Jubilee and the concept of the sabbatical year on which Jubilee is built.

In these passages we further see that Jesus recognized, as did his Jewish predecessors, that the land and its yield belong to God. Since the earth is the Lord’s, God expects those to whom it is entrusted to be merciful and generous toward those who are in need.

“The year of the Lord’s favor” literally means, “the Lord’s acceptable year.” It is based on the Mosaic law of Leviticus 25. Related to the Sabbath, a time of rest, every seventh year was a special period of relinquishment and release (Deut 15:1). After a period of seven times seven Sabbaths, Jubilee (or release) was declared (Lev 25:8-9).

In the 50th year, the Jubilee year, “you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” (Lev 25:10). Family property was to revert to its original owners (Lev 25:13), the value of property prorated based on actual use (Lev 25:14-17), slaves were to be released and equipped for self-reliance (Deut 15:13-15), debts were to be canceled and nature itself was to be given a rest (Lev 25:4,10-12).

Clearly, the Mosaic Law was written to ensure that all persons were provided with a kind of debt escape so that a person would not be permanently indebted, and therefore, unable to participate in normal, daily business activities. Additionally, Jubilee was intended to insure that the wealth of a community or nation did not permanently accrue into the hands of a few people or families.

Luke 14:7-14 God’s Economic Center

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the

place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host;⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Throughout Jesus' public ministry, he makes it clear that those considered on the margins of society are the special subjects of God's concern. He invites them to take their place right in the center of God's economy.

In this text, it is at a special place at the banquet table. For Jesus, there are no big "I's" or little "you's" from God's perspective. For Jesus, in God's economy, everyone—the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame—all who would have been considered beyond the pale of inclusion by the powers that be, receive a special invitation to take a seat at the banquet table.

In God's economic system, the poor, the voiceless and the powerless enjoy the same privileges as those who seem to have everything.

Doers of the Word

Sadly, there is no historical evidence that "the year of God's favor," Jubilee, was ever fully implemented in ancient Israel. Moses, Isaiah and Jesus sought to prevent the institutionalization of economic exploitation and the long-term consolidation of economic power.

The questions for us as followers of Jesus Christ are, What is our level of commitment to economic justice? And, in what ways are we challenging and eliminating the abuse of economic power?

What does a commitment to Jubilee mean for Baptist Christians in the first decade of the twenty-first century?

At the very least it means:

- committing to making a difference for children living in poverty;
- rejecting the practice of redlining in real estate based on race, ethnicity and sexual orientation;
- eradicating payday lending institutions;
- advocating for a living wage for everyone;
- challenging excessive corporate CEO compensations; and
- inquiring of local, state and national candidates for political office where they stand on these issues.

To be faithful, Baptist Christians must boldly preach the whole gospel, which includes dealing with present needs and conditions, not simply focus on the future in heaven. The pursuit of economic justice must figure prominently into our moral decisions.

The sabbatical year in ancient Hebrew life insured that a person who had the misfortune of being sold into slavery would not spend his or her entire life in that condition. In a similar way, committed Baptist Christians must work together to ensure that the economic conditions resulting from poverty should not determine the course of one's entire life, or worse, destroy it.

Will those who come behind us find us faithful to the plight of the poor, the captives, the brokenhearted, the oppressed and the prisoners?

To what extent will Baptists working together leave a Jubilee legacy that says that we were committed to moving people from the enslavement of poverty through better educational opportunities, improved health care and secure employment?

Written by Aidsand Wright-Riggins, executive director, National Ministries, American Baptist Churches, USA, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

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Can You Hear Me Now?

Text: Luke 4:20-22

Theme: Jesus questioned if the faith community understood his mission.

Introduction

As a seminary student, I faced a difficult situation when I was asked to preach the gospel to two women who lived together with the same man. When the first wife found out that her husband had a second wife, she got angry and left him. Later, economic problems caused her to return to him, but by then, the man already had the second woman in the house.

After much arguing, the man managed to convince the two women to live together, each one in a different room of a rustic home he had built. The children of both women played together, and one woman would take care of them while the other would do the household chores. Through a sister in my congregation, they asked to know more about Jesus Christ. I was sure they were in need, but I didn't feel comfortable preaching to them.

What could I recommend if they accepted Jesus? I presented this case to my Greek and New Testament professor, Guy Williamson. This was his answer: "Gilberto, these persons have a basic problem. They need to hear about Christ. Everything else is secondary. Go and preach to

them about Jesus! It is none of your business what God may do with them after that.”

My teacher shocked me with his revolutionary proposition. When he noticed, he asked me, “Do you know how God called me into ministry?” I answered that I didn’t, so he told me.

“I was very young, when my country, the United States, sent me to the Second World War. I was a Christian, son of Baptist Christians. I knew about the value of life and felt uncomfortable holding a rifle in my hands. The war had ended, but the horror and the smell of death was all around wherever we turned.

“One day, while we were holding a position in one of the taken German cities, we heard noises. Our sergeant gave me the terrible order to go and see what was going on. He said, ‘If you have to shoot, well, shoot, man!’ I fearfully went, asking God that there might not be anyone there.

“Half buried among debris and lifeless bodies, I saw a very dirty young boy and girl. They had been looking for food in the trash that we were leaving behind. I aimed my rifle at them, and fearful of my weapon, they stopped what they were doing. While they ran for their lives, I fell on my knees and prayed to God, ‘Oh, Lord! If I come out alive of this horrible war, I want to dedicate my life to teaching your truth, so that the world becomes more just and no one sees something like this again.’”

His testimony resulted in a fundamental principle of my life: What people need the most is to hear about Christ.

The following Sunday I spoke with the two women, and both prayed to accept Jesus as their Savior. They also decided

to talk to their husband so that he would know Jesus also. Although we eventually lost touch and I don’t know what God did with them, my job was only to bring Jesus and God’s kingdom closer to them.

Guy Williamson not only taught me Greek and New Testament but also a passion for establishing God’s kingdom. His influence is palpable in several generations of pastors. If we can see significant renewal in Mexico, it is due to the faithful and passionate prophetic proclamation of men and women like Guy.

The Biblical Witness

As faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we bear his message. That is our responsibility, our mission. Jesus’ initial proclamation to those in his hometown about his purpose and mission reminds us that each person hears the gospel message through unique filters of life experiences that affect their subsequent responses.

Jesus announced his life’s purpose and offered those who heard him the opportunity to respond. He was faithful in his responsibility to announce the good news. He left to those who heard him the decision about if and how to respond.

Luke 4:20 The Word in Person

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Luke’s gospel affirms that Jesus respected and followed the practice of synagogue worship, standing to read from sacred text and then sitting down to teach, as was custom-

ary. It was a common scene in the synagogue; nevertheless, this time, the teacher was no ordinary person, and all eyes were on him.

Who was listening? Surely, the president of the synagogue, some scribes and Pharisees and pious men and women were there, segregated with men in front and women in the back. Following Jesus' reading, they all sat down to listen eagerly to the teacher of the day.

This time, though, something was different. Prophecy had turned into reality. The Lord Jesus, the living Word, was teaching. Everything else was ordinary, but this teacher was different. He was impossible to ignore. Those present that day could not be indifferent to him or to his message.

From the beginning, though people did not always understand Jesus and his message, they were nonetheless drawn to him and riveted by the things he said and did.

They were listening, but did they really hear?

Luke 4:21 **The Great Revelation**

²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In reading from Isaiah 61:1-2 and then announcing that its message had been fulfilled, Jesus proclaimed at least seven things:

1. The Messiah had arrived. *Christ* and *Messiah* are the same word, meaning "the one anointed by God." Jesus' words made direct reference to the messianic hope of the people.

2. Salvation. The Messiah would save his people. Salvation was not some future hope for the people—streets of gold, crystal sea, etc. It involved integral wellness for the individual, and it included good health, prosperity and plentiful life.

3. Freedom. What benefit would good health deliver if there was not complete liberty to enjoy it? The ideal for which the people waited included liberty from their oppressors.

4. Blessing of light. Elijah had prophesied times when Jehovah's followers would enjoy fullness of knowledge, truth and a clear vision of God's plan immersed in His light. The blessing of light would diminish the darkness, ignorance, fear and desolation in which the people had lived.

5. God's kingdom. The Messiah would establish a new rule where equity, justice and peace would be the colors of the new kingdom's flag.

6. Jubilee year. In addition to liberty from their oppressors, Jesus announced freedom from enslavement and economic debt. Everyone would be able to participate in and benefit from community life because of Jubilee.

7. Establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. The time had come for God's will to be realized on earth, Jesus said.

Jesus' message was profound and complex. Listen again to what he said:

I Am the Messiah. You do not have to wait for anyone else.

Today is the beginning of what you have anxiously awaited: the Jubilee year, the new kingdom.

Today, a divine justice period for God's people begins.

Today, a great revolution begins.

Today, God answers your deepest prayers.

Today, salvation has arrived.

Wow! That truly was a daring interpretation of Isaiah's text, one Jesus no doubt repeated many times during his teaching.

They had heard, but did they truly understand?

Luke 4:22 **Decision Time**

²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

Those in the synagogue that day marveled at what Jesus said. Can you imagine listening to a sermon by Jesus, the Messiah, Son of God? Surely it was different from the messages they normally heard from the scribes and Pharisees, full of rules, the law and condemnation. Jesus' message was a message of hope.

They "spoke well of him." But they had to decide whether to believe the truth and obey. What stood in their way?

In the first place, they were greatly surprised that they didn't really know someone who had lived so close to them all those years. "Is not this Joseph's son?" they asked. In the second place, how could the son of a carpenter be the Messiah they had eagerly anticipated?

Some likely thought that what they were hearing was too good to be true. They had been waiting for several generations for this. They could believe in the God of Abraham and Moses of the past. They could believe in the God of the future. Could they believe in the God of the present who was with them that day?

For others, Jesus' message was simply too much of a revolution to accept. It was a spiritual, moral and social revolution that they recognized could and would change their lives forever. Some were simply too comfortable with the *status quo* to accept it.

Still others were blinded by evil. They could see the "son of Joseph" but they could not see his divine nature. They were not sensitive to the reality of the Spirit, blinded by their own sins.

As Timothy would later write, "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths" (2 Tim 4:3-4).

Following Jesus' announcement, those in attendance were no doubt expecting the other shoe to fall or an explanation of some sort. They knew him as Joseph's son from the line of David. Many of them had seen him in that very place for years (v 16). They had heard of what he had done in Capernaum (v 23). They were amazed, although they weren't sure if they should believe in him.

This kind of reaction to Jesus became a common one during his ministry (Luke 5:26; 7:16-17; 9:43). Jesus wanted the people to be sure in deciding to follow him. On

several occasions, he insisted that his disciples truly understand who he was (Lk 9:18-20 and Matt 16:13-16).

They had listened and heard. Would they understand and follow?

Doers of the Word

Harry Emerson Fosdick said, "It is by acts and not by ideas that people live."

Jesus' message introduced people to new ideas, certainly. But more than that, he introduced them to a new way to live. Hearing Jesus is more than listening to him. It is an act of discipleship. Those who heard Jesus then and who would hear him now demonstrate their understanding of the message by the way they live—concrete actions that show God's love.

As part of the larger body of Christ, Baptists are Christ's presence in the world and have the opportunity to take God's kingdom to the world. We do this loving act by loving act.

As a pastor in southeast Mexico, I visited a young man terminally ill with AIDS. The epidemic was at that time full of myths and fears. The first thing I noticed was that he wasn't using his own name in the hospital to avoid the stigma for his family. A nurse who came to his door with food told the young man's mother, "I won't go into that room; you feed him!"

The young man confused me with a Catholic priest and wanted to confess. After I explained he could talk directly to God, he asked me to remain and listen to his prayer.

I had never heard such an intense prayer. He cried out in anguish. I was so impressed that without thinking I kneeled and accidentally touched his hands. He immediately held me and said, "Thank you. It's been a long time since anyone has touched me without gloves."

I must confess, I was afraid. I had touched an AIDS patient. Looking back I recognize that God wanted to touch and save that young man before he died. My hands were there and God used them. I can never thank Him enough for that privilege.

We are the body of Christ; we are his hands, his mouth, his feet and His love for others. Our job is to walk through this world touching those who need God in their lives. As each of us does this, the will of God, we help establish God's kingdom on earth. People may reject the message, but we must become doers of the Word anyway.

Some years ago, I was asked to preach in Oaxaca, Mexico. The pastor of the First Baptist Church, Ruben Burgette, invited me to a very special meeting with the person in charge of religious relations for the state government. The purpose of the meeting concerned the fact that Nilo Dolores, another pastor in a small community, was in jail. He had been beaten and placed there by the municipal president who wanted to stop the construction of the church.

The meeting was intense. Every minute, it seemed the municipal president would take out his gun. Even though the officer told him that the law did not back his actions, he would not budge. We were advised to wait for the end of his term. Nilo told me then, with tears in his eyes, that he would not abandon his church even if they killed him when he returned to his community.

The municipal president finally finished his time in office. He had made many enemies and began having problems as a result. Someone tried to kill him. Eventually he was jailed for stealing government funds.

Who do you think visited him in jail?

Yes, it was Pastor Nilo. Shortly before his death, the former municipal president, still jailed, asked God for forgiveness and gave his life to Christ. Everyone was amazed by his transformation.

Jesus came with a message. As Baptists, we must hear him and respond. Beyond traditions, our task is to be disciples of Christ. Let us “press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14).

Written by Gilberto Gutierrez, pastor, Iglesia Bautista, Horeb, Mexico; president, National Baptist Convention of Mexico.

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Accepting the Prophetic Voice

Text: Luke 4:23-24

Theme: Jesus knew how difficult it was for people of faith to hear the prophetic voice.

Introduction

Prophets. Biblical prophets. Christian prophets. Baptist prophets?! What names spring to your mind? Names like Thomas Helwys or John Smyth, Roger Williams, Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King Jr., Will Campbell or Jimmy Carter? Prophetic voices to their time, each one, and if any are unfamiliar to you, I would encourage you to explore their work.

Meet a prophet from my part of the world—Silas Tertius Rand (1801-1889). Rand grew up in rural Nova Scotia (a province in eastern Canada), received relatively little early formal education, but learned a dozen languages including Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Micmac, Maliseet and Mohawk.

Best known as “the Protestant missionary to the Micmac” (now spelled Mi’kmaq), he felt called to share the gospel with the indigenous peoples of Maritime Canada. Rand committed his life to learning their language so that he could translate the Bible into their own tongue. To do that, he developed an alphabet and written language for them, and vigorously promoted efforts to teach them to read.

In an age of deeply-embedded racial prejudices, Rand viewed all peoples as made in God's image, and looked forward to the time when "we might dwell together in that bright world, where all the little distinctions which exist among fellow worms will be laid aside, and the Indian, the African, and the white man ... will unite for ever in praising and adoring His name." He publicly decried the unjust and unmerciful treatment of "our coloured brethren," just because "they have the audacity to wear the skin which the great Creator gave them."

Ahead of his time in many ways, Rand was concerned for the whole person. He wrote frequently, eloquently and sometimes stridently in the Baptist denominational papers on the plight of the Micmac, calling on Christians and government to improve their poor living conditions and their educational and vocational opportunities. While initially Maritime Baptists championed his evangelistic efforts and sponsored him financially, their support did not extend to personal involvement, and financial support eventually dwindled.

Rand (along with his family) sacrificed financial security and health in his life-long calling; he was often in the centre of controversy, sometimes because he worked too closely with other Protestant denominations that supported his work. Most importantly, though, he earned the trust and friendship of the Mi'kmaq. Joe Brooks, who had helped him learn the language affirmed, "others despised us and passed us by; you came among us and taught us."

Over a century later, Rand's collection of Mi'kmaq oral traditions is considered irreplaceable, and his ground-breaking linguistic efforts are still valued. Although his fellow Baptists honoured his prodigious efforts among First Nation people, they largely ignored his prophetic call, and

with his passing significant Baptist ministry among our Mi'kmaq neighbours died.

The Biblical Witness

Before we explore some examples of biblical prophetic utterances, it's important to recognise that the central role of Hebrew prophets was to proclaim God's truth rather than to predict the future, often the common understanding of the word "prophecy." In other words, they were more often "forth-tellers" than "fore-tellers."

Although the prophets were very forthright in presenting the dire consequences of flaunting God's laws for righteous living, their prime duty was to call attention to the conditions of injustice and godless living that thwarted God's intention for Shalom. Their interest in the future grew out of their concern with how God's people were living in the present.

We would do well to remember that in most cases, the prophetic message was delivered to the pew, so to speak, to those who claimed to belong to the household of faith.

2 Samuel 12:1-15 You Are the Man!

But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, ¹and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of

*his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.'*⁵ Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die;⁶ he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

⁷Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul;⁸ I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more.⁹ Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.¹⁰ Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.¹¹ Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun.¹² For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.'¹³ David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Nathan said to David, 'Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die.¹⁴ Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die.'¹⁵ Then Nathan went to his house. The Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill.

The legacy of King David is an illustrious one; we recall his reputation as Israel's greatest king, his profound poetry, his

lineage as an ancestor of Jesus and his distinction as a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). Surely he is a model of righteousness for God's people! And yet, in this passage, we see a dark side of David that the biblical writers felt was important to include in the canon.

In this masterfully-told story, we meet the prophet Nathan who has been sent to convey personally to the king God's judgement on David's wicked conduct towards Bathsheba and Uriah. It took great courage for the prophet to confront the king with his sin—prophets risked their very lives for their honesty. Nathan begins indirectly with a story—a parable of injustice. When David does not recognise his own guilt, Nathan comes directly to the point, "You are the man!" Once confronted by his sin, David confesses and repents; although he receives personal forgiveness and redemption, the consequences of the sin are not removed, and spread like a cancer through the family, the clan and eventually the nation.

In a society in which the king held absolute power over his subjects, the prophet Nathan dared to accuse the centre of power of an injustice that was an affront to God.

In his commentary on 2 Samuel (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. II, Abingdon, 1998, p. 1294), Bruce Birch emphasises that both Nathan and David stand within and represent the community of faith. We cannot just be Nathans, naming the sins of others. Sin and righteousness co-exist within the covenant community, and the church is called not only to proclaim God's judgement on injustice but also to receive and acknowledge judgement for its own participation in the conditions that create brokenness.

Micah 2:1-5 Abuse Will Be Punished

¹*Alas for those who devise wickedness
and evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in their power.*

²*They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance.*

³*Therefore, thus says the Lord:
Now, I am devising against this family an evil
from which you cannot remove your necks;
and you shall not walk haughtily,
for it will be an evil time.*

⁴*On that day they shall take up a taunt song against you,
and wail with bitter lamentation,
and say, 'We are utterly ruined;
the Lord alters the inheritance of my people;
how he removes it from me!*

Among our captors he parcels out our fields.'

⁵*Therefore you will have no one to cast the line by lot
in the assembly of the Lord.*

In this judgement oracle, the prophet Micah matches divine punishment to human crime. Those who lie awake at night thinking up new and devious ways to steal the homes and lands of others with impunity will lose their own inheritance at the hands of foreign invaders. While wrongdoing may go unchecked for a while, in the end it sows the seeds of its own judgement.

Here, Micah confronted not the central political power, as in the case of Nathan and David, but rather the economic élite. In a familiar pattern, the rich were becoming richer at the expense of the powerless.

In ancient Israel, land and land ownership held a special place in the Hebrew understanding of their relationship to God. God had provided them with a land of their own, and although the land had been divided among the tribes (Josh 14-21), God remained its true owner. The health and well-being of the people, and by extension the whole nation, rested on the right of each family (their inheritance) to support itself on its own land. The entire social structure was threatened when this relationship between God, land and people was broken. By speaking out against this injustice, Micah risked incurring the wrath of the powerful in the land.

A realistic look at our world shows us that the innocent do suffer and evil does prosper—for a time. Prophets like Micah, however, assure us that God is just and at work in the world, and that God will not tolerate abuse of others indefinitely.

Amos 2:6-8 Callousness and Excess Condemned

⁶*Thus says the Lord:*

*For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—*

⁷*they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of
the earth,*

*and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;*

⁸*they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed.*

In this judgement, Amos did not denounce the misuse of political or social power, but insensitivity to the misfortunate, and profligate lifestyles. The charges included falsely accusing people of failing to pay their debts and then selling them into slavery, sexually abusing servant/slave girls in the household, not returning garments taken as pledges for debts from the poor (Ex 22:26-27) and partying in the house of worship. God does not take such travesties lightly, and for these God will return punishment.

Further along in his oracle, Amos added one more reason for judgement (v 12): Israel had rejected those whom God had called to be God's messengers and tried to silence their voice, commanding the prophets, "You shall not prophesy." In Hebrew thinking, the spoken word had immense power: by naming the animals, Adam gained mastery over them; God's name (JHWH) was not uttered aloud. The prophets believed that their spoken words released God's power into the situations that they addressed. By silencing the prophets, the people were attempting to thwart God's will and power, but Amos warned them that this tactic would not work and they would be harshly punished for rejecting God's mouthpieces.

Luke 4:23-24 **Jesus, the Prophet**

²³He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' ²⁴And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.'

At the very outset of his public ministry, Jesus identified himself as a prophet, counting himself in the company of well-known Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah, Elijah and

Elisha. Initially, the hometown crowd greeted Jesus graciously, eager to receive the blessings that they felt the prophet's home town deserved, and perhaps a little jealous that he had already done wonderful things in Capernaum, the prosperous Galilean fishing village and trading centre which was also the home of the disciples Peter, Andrew, James and John.

All four Gospels record Jesus' use of the second proverb, in slightly different forms (see Matt 13:57; Mk 6:4; and Jn 4:44). The word *patris* can mean either "hometown" or "home country." Not only his little home village (Nazareth) but his own people (Israel) would eventually reject Jesus. As Jesus would declare at another occasion when discussing John the Baptist (Lk 7:18-27), being a prophet did not include fine clothes and luxury. Further along in our story, Jesus made it clear that God's blessings would be extended to all peoples, especially to the insignificant and disadvantaged. To the expectant citizens of Nazareth, Jesus' response came like a dash of cold water.

Doers of the Word

Throughout the Americas, one of the darkest stains in the tapestry of European settlement has been the treatment of the indigenous peoples—sometimes at the hand of the church. So much of this history has been well-documented and told that few people in twenty-first century North America can plead ignorance of this issue.

In Canada, one of the scandals of the church has been the "residential schools" system. The Government of Canada website dedicated to this issue states that "Indian residential school system . . . in part grew out of Canada's missionary experience with various religious organizations" (www.irsr-rqpi.gc.ca/english/history.html). Beginning in the

nineteenth century, children were removed from their families and their communities and placed in boarding schools run by various Christian denominations. The Government of Canada jointly administered these schools with the churches until 1969 when it assumed full control; most of the schools were closed by the 1970s. Although some former students speak of their positive experiences, an overwhelming number have spoken about the physical, sexual and emotional abuses they suffered, not to mention the precious loss of their identity and culture.

In the midst of lengthy legal battles to redress the wrongs, some churches have publicly (some reluctantly) acknowledged their collective guilt and asked forgiveness. The sin cannot be eradicated and the damage will continue to affect lives, but healing for some can begin. Echoes of the story of David's sin resonate, as the consequences of sin cannot be wiped out, even when there is redemption. The Native relationship to the land reflects the ancient Hebrew relationship—that of a sacred trust.

Although Baptists were not involved in the establishment or running of the residential schools (largely by default because of their relatively small numbers), the fact remains that across Canada, First Nation people are our neighbours. The question looms, "How have Baptists advocated for these brothers and sisters, or worked with them to improve their quality of life?" Who is the prophetic voice that speaks to one of the great ongoing travesties of justice in North America? Will we heed the Silas Rand of our day?

Many injustices in our immediate neighbourhoods cry out for our attention. Abuse of economic, social or political power takes many forms. It may consist of blatant discrimination based on racial or economic factors or it may be a hedonistic lifestyle that ignores the plight of the disadvan-

taged. Do we heed the voice of Jesus, the ancient prophets and the prophets of our day who call our attention to our complicity in the inequalities and injustices of our culture? God's Shalom is intended for all peoples, not just the privileged few, and we risk the health of our own souls if we ignore that truth.

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

Written by Carol Anne Janzen, lecturer in Christian Education, Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

Read the riveting story of Rand's life-work in *To Be a Pilgrim; A Biography of Silas Tertius Rand, 1810-1889* by Dorothy May Lovesey; Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1992.

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A God Who Won't Be Boxed In

Text: Luke 4:25-27

Theme: Jesus warned that God's unstoppable agenda marched forward even if it was outside the circle of faith.

Introduction

Baptists are a very “human” group of people. A quick look at our own Baptist history shows times when we failed to be perceptive to God's leadership.

For example, we can quickly find throngs of eighteenth and nineteenth century Baptists who seemed to have no convictional problems about their involvement in slavery enterprises. Some Baptists in more recent years have leaned toward warlike gestures before gathering all the facts and exploring all peaceful negotiation possibilities. Thankfully, we can learn from our errors.

On the positive side, we can observe countless examples of believers who closely heeded the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God's people gain great insight when they pay close attention to those Baptists who carried the mantle of righteousness and justice and realized that God won't be boxed into our human constructs and plans.

For example, in the early part of the twentieth century, Helen Barrett Montgomery stood firm in her convictions regarding the role of women in leadership and service opportunities.

She blazed the trail for women in spite of much opposition from both genders. Her faith convictions led her to great influence with both Rochester University and the local school board. She worked closely with other believers in interdenominational circles to produce watershed events such as the World Day of Prayer.

Moreover, Montgomery's leadership skills catapulted her into the presidency of the Northern Baptist Convention in 1921. She championed Baptist distinctive tenets and told her fellow Baptists that they were “trustees for great principles, never more needed by the world than now. Let us not betray them.”

Montgomery was also the first woman to complete a translation of the entire New Testament in English, called *The New Testament in Modern English*. By virtue of her personal experience, she was someone who could well understand her Savior's activity in our world.

Montgomery knew that the Lord would not allow himself to be boxed inside any human agenda. The living God was, is, and will be sovereign.

Another clear example of God refusing to allow the divine plan to be thwarted comes from 1960s Cuba. Fidel Castro had already wrested control of the country from a notorious dictator named Bautista. (Coincidentally, that surname is translated “Baptist.”) In order to consolidate power, Castro decided to imprison evangelical pastors and missionaries, among whom were Herbert Caudill and his son-in-law David Fite. Many of these unjustly imprisoned people were confined for months, even years.

Castro's best laid plan didn't lead to success, however. On the Sunday after the leaders were imprisoned, their church-

es had greater attendance than normal. The new prisoners consoled each other with God's Word in more than one way. They shared scriptural passages they had memorized. They also hid pages of the Bible between pages of a book on Shakespeare. Certainly, the prayers of the Cuban people and those from other countries helped soften the new dictator's heart. Eventually, all of the Baptist leaders were released.

Today, the good news of salvation rings across Cuba as Baptist churches are allowed to express their calling. For example, UBLA (the Latin American regional arm of the Baptist World Alliance) recently held their annual meeting in Havana. The General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, Denton Lotz, as well as the BWA president, Billy Kim, enjoyed an audience with none other than Fidel Castro. During the cordial meeting, these Baptist leaders spoke frankly about human rights to the chief of state of Cuba.

The Biblical Witness

Make no mistake about the sovereignty of our God. In God's perfect timing, the Lord of Glory will mete out his peace and justice both through his followers and through those who are insensitive to his guidance.

Jesus sometimes worked with the people of faith and at other times he worked around them. Much depended on their responsiveness to the dynamic will of God.

Luke 4:25-27 Radical Ways

²⁵"But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years

and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

Here Jesus does what he did so well—subtly provoking the religious types to reconsider their understanding of God and God's ways. First, the Jews were scandalized when Jesus asserted that the great justice passage from Isaiah referred to him. Ever the Master Teacher, Jesus then addressed their incredulosity with more references from Hebrew scripture. He quickly drew upon the examples of Elijah and Elisha, venerable heroes of their faith.

A bit of uncomfortable irony came as Jesus referred to Elijah and Elisha. Any good Jew was well acquainted with the prophetic virtues of these two men and would consider them the "good guys." Jesus knew the very mentioning of their names and vignettes from their lives would be compelling.

Nevertheless, those listening to Jesus knew they were in a moral dilemma. Their beloved prophets also caused distress among the peoples of their day. Those men of God didn't tow the party line. They stated many politically incorrect things. Simply put, Elijah and Elisha were doing the job of being prophets, speaking on behalf of God in a way that bristled in the ears of the wayward people.

Jesus' dialogue in Luke occurred a few hundred years after Elijah and Elisha. By that time, Jewish cultural heritage had allowed the people to soften the alarming sides of their stellar prophets. In other words, the Jews of Jesus' day had accepted the revisionist interpretations of their religious history.

To combat that error, Jesus simply reminded his listeners that Elijah and Elisha carried out God's purpose both inside and outside the chosen house of Israel. Therefore, if the Jews were fully to honor the ways of Elijah and Elisha, they would have to affirm that God sometimes carried out the divine plan without the help of God's people. Such a radical acknowledgement was a blow to the pride and collective self-esteem of the Jewish people.

1 Kings 17:1-16 **Beyond the Borders**

¹“Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”²The word of the Lord came to him, saying, ³“Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁴You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.”⁵So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁶The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. ⁷But after awhile the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land. ⁸Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ⁹“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”¹⁰So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so I may drink.”¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.”¹²But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may

go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.”¹³Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.”¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

This dramatic passage from 2 Kings reveals God's willingness to shake up the all-too-comfortable Israelites with more revelations of his holy character. Elijah and a widow become the main characters in this account that must have disturbed the self-satisfied Jews. Through an interesting set of circumstances, Elijah carried out his prophetic responsibilities by challenging the people for having turned from God.

Within this provocative story, Elijah withdrew from his Jewish community and related to a poor Gentile widow who generously aided him. Her kindness to Elijah came in spite of the fact that she was actually at the point of starvation. In turn, God honored this moment with his miraculous provision of abundant meal and oil.

Much of this account would be appreciated by the Jewish people, especially the earlier account where Elijah received his food from the ravens. But the rub came quickly in terms of an ethnic and religious disparity. It is no small matter that Sidon, the town of this encounter with the widow, is in Lebanon and not in Canaan. God thus revealed that his kingly reign extends to the people who reside beyond the borders of Israel. Such knowledge was oftentimes rejected or ignored by ardent Jews.

Through Elijah's actions, the living God began to reveal that he could work outside the supposed confines of the Jewish people. God again showed that he would not be boxed into the Jews' limited understanding of his ways.

2 Kings 5:1-14 For All People

¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." ⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹But

Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!" ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean? He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean?"" ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Many of us remember portions of this remarkable 2 Kings story from our childhood days in Sunday school. Let's get reacquainted with the great truths of the account.

At this time, Israel's outstanding man of God was Elisha, the prophetic heir to Elijah. Elisha is joined in this passage by an interesting cast of characters, including a powerless slave girl and a powerful Syrian general, Naaman. Many Jews must have dropped their jaws upon learning that Naaman, a Gentile, received healing from his leprosy from the God of Israel.

There's much more power and significance in this story that highlights the wonderful healing of the influential Gentile named Naaman. First, this general's victories are noted as coming from the God of Israel. Second, a Jewish slave girl, who has nothing to give but advice, encourages General Naaman to find healing from the God of Israel. Then, Elisha fashions no spectacular healing for the crowds; instead, he commands Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan River. At

this point, Naaman's frustration nearly led him to discard the whole idea.

Only after some diplomatic prodding from his assistants did Naaman comply with the request of Elisha to dip seven times in the river. The final result was cleansing of the leprosy from the God of the Israelites. Through this experience, Naaman and countless others have realized that our Lord offers his holy provisions to all the great tribes of people throughout the earth. God would not allow himself to be confined to the possessive clutches of one group of people.

In the middle of the last century, many Baptists discounted the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr., as he sought to lead the United States to civil rights equality. They didn't realize the impact of "wringing good out of evil," a term Dr. King used after the tragic deaths of four girls who were killed while attending Sunday School when their Birmingham, Alabama Baptist church was bombed. Slowly through those turbulent years, more Baptists began to realize God was orchestrating racial justice through courageous people such as Dr. King. Once again, our living God announced he wouldn't be boxed in to any unrighteous human devising.

Luke 9:4-6 **Seeking Healthy Alliances**

⁴“Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. ⁵Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”⁶They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.

This passage once again emphasizes God's posture of autonomy in our world. God will work with or without the approval of people. Jesus instructed the disciples to be ready to move to other areas if they were ever rejected. The emphasis here deals with seeking fresh opportunities to proclaim the kingdom of God. Jesus' coaching of the disciples was positive and time-efficient; he directed them to find listening ears rather than misspend valuable time with those whose hearts were closed.

We should consider unprofitable situations that entangle us in the twenty-first century. Some of our social ties are contentious, even within the circle of faith. Maturing believers need to be willing and ready to follow Jesus' admonition to "shake the dust off their feet" in the presence of unhealthy alliances.

Doers of the Word

These scripture texts clearly signal that God can easily surprise us with his will and ways. God won't be boxed into our preconceived notions of what he should do. Our sole guideline to predict God's work is to peer into God's character through the chronicle of God's Word. Sadly, many believers from time to time are known to disregard divine counsel found in scripture. Just as comprehension of geography requires one to study maps, the effective "doer of the word" has to first become intimately acquainted with the word.

To become a successful "doer of the word," we must also closely analyze God's character and passion. As you study scripture, seek to find parallels in modern-day life. Try to discover examples of how some North Americans carry pseudo-spirituality in an unflattering light. Reflect on how

our religious fervor might be built around favorite passages of scripture to the exclusion of other portions of God's Word. Ask yourself if our religiousness might be shaped more by Western cultural traditions than by biblical norms. Explore just how similar we are to the self-satisfied and all-too-pharisaical Jews of two thousand years ago.

Thankfully, the Bible is full of passages that show God responding to prayerful people. On the other hand, we likewise find sections of scripture where God accomplishes the divine will without the collaboration of the people who supposedly follow him. No matter the postures of the human characters throughout history, God always does what is righteous and holy.

A couple of the pivotal verses of the Bible come from Job's mouth after all his suffering: "Then Job answered the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted'" (Job 42:1-2).

Unfortunately for Job, he could not draw from the wise counsel of the 66 books of the Bible we cherish today. Job had to endure great misery and labor with hobbling efforts in order to gain some insight and understanding into God's ways.

Today, we are blessed with the ultimate picture of God's greatest action of grace and mercy on this earth. True to form, our Lord's work at Calvary deals with a cast of characters who had nothing to do with godly ways. The cross became the quintessential statement of love; God would allow absolutely nothing to step in the way of his perfect plan of salvation.

A beautiful prayer of confession from the 1976 annual meeting of the United Methodist Women's Caucus offers

some valuable parting words for us. The last lines were:

"God, forgive me for calculated efforts to serve you only when it is convenient to do so, only in places where it is safe to do so.

Creator God, forgive me, renew me, and send me out as a usable instrument, that I may take seriously the meaning of Your Cross."

Pray that we Baptists would gain the spiritual depth of the people who penned and affirmed these words. May we drink in the meaning of the cross and follow the marvelous ways of grace that come from our God who won't be boxed in.

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Marching Forward Through Opposition

Text: Luke 4:28-30

Theme: Jesus faced threats for his prophetic voice and moved forward with courage.

Introduction

Although we now celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr., Day across the country and can find a boulevard or highway to honor him in every major city and many small ones, King's prophetic voice for justice earned him more anguish than accolades during the difficult days of the Civil Rights Movement.

Birmingham, Alabama had become infamous for bombings of African American homes and churches as well as the brutal fire hoses and snarling dogs of Sheriff Bull Connor's police force during the Freedom Summer of 1961. In 1963, the black community was terrorized when white supremacists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church, the spiritual center of the local Civil Rights Movement, during Sunday worship. Four young girls were killed in the blast, and 23 parishioners were wounded.

King called Birmingham "by far the worst city for race relations in America" and brought it to the nation's attention by preaching and marching for justice there in April. Despite the ugliness of the situation, King's prophetic voice earned him the wrath of the Civil Rights Movement itself. In

addition to his opponents, allies and friends berated him for the damage he was causing the hapless city of Birmingham by pushing too hard and too fast for equal rights. A covert local alliance, working to salvage the city's ugly reputation by looking for ways to dismantle segregation gradually, saw King as a threat.

But King said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy" (*Strength to Love*, 1963). King went to jail that Good Friday, April 12, on frivolous charges of parading without a permit while three-quarters of the city's black clergy initially refused to support him. He lived his belief that "The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace and brotherhood" (*Strength to Love*, 1963).

While imprisoned, King wrote "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," a powerful, prophetic witness that stands in judgment, then and now, of all God's people who would compromise, hold back or be silent in the face of injustice against the people of God.

The Biblical Witness

When Jesus read the prophetic words of Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue and declared that he fulfilled them beginning "today," the initial response of those assembled was admiration, wonder and approval. At first it seemed that God's bounty was going to be lavished upon them.

The beginning of the age of God's reign meant good news to the poor, oppressed and imprisoned. Jesus' mission was to usher in the amnesty, liberation and restoration promised in the "year of the Lord's favor," the time of jubilee referred to in Leviticus 25.

Instead of the Jewish people profiting from the unexpected blessing of having a prophet arise from their midst, God's grace would be poured out on others. God's largesse would not be confined by religious, cultural, ethnic, historical or any other traditional limits. The poor would hear good news and the rich would hear woes.

It didn't take long for doubt and resistance to overtake them when Jesus' hearers began to understand the moral imperative of his words and mission.

Luke 4:28-30 **From Awe to Anger**

²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The mixed feelings of those assembled for Jesus' inaugural address turned to outright hostility. Not only would the poor be favored, but the rich would pay the price of the injustice they had caused or allowed. Neither would they enjoy the special privileges and benefits they expected from association with the hometown boy who made good. God's favor was to be extended far beyond their little circle, even and especially to Capernaum with its significant non-Jewish population.

Jesus made his point with familiar stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, but he declared a new truth in them that was hard to hear. Although Israel knew of God's grace toward all people as early as the covenant with Abraham (Gen 22:18, Acts 3:25), they chose anger and violence instead of facing the hard reality of traditions and practices

long justified and embraced. But Jesus did not back down from their criticism and rejection.

The crowd responded to Jesus' declaration of God's mercy with "rage" (v 28, NRSV) and "wrath" (v 28, KCJ). The intensity of their anger led them to attempt to eliminate the source of their discomfort. The synagogue faithful grew into a mob that sought to hurl Jesus against stones, an acceptable form of stoning in that day but far from official procedure.

Luke 6:22-23, 26 **Overtured Expectations**

²²"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. ... ²⁶Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

Both scripture and history reveal that faithful discipleship and prophetic witness go hand in hand with opposition. When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Plain, he knew that his teachings would scandalize people because they overturned conventional expectation.

God's priority for outcasts spelled danger for the privileged. The sermon picks up the theme of the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) in which the shortsighted rich are lulled into a false sense of security. Ultimately, they are sent away empty. It warns of God's judgment on those who do not take part in God's justice for the oppressed.

Those who speak prophetically pay a price. The fourth beatitude implies that those who live by God's blessing will be persecuted. A faithful disciple will inevitably endure being hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. The fourth woe (v 26) warns that, although a good reputation may be desirable, watch out if *all* speak well of you. It may well be evidence of flattery accorded to the rich or popularity ascribed to false prophets.

Ultimately, however, faithfulness to God's redemptive work is rewarded, even when one is cast out and reviled (Isa 66:5; Jas 2:7).

Luke 4:31-44 **Undeterred Mission**

³¹He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the sabbath. ³²They were astonished at his teaching, because he spoke with authority. ³³In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴"Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are the Holy One of God." ³⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" When the demon had thrown him down before them, he came out of him without having done him any harm. ³⁶They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, "What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!" ³⁷And a report about him began to reach every place in the region. ³⁸After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. ³⁹Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them. ⁴⁰As the sun was setting, all

those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. ⁴¹Demons also came out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

Despite a traumatic rejection of his call and mission to God's redemptive work in his hometown, Jesus went ahead with his prophetic witness and work. He left the enraged crowd in Nazareth behind and traveled to Capernaum where he continued to teach in the synagogues on the sabbath, heal the sick and preach the good news with all its potential for persecution, rejection and harm to him.

He fulfilled the work and words of the prophets by healing the sick, thus proclaiming the steadfast presence of God among God's people. The works he did were dramatic and miraculous, drawing great crowds and much attention. They also fostered potential conflict, abuse and misunderstanding, but this did not deter him.

Luke 9:51-56 **Marching Forward**

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

When Jesus faced opposition to his ministry, he refused to respond in kind, and he refused to be discouraged. A Samaritan village would not receive Jesus and his disciples as they moved toward Jerusalem. Just as Jesus faced rejection when he began his ministry in Nazareth, he faced rejection again as he approached his time of suffering and death. He was planning to minister to these outsiders, despised half-Jewish heretics, but they refused his hospitality.

James and John reacted to the rejection with understandable anger and resentment. They were ready to call down fire to punish them in the spirit of Elijah (2 Kings 1:9-10). But Jesus had come to save and to reconcile, not destroy. He would not put his mission at risk by action that contradicted his preaching. He had taught his disciples earlier to respond to rejection by shaking the dust from their feet and moving on (9:1-6), and this is what they did.

Later, Paul, another faithful follower of Christ, would persevere through persecution in his ministry in the same way (see Acts 14:1-7; 19-20; 17:1-11, 22-32; 19:8-9).

Doers of the Word

The good news message of Jesus demands much of those who follow him. Like the hearers of Jesus' first public preaching, we often would rather not face the challenges and demands that wholehearted discipleship requires of us. When justice for others has implications for the vehicles we drive, the kind of people we welcome to worship or the way we spend our money, we resist.

What does the good news of God's grace imply for your life and daily choices? What parts of Jesus' message have you ignored, shoved aside or even rejected or rebelled

against? Following Jesus is often difficult and counter-cultural. It goes far beyond feeling good, and it demands a daily response.

Baptists are called to a renewed commitment to peace, justice, righteousness and goodness in spite of those who would distract, discredit and oppose our attempts to be faithful to this daunting ministry.

Nannie Helen Burroughs' life is an example of a Baptist who continued the prophetic witness and work of Christ in the face of struggle and opposition. She was the child of parents who had been born into slavery. Her father later became an itinerant Baptist preacher but died shortly after Nannie Helen's birth.

Her mother moved with her to Washington, D.C. so that her daughter could receive a better education. She graduated with honors in 1896 from the Washington Colored High School, the most successful African American high school in the United States. She wanted to become a teacher, but the District of Columbia refused to hire her because of her race.

Her tremendous disappointment in being denied a job for this reason fueled her desire to build a school for African American girls where they could receive a quality education. In 1900, at the National Baptist Convention's annual meeting, Burroughs delivered a prophetic speech, "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping," in which she boldly denounced the limited opportunities for women in Baptist churches. "For a number of years there has been a discontent, a burning zeal to go forward in His [Christ's] name among the Baptist women of our churches," she said.

This speech marked the beginning of a long and fruitful

career for Burroughs during which she provided a prophetic voice for Baptists. In 1920 she rebuked the African American male leaders of her denomination for preaching “too much heaven and too little practical Christian living” and called on them to “make the religion a real, potent factor in race regeneration.”

Thirty years later, Burroughs challenged the churches of the nation: “It is high time that the church were up to its business or [it should] stop preaching; stop building houses and calling those buildings ‘churches of Christ’ while excluding races that are not of the color that they like; stop teaching spurious doctrines and wearing the livery of heaven in which to masquerade and naming the name of Jesus and refuse to follow his teachings.”

Burroughs realized her dream of a school for African American girls in 1909 when the National Training and Professional School for Women and Girls opened in Washington, D.C. Its motto was, “We specialize in the wholly impossible.” In its first 25 years, the school provided training for more than 2,000 girls and young women.

Today, more than ever, Baptists are needed to march forward through opposition. Following Christ, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others we must:

- discern and practice godly wisdom;
- embody and call for high moral standards;
- practice effective dialogue and listening skills;
- embrace and extend truthful messages;
- allow others to learn and lead;
- take risks and pursue what is right consistently.

Written by Heather Entrekina, senior pastor, Prairie Baptist Church, Prairie Village, Kansas.

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