

Baptist
HISTORY
&
HERITAGE



A FESTSCHRIFT
IN HONOR OF
E. GLENN HINSON

VOLUME LIII | SPRING 2018 | NUMBER 1

Baptist HISTORY & HERITAGE

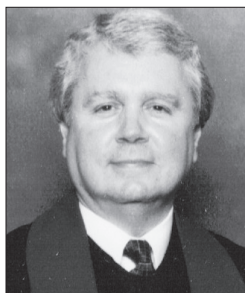
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Executive Director's Note

John Finley is Executive Director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society.

In the first eight months of my new role with the Baptist History and Heritage Society, I have enjoyed the privilege of meeting with so many of our long-time members, friends, and financial supporters who are literally scattered across the Baptist landscape.

My travels have taken me from Savannah to Atlanta and Nashville, from Dallas to Waco and San Antonio, from Kansas City to St. Louis, and from small towns in Georgia to our nation's capital. Without exception, all of these persons have expressed profound thanks for the Society and all that we do to communicate Baptist history and to preserve our Baptist heritage.

This year the BH&HS marks its eightieth year, and we plan to celebrate in fine fashion. A major redesign of our website and social media platforms is well under way and will launch very soon. Later this spring the Society will publish a biography by Roger H. Crook about a key North Carolina Baptist leader, titled *Thomas Meredith: A Man of His Time—A Man Ahead of His Time*. Our annual conference will be held May 31-June 1, 2018 at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and will focus on the theme "Baptist Women in the Twentieth Century: Missionaries, Mission Leaders, Churchwomen, Civil Rights Activists, and Ministers." Keynote speakers include Melody Maxwell, Molly Marshall, and Mandy McMichael, and Walter Shurden will speak at a breakfast gathering of the Fellowship of Baptist Historians. In addition, more than twenty scholarly papers, panel

discussions, and other presentations will be offered in a series of interesting breakout sessions.

One of the highlights of our annual conference will be the presentation of the official copy of this Festschrift issue of the *Baptist History and Heritage* journal in honor of E. Glenn Hinson. As other writers note in the pages that follow, Glenn Hinson has served Baptists and the larger Christian community as a remarkable historian, Patristics scholar, ecumenist, and spiritual guide, as well as a mentor, friend, and colleague to several generations of Baptist college students, professors, and local parish ministers. I hope that members and friends of the Society will plan to join us in Atlanta this year as we honor Glenn Hinson for his many years of service and share together in what promises to be an outstanding annual conference. **BH&HS**

**BAPTIST WOMEN IN
THE 20TH CENTURY:
Missionaries, Mission Leaders,
Churchwomen, Civil Rights
Activists, and Ministers**



BH&HS Annual Conference

**Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Ga.**

\$100
(Includes conference materials, two meals, two snack breaks)



BAPTIST
HISTORY & HERITAGE SOCIETY

Registration: www.baptisthistory.org
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Editor's Note

Bill Pitts is a professor of religion at Baylor University.

The Baptist History and Heritage Society publishes three issues of the journal each year. In recent years the Society has devoted the spring issue to a Festschrift that recognizes the lifetime contributions of Baptist historians to the history and heritage of Baptists. In this issue we honor the work of Dr. E. Glenn Hinson.

Glenn Hinson is a prolific Baptist historian who has inspired many students through his teaching and publications. He has also mentored a generation of Ph.D. students in church history who have, in turn, made their contributions to many others in the academy and the church.

We are delighted to have Dr. Loyd Allen, a former student of Dr. Hinson, to edit this volume of articles. The articles focus on a variety of topics in the history of Christianity: Patristics, Baptist history, and Christian spirituality. These essays are written by scholars who have been colleagues or students of Dr. Hinson. We are indebted to Dr. Allen for his editorial work in producing this Festschrift.

Festschrifts often include a biographical sketch of the honoree's life. However, Dr. Hinson himself has written a full-length autobiography, *A Miracle of Grace* (2012). I highly recommend this collection of reflections on his life, the challenges he faced, and his responses to them.

Festschrifts also usually include a bibliography of the honoree. We are happy to have the opportunity of publishing Dr. Hinson's bibliography in this volume. The bibliography demonstrates that Dr. Hinson has contributed significantly to the writing of many aspects of the history of Christianity.

Hinson has published some twenty-seven books chiefly in the period 1967-2000. His early works focused on the New Testament, Baptist history and identity, the nature of the church, and the legacy of Christian spirituality. He wrote articles for the *Christian Century* and Baptist state papers, especially the *Western Recorder*. Throughout his career he published numerous reviews of books on many aspects of Christian history, especially for *Review and Expositor*. In the 1980s he published a major book on Christianity in the Roman Empire, and he continued to reflect on the nature of the church and Baptist identity. For journals he wrote articles on spirituality and ecumenical dialogue with other Christians. He became an advocate for *Seeds* in the Christian campaign to fight hunger and for *Baptist Peacemakers* in the campaign against war; he also supported women in ministry. In the 1990s he produced histories of Christianity in the early and medieval eras, but devoted increasing attention to dimensions of spirituality, including a biography of his mentor Douglas Steere.

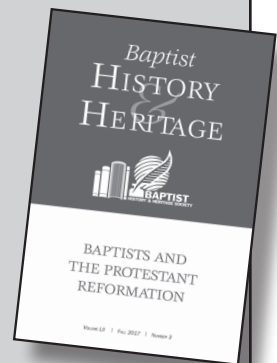
As is fitting in a volume conceived as a tribute to a scholar, numerous personal expressions of gratitude to Glenn Hinson appear in these articles. Hinson has contributed personally as well as through his publications to the lives of many scholars. It is a pleasure to be able to honor our fellow Baptist historian in this volume. **BH&HS**

To publish in *Baptist History & Heritage*

Submit manuscripts to:

BOOK REVIEWS:
mikew@dbu.edu

ARTICLES:
William_Pitts@baylor.edu



*Articles should be original works, based on primary and secondary sources,
and should set forth a clear line of argument in 4,000-5,000 words.*



Festschrift Editor's Note

Loyd Allen is Professor of Church History and Spiritual Formation at the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University.

This Festschrift honors E. Glenn Hinson's contributions to Baptist life. Dr. Hinson has served Baptists as a pastor, teacher, writer, scholar, activist, and spokesperson for liberty. To give just one article each to Dr. Hinson's areas of expertise would require more pages than this Festschrift has available.

In addition to Baptist history, he has contributed in multiple disciplines, including New Testament, Patristics, global ecumenism, spirituality, and peacemaking. His complete bibliography, found at the end of this volume, hints at the depth and riches of this extraordinary Baptist. And in this, his ninth decade, Dr. Hinson continues to write, speak, and correspond on matters of vital importance to Baptists, other Christians, and the world at large.

Extensive as his academic credentials are, Glenn Hinson represents something of greater value to Baptist history than his outstanding scholarship and publication record can convey. Glenn's words, which are of surpassing value, matter less than their origin: a great Baptist soul who transcends denominational bounds. After Dr. Hinson spoke at a professional meeting years ago, someone asked Bill Leonard if Bill could understand Glenn's words. Bill said, "What he's saying matters less to me than knowing who is saying it among us."

Glenn embodies erudite scholarship arising from a disciplined Christian life as well as any Baptist in our time. Forgive me this personal example: I gave a series of lectures about Baptist spirituality in Glenn's honor once. Glenn let me know early on he did not agree with my thesis. He got the last word when asked to summarize his thoughts at the end of the lecture series. He carefully dismantled my approach piece by piece, without mentioning my name. Then, he concluded by quoting directly from my Ph.D. dissertation quite favorably and extensively in support of his thesis. Telling the truth with love without compromising is Glenn's way.

The articles in this *Festschrift* are samples of Glenn's deep and wide influence in Baptist life and beyond. Hinson awakened Baptists to the larger Christian spirituality tradition. Premiere Baptist historian Walter "Buddy" Shurden, a longtime friend and faculty member with Hinson during their Southern Seminary years, writes the first article. He addresses Baptist spirituality as he has known it for sixty years, combining Hinson's insights into Baptist history and heart religion with his own.

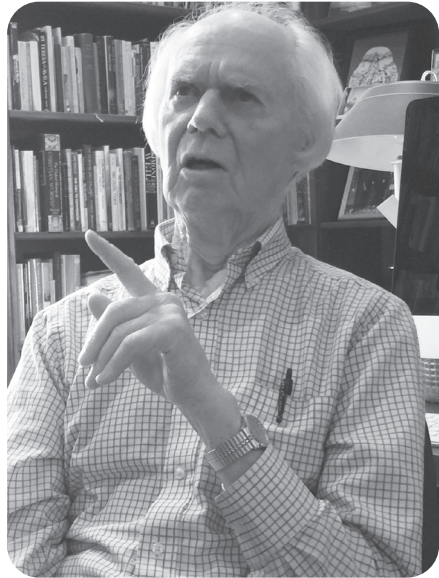
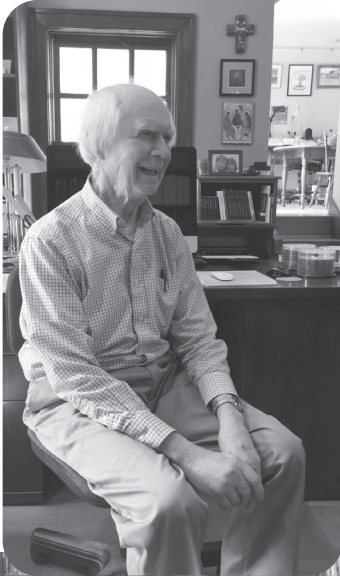
The second article comes from Bill J. Leonard, another longtime friend and former fellow faculty member with Hinson at Southern. Leonard takes the primary source reports of a seventeenth century critique of Baptist dissenters by Daniel Featley, an Anglican clergyman. The article points to the dissenting power of Baptist spirituality and practice near its origins and asks what this radical defense of freedom means today. Dissent and voluntarism in faith have been hallmarks of Hinson's scholarly Baptist writings and his public witness in the face of Fundamentalist attacks against religious freedom.

Linda McKinnish Bridges, president of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, writes the third article. She and Hinson served on the faculty at that institution during the last years of his full-time career. In her article McKinnish Bridges combines personal experience, historical investigation, and a Celtic spirituality that blesses women's place and presence. No doubt, Hinson, whose scholarship seeks more to transform than inform, will delight in this holistic approach.

The next article, from Dr. Gary Poe, professor of history at Palm Beach Atlantic University, investigates the apophatic spirituality of Gregory of Nyssa. Poe wrote his dissertation in Patristics with Hinson as his supervisor. This scholarly Patristics article is surely fitting for a *Festschrift* for Glenn Hinson, who more than once I have seen bridle at the attention he gets as

“the spirituality guy,” once remarking, “I am a Patristics scholar by vocation, you know.”

The final article by Johnny Sears, executive director of the Academy of Spiritual Formation, highlights Hinson’s association with that institution, revealing Hinson’s ecumenical spirituality context and the contributions he drew out of it. Sears traces Hinson’s associations with persons such as Douglas Steere and Thomas Merton, as these contacts issued in practical and institutional expressions of a spirituality of contemplation and action. **BH&HS**



Baptist Spirituality as I Have Known It for 60 Years



Walter B. Shurden

Walter B. Shurden is Minister at Large at Mercer University.

I had admired him from afar for several years, so one of the great joys of my life is that I served on the faculty at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary with Dr. Glenn Hinson from 1976 to 1983, both of us in the church history department. Those who know the geography of the campus at Southern Seminary will remember that the library is set somewhat in the middle of the campus, while the chapel is on the northeastern edge of the campus. In a conversation with Dr. Hinson one day about the history of the seminary, he said to me, "Buddy, if we could rebuild the seminary, we should place the chapel in the middle of the campus where the library is located."

This marvelous scholar and towering intellectual with his two Ph.D. degrees and 90-page bibliography in no way intended to demean the role of the mind in theological education. He was, however, reaffirming the role of heart religion in the Christian faith and especially in the Baptist heritage.

While Hinson's legacy will be recorded primarily as that of a teacher and writer of spirituality and patristics, he has also been among the most

insightful and creative historians of the Baptist people for the last half century. And though a devout Baptist churchman, Glenn Hinson has always positioned himself a theological galaxy away from any and all sectarianism. Rather, he has been an enthusiastic Baptist ecumenist who referred to Baptists as “this people with whom I’ve enjoyed a love/hate relationship through most of my 80 years.”¹ Fortunately for Baptists, he often combined his enormous knowledge of Baptists with his insatiable love for the contemplative life and left us a surprising number of writings on “Baptist spirituality.”²

As his ecumenical contacts multiplied early in his teaching career at Southern Seminary, Hinson found little in the Baptist tradition of spirituality that “measured up” to what he found in some other Christian traditions. Fortunately, a writing assignment changed his mind. “Some in-depth research into the spirituality of my Puritan ancestors opened my eyes to riches I had never discerned before, some of which equaled the finest treasures in all Christian history. Over [several] centuries Baptists had let many of these gems lose their luster, but a little polishing and cleaning showed that, even now, treasures are latent in the Baptist treasury, awaiting recovery.”³

This article is not an analysis or evaluation of Hinson’s understanding of Baptist spirituality, though that project cries out for some aspiring Ph.D. student to undertake. I will make reference here to some of Hinson’s emphases, but my subject is “Baptist spirituality as I have known it for 60 years.” This paper is not research as much as recall; it is not as scientific as it is subjective. If you have been around white Baptists of the South for the last half-century, you will, I hope, recognize much of what I say.

I will be using the term “Baptist spirituality” to describe the way that the Baptist people I have known have experienced and lived out their Christian faith. It may help to know that I have been a Baptist since 1955. I have served as pastor of four Baptist churches in three states, and as interim pastor of about 30 Baptist churches in seven states, and I have taught in three Baptist seminaries, a Baptist college, and a Baptist university. None of this makes me an expert on Baptist spirituality, but it does suggest my “observant” status for the last six decades.

I will frame Baptist spirituality by identifying what I see as three movements within the Christian life. Indeed, these three movements may be found in Christian spirituality in general, but within these movements are distinctive Baptist features that I will highlight.

Giving In to Being Loved

The first movement in the Baptist spirituality that I have known occurs when an individual gives in to being loved by a God of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. I use the phrase “gives in to being loved” deliberately, because this is something the individual does.⁴ No other person can give in to being loved by God for the individual. Spiritual plagiarism was prohibited. The launch into faith for Baptists is highly personal, tailored to the individual. It is custom-fit religion, not one style fits all. Each individual had a “personal testimony.” Of course, what I am calling “giving in to being loved” is a synonym for common Baptist words such as conversion, new birth, accepting Christ, being saved, meeting the Lord, following Jesus, and maybe personal transformation.

A very important concept in Baptist spirituality, and one that Glenn Hinson has written about often, is the voluntary principle in religion.⁵ Hinson observed that Baptists were one among many religious movements birthed by the Puritans both in England and the American colonies during the 17th century. However, Baptists diverged from the Puritan mainstream in their radical concern for the voluntary principle in religion. Puritans retained infant baptism, for example. But in Baptist life, the individual voluntarily chooses baptism, apart from any and all force, coercion, or manipulation. “Believer’s baptism,” which essentially means “voluntary” baptism, is certainly a cardinal tenet of the Baptist family.

My Baptist people have been almost unanimous in agreeing that the highest form of love is a totally free choice, not an act of conformity or coercion. At their best, Baptists have never used force, coercion, or manipulation in urging people to the shelter of God’s love. I say “at their best,” because Baptists have not always lived up to that ideal. One of the sad legacies of revivalism in Baptist life is that our “evangelism,” with its inordinate pressure, has often contradicted our voluntarism. Hinson recounts being in a Baptist church one Sunday morning and watching a young mother “virtually drag twin four-year-olds down the aisle at the invitation.” Hinson added, “I don’t think either child responded voluntarily or knew what was happening.” Making matters worse, the pastor took both children to the baptistry and baptized them that very morning!⁶

What was the point in stressing voluntary faith and believer’s baptism? It was a sincere effort to have a church of believers only. This is another Baptist ideal never attained. Hinson’s experience with those twin boys is Exhibit A of

our failure. On the other hand, I have no doubt that many persons baptized as infants became people of real and genuine faith. We Baptists have been supercilious and wrongheaded not to admit them into our churches until they waded into our deep waters. Voluntarism guaranteed neither a superior Christianity nor a “regenerate” church. Nevertheless, Baptists I knew in my early years of faith discounted secondhand experiences in religion. Proxy religion was never sufficient. They wanted something deeply personal, what Jewish philosopher Martin Buber designated as an I-Thou meeting. They wanted a divine-human encounter, a religion of the heart, a spiritual experience. The particular character of this personal divine-human meeting, as I have observed it, came packaged in diverse forms for Baptists. They never standardized the particular shape, the emotional tone, or the distinctive character of conversion. But Baptists have been amazingly consistent in saying, if not always practicing, that secondhand faith or a hand-me-down-God is inadequate. Over these 60 years I have come to believe that is an important conviction.

White Baptists in the South for the last 60 years have celebrated many different ways that individuals have given in to being loved by God. I have personally known Baptists who have given in to being loved by God through the following ways:

- the calm of domestic nurture
- the emotionalism of revivalism
- the struggle of intellectual curiosity
- the pain of physical, emotional, or spiritual suffering
- the joy of service
- the majesty of creation
- the surprise of individual mystical experiences.⁷

I came to faith as a first-year college student through the surprise of a religious experience, and I can take you by the hand and show you the dorm room where I first met the Holy in life. My parents, on the other hand, were converted under evangelist Eddie Martin in an emotional tent revival. A sophomore in high school, I went with them one night, but “like a tree planted by the rivers of water” I would not be moved—not even by gospel theatrics. I also have known Baptist students who came to faith by way of intellectual struggle. While the Baptists I have known have given in to being

loved in numerous ways, the public perception of Baptists seems to be that most of us have come to faith through either the emotionalism of revivalism or the surprise of individual religious experience. While I may be wrong, I think the public has perceived Baptists as having “hot” religious experiences. This is contrary to my experience with Baptist spirituality.

After more than a half hundred years in the Baptist church yard, I have come to believe that most Baptists have come to taste the love of God as did Timothy, the apostle Paul’s young assistant, through their parents, church families, and friends.⁸ Most of the people I have baptized and most of the people I have seen baptized in Baptist churches have come from within the community of faith, marinated in God’s love, accepted and affirmed by the people of God. If the Baptists of my tribe took a sheet of paper and wrote the name of the person who first pointed them to Transcendent Love, most would write the name of a parent, a grandmother, a Sunday School teacher, or maybe a loving pastor.

Insisting on the importance of each individual giving in to being loved, Baptists have also maintained that such an act must be completely voluntary to be authentic. That act of voluntary surrender, I repeat, has come packaged in diverse ways. Most of the Baptists I have known, regardless of the manner in which they gave in to being loved, would identify with Mary McDermott Shideler: “My key to meaning . . . is not commitment but receptivity, not ‘I love’ but ‘I am loved.’”⁹ Giving in to being loved by God, freely and voluntarily and in diverse ways, is the beginning point of most of the Baptist spirituality I have known.

Giving Up to the Demands of Love

I call the second movement in Baptist spirituality “giving up to the demands of love.” More than a half century ago now, James Baldwin wrote his great quasi-autobiographical novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In it Baldwin describes a family in Harlem. The father, Gabriel, was a preacher in a church called the Temple of the Fire Baptized. He had a son named John who had never committed himself to Christ. Gabriel tried and tried to win his son to a life of faith but without success. One night at Gabriel’s church in Harlem the congregation sponsored what they called a “tarrying meeting.” They “tarried” after the worship service, praying for all those among them who were not Christians. And so finally, John, the wayward son, went to the front of the

church and knelt for prayer. The church people came by him with religious fervor, laid hands on him, prayed out loud for him, sang songs over him, shouted hallelujahs, and did everything they knew to get John saved. About daybreak, after they had prayed until the wee hours of the morning, John let go and got saved. He gave in to being loved by a good and gracious God. Florence, one of the women of the church, overjoyed with the event, said to Gabriel, John's preacher father, "Well, I reckon your soul is praising God this morning." Looking straight ahead, holding his body more rigid than an arrow, the father replied, "He's going to learn that it ain't all in the singing and the shouting—the way of holiness is a hard way. He got the steep side of the mountain to climb."¹⁰

I came to faith in an era when Baptists believed in the "singing and shouting" part of faith. The first response to being loved by God was not to analyze or scrutinize; the first act of faith was to sing the Doxology, to cry uncontrollably, to be smitten silent, to bow, to fall upon the shoulders of those nearby and hug hard. Again, what Baptists have meant by "singing and shouting" has changed over the years. It has even varied from Baptist to Baptist during my 60 years with these wonderful people. In the last several decades we have dressed it up a bit, shined its shoes, and covered it over with a bit more sophistication and education. Some Baptists have walked out the front door, turned left, and become "Baptistpalians,"—a mixture of Baptist experience with Episcopalian mystery. Others, wanting their religion hotter, turned right and became "Baptistcostals"—combining the Baptist experience with the enthusiasm of the Pentecostals. But scratch deep enough and most Baptists of my tribe will bleed a piety of the heart that unapologetically tears up at the goodness of God's grace.

So Baptist spirituality is certainly about "giving in to being loved," but it is also about "giving up to the demands of love." Here the theology is not grace but struggle. Here the word is not "gift" but "demand." Here the theology is not one of salvation but one of discipleship. Here the text is not that gorgeous biblical text that has become a kind of Baptist denominational mantra and that flows through the first movement of Baptist spirituality: "For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8 KJV). Here the text comes from the closing chapter of that same book of Ephesians: "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand . . ."¹¹ (6:10-11, NKJV)

Baptists of my era have been best known for their conversionist spirituality, for giving in to being loved.¹² But they also had pastors and churches that confronted them with the imperative of living the Christian life. Baptists recognized, albeit insufficiently, that all the action was not at the starting gate. No amount of emphasis on “once saved, always saved” has stymied the call of Baptist Christians to take following Jesus seriously. Without question, Baptists are a grace-people; but grace never meant a completely free pass, absent of personal and churchly devotion and acts of mercy. Another important word for Baptists, therefore, is responsibility. For 50 years I have heard that word preached and taught as “discipleship.” Our anti-Catholicism made us hesitant to use the word “works,” but “works” is what it was.

Like most Christian spirituality, Baptists have two foci to their spiritual lives. One is solitary and centered on the life of the individual, while the other is communal and focused on the local congregation of believers. Bonhoeffer uttered great wisdom for the life of the Spirit when he said, “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.”¹³ Excess runs in both directions, individually or communally. Groupthink and a pack mentality are dangerous to the soul, say Baptists who mentored me. That is why Wayne Oates, the Baptist who taught us pastoral counseling, titled his autobiography *The Struggle to Be Free*. But measured by the Baptists I have known, “Lone Rangerism” and the idea that I can make it on my own is a worse enemy to the life of the soul. Even our evangelists, so prominent in the 50s and 60s and primarily concerned with the salvation of individuals, implored their converts “to find a church where the Bible is taught so that your faith can grow and you can find a place to serve.” This was a refrain, for example, of Billy Graham, the most famous Baptist evangelist ever.

I have known very little Baptist spirituality that has not been hardwired to the local church. Nothing indicates this better than the old Six Point Record System,¹⁴ a little envelope that many of us filled out for years as we went to the Baptist Sunday School each week. Most of the Baptist churches I know best today no longer use the Six Point Record System to monitor their discipleship, but the Six Points reigned supreme in Baptist life for a number of years. That petite envelope is instructive, if one wants to know what was important in Baptist spirituality for much of the 20th century. The little envelope to which I refer looks like this:

INDIVIDUAL REPORT ENVELOPE

Name _____ Sunday _____

If VISITOR Give

Home Address _____

Class _____ Amount of Offering \$ _____

Check (✓) each point attained and add up total grade

Attend- ance 20%	On Time 10%	Bible Brought 10%	Offering 10%	Prepared Lesson 30%	Preaching Attendance 20%	Total Grade

Visits Made _____ Phone Calls _____ Letters & Cards _____ Total Contacts _____

Form 15 Broadman Supplies

Across the top of the envelope was a place for your name. As an individual, you mattered! That is basic to Baptist spirituality. Next to your name was a place for the date of the particular Sunday. Beneath those two items was a place for your home address if you were a visitor. Beneath that was a place for the name of your Sunday School class and the amount of the offering you had brought for that Sunday. Then followed the six points in little boxes that you checked off in order to get your final “grade” for the Sunday: “Attendance” counted 20%, “On Time” 10%, “Bible Brought” 10%, “Offering” 10%, “Prepared Lesson” 30%, and “Preaching Attendance” 20%.

Beyond the stark simplicity and incredible audacity of “grading” one’s spirituality and replicating the American corporate enterprise’s desire for efficiency, something that Hinson often railed against,¹⁵ the Six Point Record System pointed to some significant aspects of Baptist spirituality that should not be laughed out of church. Being able to check off “Present,” for example, indicated that you thought the observance of Sunday was important. It spoke to what Stanley Roberts, my minister of music, calls the “sacrament of presence,” and it challenged our priorities about where we were to be when Sunday rolled around. “On Time” only graded out at 10%, but in a sense it challenged our calendars and suggested an order for our lives. “On Time” was Baptists’ truncated version of the Christian calendar, indicating where we were supposed to be and when.

“Bible Brought” implied, of course, that we had read those Bibles. The phrase fails to reflect adequately the major emphasis that Baptists placed on Bible reading and Bible study. The Bible stood central in the spirituality I knew. In a very real sense, the Bible, not baptism or the Lord’s Supper, served

as our major sacrament.¹⁶ I was encouraged to try to understand and interpret the Bible for myself¹⁷ and to have a daily “quiet time,” consisting of prayer and serious study and memorization of the Bible. Indeed, I remember trying to memorize the Sermon on the Mount when I was a college student shortly after my conversion. I think I made it through chapter 5 of Matthew. It is unfortunate that many of the scripture passages we can quote from memory came in our early years of faith. That is certainly true for me. Although the mild phrase, “Bible Brought,” inadequately depicted the Bible’s role in our lives, it did symbolize a challenge to all the other authorities on which we erroneously based our lives. It reminded us that we were to give up to those demands of love we read in that Bible.

The inoffensive little word “Offering” stipulated a vocation of financial stewardship. The word “tithe” was the one I knew best, and it played a more prominent part in our church’s vocabulary. I am not sure why that small envelope used “offering” rather than “tithe,” because my memory is clear that “tithing” was primary, while bringing an “offering” was an additional gift to God. However, offering served as a challenge to our wallets and our purses. It called us to reflect on what we often heard from the pulpit and that we were all tenant farmers because the earth is the Lord’s. In checking off “Offering 10%,” you were called to remember that how you spent money was not merely an issue of personal privilege but a matter of how seriously you were following Jesus.

“Prepared Lesson,” surprisingly, counted more than any of the others—a whopping 30%. This point implied the serious Bible reading and study that I mentioned above. “Prepared Lesson” meant that one had read the “Lesson” in our Sunday School quarterlies along with the Bible passage on which the “lesson” was based. “Prepared Lesson” challenged what our eyes focused on in life and constituted a kind of Baptist *lectio divina*. This was a weekly exercise in spiritual or “holy” reading, but we would have never thought to call it that.

“Preaching Attendance,”¹⁸ while mirroring our dreadfully pruned concept of worship, spoke to the sacrament of the preached Word and the centrality of corporate worship in our lives. Without doubt, the sermon constituted the central element in a worship service. Everything else—Bible reading, prayer, congregational singing, “special” music—prepared us for hearing and responding to the message of the day. My friend John Tadlock asked Harvey Cox, a Baptist professor at Harvard Divinity School,

"What practices or disciplines help keep you on the Christian path?" Cox answered: "Showing up for church on Sunday. It reminds you that you are part of something larger." We showed up. Our envelopes had been sealed, our offering placed inside, "boxes" checked, and we dutifully turned them in to the class secretary. And we did it every Sunday. We never designated it as such, but it was part of our "spirituality."

At the bottom of the envelope you would find another line to complete: "Visits Made ____" Phone Calls ____, "Letters and Cards ____" and then a place for "Total Contacts ____." There was no place for emails, Twitter, or Facebook, but that horizontal line at the bottom of the envelope represented a mid-20th century rendition of social networking for Christians. Even more, it was part of the Christian's calling to reach out, to practice the discipline of hospitality, and to "witness." I recall a ministerial student at Mississippi College saying to me that he tried to "witness" about Christ to at least one person every day. He may have been bragging, but I doubt it. Regardless, I remember as a new Christian being impressed by a zeal that I sorely lacked and about which Baptist leaders made me feel guilty. The practice of evangelism and "witnessing" represented a cardinal feature of the devout Christian life as it was first presented to me. Amazingly, when I read online Pope Francis's *The Joy of the Gospel: EVANGELII GAUDIUM* (so egregiously misrepresented by segments of the media), I thought parts of it sounded like an evangelistic tract from the Southern Baptist 1950s. With a single sentence, Francis unintentionally dismisses all the slick techniques and clever strategies in evangelism textbooks that have come from Christian publishers, saying, ". . . anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love."¹⁹

Like the early Puritans who birthed us, we Baptists affirmed through the Six Points the sanctity of the Sabbath, the centrality of church, the supremacy of the Bible, the call to financial generosity, the importance of reading and learning, and the sacrament of the preached Word of God.²⁰ And like spirituality writers of today, we Baptists knew the need for "soul friends," so we gathered with our friends in our Sunday School classes. Those groups also represented a kind of weekly "spiritual retreat" where we experienced "spiritual formation" for our lives. It is not a stretch to say that the Six Point Record System served unknowingly, of course, to connect us to our historical roots and even reflected some of the currents within the literature on

contemporary spirituality. Moreover, those little Sunday School classes, while never becoming the “schools of love” that Hinson and Brian McLaren²¹ and others of us hope for in our churches, were often places where thousands of Baptist Christians first learned about the gift and the demands of divine love.

Giving Back Because of Love

“Giving back because of love” is the third movement of spirituality into which I was immersed. We Baptists, of course, did not lack for critics, nor should we have. One of the major criticisms, as I have known it, is that Baptists have talked too much about “being saved” and not enough about “being spent.” We fixate on self. We obsess about OUR needs, OUR happiness, OUR rights, OUR freedoms, and OUR future. We get trapped in spiritual narcissism, a condition condemned in both testaments and most of the 66 books of the Bible. While the Bible is about giving in to being loved and giving up to the demands of love, it is also about giving back because of love. It is about letting go, reaching out, loving back, and giving back. It is about Jesus’ Great Commandment to love God and neighbor.

Baptist life among white Southerners over the last six decades has not been without manifestations of “giving back.” These Baptists believed that giving back, serving Christ both in the world and in the church, was not limited to the clergy. The Baptist logic I ran into goes like this: when one gives in to being loved, one also commits to giving back because of love. To say it yet another way, when one comes to the mercy seat of salvation, one also gets ordained to the ministry of mercy, service, and reconciliation. Those who know the healing, restorative power of Christ’s love are directed to continue the work of doing and teaching what Jesus did and taught.²²

I was taught from the time of my conversion at age 18 that all Baptist Christians are ministers. Baptists call this idea the priesthood of all believers. We get the idea from the Bible, and it came to us through the Protestant Reformation, especially from Martin Luther. Baptists of my ilk rarely placed their hope in what C. S. Lewis called a “trained minority of theocrats.”²³ Indeed, most of the Baptists I have known would delight in Eugene Peterson’s translation of Matthew 23:8ff: “Don’t set people up as experts over your life, letting them tell you what to do. Save that authority for God; let him tell you what to do. . . . There is only one Life-Leader for you and them—Christ” (vv. 8b-10, *The Message*).

The concept of the priesthood of all believers means that each individual has both the privilege of access to the presence of God and responsibility for the ministry of the Kingdom of God. Baptists, so they told me, have no special priesthood or clergy with exclusive privileges or responsibilities that do not belong to the laity as well. Each individual Baptist is a priest. The Bible teaches it.²⁴ The Protestant Reformers rediscovered it. And the Baptists practiced it. I have often thought that at least one week out of the year all Baptist people should wear priestly collars to signify their identity as ministers of Jesus Christ. And when people ask, "Why the collar?" each Baptist can say, "Because I have been called to serve Christ's church as a minister of the gospel in God's world."

But how and where have Baptist priests been urged to "give back?" Well, as I said previously in my discussion of the Six Point Record System, the Baptist priesthood executes its ministry through the life of the local congregation of believers. In my six decades among the Baptist people, I have never experienced any form of Baptist spirituality that marginalized the centrality of the local congregation of believers. This idea of service *IN* and *THROUGH* the church may at times be overemphasized, but I have never seen it minimized by Baptists. Nor should it be. What the local congregation of believers does on Sundays, Wednesdays, and other weekdays is critical to the work of the priesthood. Worship and Christian education empower, motivate, and encourage witness in the world outside the church walls. Corporate worship reminds us that we are designed to be conduits and not catch-basins of God's grace.

But Baptist priests also exercise their ministry in their regular day of work, through their common vocation. We exercise our priesthood "by the way we make our living." Baptist priests witness through the integrity of their work in their daily occupations. Last year a group of 16 people from my church made a mission trip to Haiti, an annual endeavor for several years now. When they reported back to the congregation on the Sunday after their return, they told us what they had done. They gave medicine to the sick, hugged the orphans, constructed a school building for the orphans, played soccer with children, and gave medical checkups to those who had not had one for years.

As these returning priests reported to our church in Sunday worship, I could not restrain from thinking that what they reported doing in Haiti they also did every day at work in Macon, Georgia. Some are nurses, one is an

architect, two are counselors, and one is a construction worker. I gave thanks for what they had done in Haiti, but I was also grateful for their faithfulness in doing that kind of work every day. Baptist Carlyle Marney said of the priesthood of believers that the work is always “downtown.”²⁵ He meant that the church has “to get out of the house” because the priests of God do most of their work in hospital rooms, bank offices, department stores, construction sites, classrooms, and all the other rooms in our lives where we do “our” daily work. *Opus Dei*, the Work of God, is our daily work.

Three areas in which Baptists have been somewhat successful in giving back, both personally and communally, are the stewardship of money, the activity of missions, and the ministry of social justice. The Baptist spirituality I have known has been far more committed to the first two than to the third. Baptists made straight A's in money and missions, but they almost flunked social justice. Personal morality, rather than social justice, is what loomed large on the Baptist screen in my Baptist beginnings.

I am sure it was not the case with all 18-year-olds, but when I turned toward Baptists in the mid-50s, they handed me that verse in 2 Corinthians 6:17, urging me to memorize it, and I did: “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing” (KJV). In the Baptist language of the day, I was to live a “separated life.” “Worldliness” was the enemy. To be spiritual, I had to reject “the world.” They got painfully pointed. Dancing had to go. But it was, and still is, one of my better sports! My future wife had taught me the “Memphis two-step” and the jitterbug in the eighth grade on a Friday night in Strange Park in Greenville, Mississippi, and I refined my movements through high school and my first year of college. Then Jesus saved me from dancing . . . for a while.

Louis Smith, my preacher-boy roommate at Mississippi College and friend until he died a few years back, piled on. He stood in the middle of our tiny dorm room and ordered me, Amos-like, to give up my Pall Mall cigarettes. I acquiesced. Three decades later Dr. C. Everett Koop, the 13th surgeon general of the United States, proved Louis Smith right, and Koop kicked the America tobacco industry in the teeth.

Around the corner on the top floor of Chrestman Hall, from where Louis recently had kicked out my unspiritual teeth, lived Charlie Long from Ethel, Mississippi. He toted a blue Scofield Bible. Charlie had worn the blue from the covers, and he had underlined page after page in red and blue ink. It was an intimidating book to a brand-new Christian who didn't know where

to find “You must be born again.” One of my dearest friends for each of these past 60 Baptist years, he was more “separated” than Louis Smith. His list of prohibitions was longer: movies, rock music, card playing, and smooching got the hit. I thought Jesus had saved me, but his people were ruining me! I bought in for a short time, and truth be told, I needed the guardrails to learn to walk. I discovered later that there were, for me at least, stages to spirituality.

This emphasis on a personal ethic did not mean that Baptists completely lacked a social ethic. Those I first met were not simply inward-looking pietists detached from the conflicts of life. Nor were they so “separated” from the world that they never took a stand on public issues. The issue was not that Baptists dismissed social issues because of their preference for personal issues. The issue was that Baptists accentuated personal ethics and traditional rather than progressive social ethics. Defense of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation were as much an involvement in public morality as was opposition to those issues. Public opposition to Al Smith and John Kennedy as U.S. presidential candidates was as social an issue as support of those two Roman Catholics. The same is true of the women’s movement, abortion, and issues related to the LGBTQ communities. Why did we ever let white Baptists of the South get away with pretending they had no “social” gospel as part of their spirituality? Contrary to what many observers of Baptist life have believed and written, Southern Baptists had a pronounced “social gospel.” I sensed it immediately. I also sensed very soon that it was the wrong one for me.

But even here nuance comes into play, for it was not all traditional social gospel I heard. I took my cue in seminary from Frank Stagg, a New Testament scholar who could hardly write a book that did not speak prophetically to race, gender, war, and aging, along with other social issues. If my wife had cooperated, we would have named our only son “Stagg Shurden.” She preferred a Junior, and our son got hung with my name. “Be careful,” warned a senior M.Div. student at New Orleans Baptist Seminary, still irreparably steeped in his Mississippi prejudice when he learned I was taking the Gospels class under Stagg, “He’s a n_____ lover.” Stagg was that and more.

Stagg’s manner of relating the New Testament to social issues claimed me from that first class at New Orleans Seminary. Harry Emerson Fosdick and Carlyle Marney, both Baptist pastors, taught me justice issues through their writings, as did Clarence Jordan. And I later bumped into Foy Valentine,

T. B. Maston, and President Jimmy Carter in denominational circles. Friends such as Henlee Barnette, James Dunn, and especially Paul Simmons left more of a mark on me than they will ever know. Each of these helped me redefine “worldliness.” “Worldliness,” they said, “is war and greed, prejudice and poverty, sexism and nationalism.” All of that was a long way from dancing and listening to rock music. “Come out from among them” took on revolutionary meaning.

My studies in Baptist history helped to sharpen and widen my spirituality on social issues. One cannot read Baptist history without knowing John Clifford in England, Tommy Douglas in Canada, and especially Walter Rauschenbusch, Howard Thurman, and Martin Luther King Jr. in America. One of the attractions of Glenn Hinson to so many of us over the years has been his holistic approach to the Christian life of “head, heart, and hand.” A scholarly intellectual (head) who embraces a contemplative lifestyle (heart), he constantly wraps his activist hands around issues of social justice: race, gender, poverty, peace, religious freedom, and others. You could be a white Baptist minister in the South for the last 60 years and escape the influence of a progressive social ethic, and many did, but you had to work at it.

I read recently of a proverb that comes from the peasants of Haiti. It says, “God gives but doesn’t share.” God gives but does not share? That’s right. The Haitians mean that God gives our world everything it needs to flourish, but God does not divvy up the loot. That is our responsibility. The Baptist spirituality I have known for more than 60 years, while never reaching its full potential, has had some sense of that need to give back. These Baptists have known that while God gives, they must give back. Some of this payback has been through acts of social justice, but more of it has been through money and missions.

I sincerely believe that Baptist spirituality over the last six decades had some solid foundation, some rock-solid pavement, beneath it. I also believe it had dangerous potholes, gaps that desperately needed to be filled and repaired. In spite of these potholes, at age 80, I am indescribably grateful for the spiritual life bequeathed to me from the Baptist people. **BH&HS**

Notes

1 E. Glenn Hinson, *Baptist Spirituality* (Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith, Inc, 2014), 1.

2 Hinson's most recent thinking on the spirituality of Baptists may be found in his *Baptist Spirituality*. His notes in this book will direct you to other of his writings on the subject, so I will not recite them here. Interestingly, Hinson's conviction that "Attentiveness to God is . . . what spirituality is all about" is very similar to that of British Baptist theologian, Paul Fiddes. Both stress attentiveness and "religion of the heart." See Paul S. Fiddes, *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2008), 25-53.

3 Hinson, *Baptist Spirituality*, xii.

4 Where I speak of "giving in to being loved," Hinson speaks of our need to "open to the love of God." He insists, "We have to open, for God does not drive a bulldozer." See *Ibid.*, 65. The theological debate as to God's role in initiating faith never seemed to bother the Baptists I knew; they sensed their responsibility of surrender and lived with assurance that God would welcome them.

5 Hinson, *Baptist Spirituality*, 10-11, 20-21. While he speaks of "the voluntary principle in religion" as "one of our most cherished Baptist tenets," he recognizes the temptation therein toward individualism. Claiming that Baptists and their Puritan ancestors were both "voluntarists," he points out that church discipline can only be exercised "if people freely enter into covenant, therefore, with God and with one another." And he says, "To be authentic, faith must be free. Early Baptists grasped that point the best."

6 Hinson, *Baptist Spirituality*, 10.

7 Reading Hinson's autobiography, I was struck by his diverse grace experiences. He knew grace through the nurture of Bertha Brown, G. C. Busch, Ossie and Fleta Marsh, and others. He discovered grace through an intellectual search that ended in a 2 a.m. mystical experience that set him free from doubts. Note the title of his personal story. See E. Glenn Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012) 32, 82-83.

8 2 Timothy 1:5.

9 Mary McDermott Shideler, *Consciousness of Battle: An Interim Report on a Theological Journey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 93.

10 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1952), 211.

11 Ephesians 2:8-10, 6:10-11.

12 I agree completely with Hinson that Baptists have been guilty of "overloading the front end of the spiritual life." See *Baptist Spirituality*, 32-44.

13 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 78.

14 For a good discussion of the historical context in which the Six Point Record System emerged, see Glenn Hewitt, *The Efficiency Movement in Florida Baptist History*, an address presented at the annual meeting of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, May 1987, available at http://www.floridabaptisthistory.org/docs/monographs/efficiency_movement.pdf.

15 Hinson, *Baptist Spirituality*, 45-57.

16 Dr. Fisher Humphreys reminded me "Bible Brought" was inadequate, and he furnished the sacramental language. Hinson agrees with the dominant role of the Bible among Baptists. He said, "Indeed, one would not be far off the mark to say that they [Baptists] have sometimes extended to the Bible the awe and reverence God alone merits." See E. Glenn Hinson, *Who Interprets the Bible for Baptists?* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2003), 8.

17 Hinson said, correctly I think, "As Baptists of the South have achieved a majority status in their society, they have left behind the outlook which most characterized their forbears, that is, freedom to interpret scriptures for themselves." See Hinson, *Who Interprets*, 7-8.

18 See Hinson's experience, *A Miracle of Grace*, 100.

19 Before published in book form, Francis's document online had numbered paragraphs. See no. 120 at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

20 Compare the Six Point Record System to some of the Puritan practices Hinson discusses in chapter two of *Baptist Spirituality*.

21 See Hinson, *Baptist Spirituality*, 66-69, and Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), 50-56.

22 Acts 1:1.

23 C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: MacMillan, 1961), 113.

24 See Exodus 19:4-6; 1 Peter 2:5, 2:9; Revelation 1:5-6, 5:9-10, 20:6.

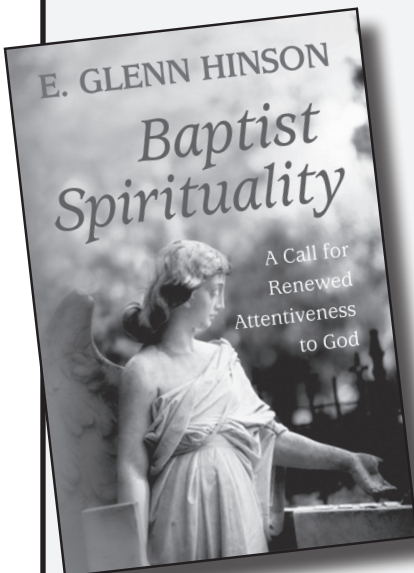
25 Carlyle Marney, *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 13.

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Daniel Featley vs. the Early Baptists



Bill J. Leonard

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"They preach, and print, and practice their Heretical impieties openly; they hold their Conventicles weekly in our chief Cities, and Suburbs thereof, and there prophesie by turns; and (that I may use the phrase of Tertullian) aedificantur in ruinam, they build one another in the faith of their Sect, to the ruin of their souls; they flock in great multitudes to their Jordans, and both Sexes enter into the River, and are dipt after their manner with a kind of spell containing the heads of their erroneous tenets, and their engaging themselves in their schismatical Covenants, and (if I may so speak) combination of separation. And as they defile our Rivers with their impure washings, and our Pulpits with their false prophecies and fanatical enthusiasms, so the presses sweat and groan under the load of their blasphemie."¹

In 1645, Anglican clergyman Daniel Featley directed this assessment of the seventeenth-century "Dippers" or "Anabaptists," rampant in England, toward the sect that would become known, then and now, as Baptists, a

religious communion that traces its origins to 1609 and a group of English Separatists, exiled in Amsterdam, who founded the world's first discernable Baptist congregation. Theological "kinfolks" of the Radical Reformation, Baptists were often linked with Mennonites and other Anabaptists due to their commitment to a believers' church, the insistence that a conversion, a personal religious experience with God through Jesus Christ, was essential for all who would claim membership in the church. Believer's baptism was the outward and visible sign of that inner experience, administered, not only to infants in the often state-mandated norm of the day, but also to those who could testify to the necessary encounter with grace—thus the name Anabaptist (re-baptizer) and the later designation as Baptist.²

The earliest Baptist communions practiced baptism by affusion, pouring water three times over the head of the new believer. However, by the early 1640s, and probably due to the influence of certain Dutch Anabaptists, baptism by total immersion ("dipping") became increasingly normative. Indeed, the (first) London Confession of Faith of Particular Baptists, 1644, describes the mode accordingly:

The way and manner of the dispensing of this [baptismal] ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water. It being a signe, must answer the thing signified, which are these: first, the washing the whole soule in the blood of Christ. Secondly, that interest the Saints have in the death, burial and resurrection; thirdly, together with a confirmation of our faith, that as certainly as the body is buried under water, and riseth againe, so certainly shall the bodies of the Saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection to reigne with Christ.³

Although used in early Baptist confessions, "dipper" also became a term of contempt, identifying practitioners by their weird, if not decadent, practice of immersing the whole body in a river or stream, a New Testament mode that Baptists reclaimed in their effort to replicate the faith and practice of the earliest Christian communities.

By 1612, segments of the Amsterdam group returned to London under the leadership of one Thomas Helwys (Ellis), with a congregation emphasizing conversion and baptism, individual free will to receive salvation or reject

it, and religious liberty grounded in the freedom of conscience. Known as General Baptists, they believed that Christ's death on the cross was a general atonement, beneficial to all human beings who freely chose salvation through repentance and faith. Free will also meant that believers might later choose to turn away from the faith they once affirmed and thus "fall" from grace.

By the 1630s a group of Particular Baptists took root in London, so called because of their commitment to Calvinism and its assertion that the atonement of Christ was beneficial only for a particular group of individuals elected for salvation from the foundation of the world. Since all humans were totally depraved and deserved damnation, that God should choose to save any was a gift of grace. Regeneration came as God's grace was miraculously infused (implanted) into the elect enabling them to repent and believe. Such grace was irresistible, so none of the elect would escape redemption before they departed this world. Through the power of grace, the elect would persevere to the end and could not fall away. Amid their theological differences, Calvinist and Arminian Baptists were united in their belief "that baptism was not to be administered to infants, but such only as professed faith in Christ."⁴

The Baptist movement apparently had an abrupt impact on British Protestantism, evident in the rapid growth of numerous congregations ("conventicles") across the British Isles. Their repudiation of infant baptism as unbiblical and inappropriately coercive, their concern for conversion and believer's baptism, and their generally egalitarian response to congregational leadership frequently put them at odds with "normative" English Protestantism, thereby challenging establishmentarian orthodoxy and the nature of Christian citizenship.

Such deviant theology and swift expansion brought Baptists to the attention of one of their most formidable early opponents, Daniel Featley, an Anglican clergyman with Calvinistic sentiments. Featley immediately warned that while other "depravers of the Doctrine, or disturbers of the Peace of the Church" generally practiced their heresy in secret, the Baptists preferred to "strut in the upper deck, and discover [disclose] themselves with open face . . . and boast with swelling words of vanity that they expect somewhat more than Toleration."⁵ In other words, Baptists readily declared themselves in the public square and demanded not mere toleration by the majority religion and its governmental bedfellows but complete freedom of faith and worship with no penalties from church or state. They called for

such freedom, not simply for themselves, but for all persons, with or without religious opinions.

Daniel Featley found these brash claims unacceptable, asserting that in earlier eras, if such heresy broke “out at any time, by the care of the Ecclesiastical and Civil Magistrates it was soon put out.” But the Civil War had distracted leaders from such supervision and thus, “this Sect, among others, hath so far presumed upon the patience of the state, that it hath held weekly Conventicles, re-baptized hundreds of men and women together in the twilight in Rivelets, and some arms of the Thames, and elsewhere, dipping them over head and ears.”⁶ The damnable Baptists were thriving; something had to be done. Their exotic, indeed immoral, rituals, particularly baptismal immersion, were attracting the curious, the licentious, and the ignorant.

Featley's concerns about the Baptists illustrate the assessment of Brown University professor, William McLoughlin, who wrote in 1991: “What Puritans foresaw, even if dimly, in the thrust of the principles advocated by the Baptists was the overthrow of the medieval ideal of the corporate Christian state and the substitution for it of a voluntaristic, pluralistic, individualistic, or atomist social order. This, in their eyes, was tantamount to anarchy.”⁷

Daniel Featley, well known for debates with Catholics and Protestant dissenters other than Baptists, engaged the Baptists directly in a disputation held in the borough of Southwark, a London neighborhood, on October 17, 1642. Three years later, a short time before his death in 1645, Featley published his assessment of the debate in a volume titled, *The Dippers Dipt or, the Anabaptists Duck'd and Plung'd over Head and Ears, at a Disputation in Southwark*. In it he provided details of the disputation and his verbal exchanges with the Baptists, while adding his own aggressive commentary on the dangers and weakness of something called “Baptist faith.” The result is a scathing critique from one of Baptists' ablest and sardonic detractors. Among other things, Featley claimed the Baptists were:

- an illiterate and sottish sect
- a lying and blasphemous sect
- an impure and carnal sect
- a bloody and cruel sect
- a profane and sacrilegious sect⁸

And then he really got nasty.

The Dippers Dipt and Daniel Featley are frequently cited in a variety of Baptist historical studies, but few have given extensive attention to the context of the book and the breadth of its contents.⁹ Such a broader study, I think, is important for several reasons.

First, the book illustrates the way in which Baptists sought to describe themselves as they developed in seventeenth-century English and American religious life. They unashamedly declared their views on the nature of the believers' church, believer's baptism by immersion, and their demand for complete religious liberty. Amid Featley's scathing assessments, the Baptists asserted what they believed to be biblically-oriented arguments for interpreting and enacting the Christian gospel.

Second, although Baptists had already delineated their specific doctrinal views in various, sometimes contradictory, confessions of faith, their theological and ecclesiastical identity was still in flux. Indeed, the debate illustrates their struggle with numerous questions, including:

- Was the Anglican Church a false or true church of Jesus Christ?
- Was Holy Communion open to all believers or only those who were properly baptized as believers?
- Was salvation available to all who believe, or only for the elect?
- Should Baptists exercise their citizenship as civil magistrates, or by swearing oaths as required of British citizens by law?

Third, *The Dippers Dipt* illustrates the way in which Baptists were perceived by their harshest critics, not simply as theological mutants, but as an illiterate and perverse sect, attempting to disguise their immorality, their ignorance, and their treason with certain intense but deviant approaches to biblical orthodoxy. Given these concerns, as historian William McLoughlin noted, "it is not surprising that the Puritans also misunderstood them."¹⁰ Daniel Featley's primary criticism of the Baptists was that they were seditious and treasonous citizens because their theological views challenged traditional church-state relationships; that they were ignorant illiterates who lacked the educational and intellectual acumen even to discuss theological truths, let alone contradict traditional orthodoxy; and that they were sexually promiscuous, as evidenced by their lurid baptismal practices.

Finally, these seventeenth-century theological and ecclesiastical confrontations offer clues for understanding how contemporary Baptists, now the largest (but rapidly declining) Protestant communion in the United States, respond, not only to church-state relationships, but also to new or expanding religious or irreligious minorities.

Daniel Featley: His Life and Approach

Daniel Featley was born in 1582 and baptized into the Anglican Church during the reign of Elizabeth I. He attended Corpus Christi College, Oxford, receiving the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1601 and the Master of Arts in 1605. Ordained to the Anglican priesthood, he moved quickly through the ranks, becoming a “domestic chaplain” to George Abbot, the archbishop of Canterbury, in 1617.¹¹ A stalwart anti-Catholic, Featley developed something of a reputation for “disputations with and against papists,” particularly the Jesuits. Some of these gatherings ended in near riots among the divided and antagonistic crowds.¹² As a Puritan, he opposed high church Anglican rituals that he thought too Romanist, and denied that the Roman Catholic Church was in any way “a true church of Christ.”¹³ A confirmed Calvinist, Featley was an ardent foe of Arminian theology and its emphasis on free will and falling from grace, believing that it was simply an extension of Roman Catholicism.

When the English Civil War began in the early 1640s, Featley was a royal chaplain to Charles I, yet because of his skill as a theologian and debater, he was appointed to the Westminster Assembly of 1643, probably “the only leading Episcopalian to take his seat” at that Presbyterian-dominated assembly.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Puritan leaders concluded that he was a royalist and moved away from him. Caught in what the *Oxford Dictionary* calls a “sting” operation for smuggling secret letters to the Crown, he was formally accused of being a Royalist sympathizer, ousted from the Westminster Assembly, fired from his ecclesiastical position, and imprisoned in a gaol in Aldersgate Street, London, in 1644.

While in prison, Featley continued to debate Baptists, engaging in arguments with fellow prisoner and Baptist, Henry Denne. One source says: “Mr. Denne [was imprisoned] for preaching against infant baptism, &c.; Dr. Featley on account of some difficulty with the parliament.”¹⁵ Featley fell ill in March 1645 and was moved to better quarters in Chelsea College where

he died on April 21 as a result of dropsy, a stroke-like condition.¹⁶ *The Dippers Dipt* was apparently edited while Featley was in prison.

In his 1848 work, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and in Other Parts of the World*, David Benedict described the “famous dispute” between “Dr. Featley and four baptists, somewhere in Southwark.” He noted that “the Dr’s version of the affair in his own peculiar style” is found in his treatise, *The Dippers Dipt*. Benedict assessed the event, noting:

The speeches on both sides are given somewhat in detail; but as the Dr. managed the story all in his own way, and as he then felt towards his obnoxious opponents, we should naturally expect that they would come off but second best. But under all these disadvantages, the baptists, who made no display of learning, by the Dr’s own showing, on the main questions at issue, had the better of the argument; as they kept close to the scriptures and demanded plain bible proof for infant baptism, and all his other main positions.¹⁷

William Kiffin (1616–1701) was perhaps the best known of the “four Baptists” who confronted Featley at Southwark. Kiffin came to Baptist views through certain Independent Puritan congregations in London and a Baptist-constituted communion led by John Spilsbury. He was the only person to sign both the first and second London Confessions of Particular Baptists.¹⁸

Kiffin, referred to as “Cufin” (a Welsh derivative) in *The Dippers Dipt*, is cited by name only briefly in the document, challenging Featley on issues such as the nature of ordination and baptism in the Anglican Church. Concerning the ministerial calling, Kiffin insisted that “Christ gave the power of ordaining to his church [i.e. the congregation], not to any particular man [i.e. the bishop].”¹⁹ Likewise, Kiffin denied that Anglicans administered a true New Testament baptism, “for you baptize children, and that is not agreeable to God’s word.”²⁰

In his work, *Remarkable passages in the life of William Kiffin*, William Orme wrote of the Southwark encounter and the publication of *The Dippers Dipt*: “Those who would judge of the modesty of the age, have only to consult the engraved title of this ridiculous work: in the volume itself, the vapouring and unfairness of Featley are more prominent than the strength of his argument.” Orme noted that while Featley arrogantly claimed to have

“blankt” his Baptist rivals, “Kiffin was neither finished nor discouraged by this alleged discomfiture, for he had the temerity afterwards to challenge” others regarding many of the issues raised in the Southwark debate.²¹

Featley Sets the Scene for the Debate

The Dippers Dipt begins as Featley lauds the insights of John Calvin, the “Bright burning Taper of Geneva,” a man “warm in his Devotions,” and “clear and lightsome in his Disputes.”²² Apparently hoping to do the same, Featley opens his dispute by declaring: “Now of all Heretics and Schismatics the Anabaptist in three regards ought to be most carefully looked unto, and severely punished, if not utterly exterminated and banished out of the church and Kingdom.” These “three regards” included the following.

First, the Baptists were DANGEROUS, theologically and politically, because of “their affinity with many other damnable Heretics, both Ancient and later.” This guilt-by-association list of their heretical soulmates includes such ecclesiastically condemned doctrinal miscreants as “mille-narians,” “Marcionites, Novatians, and Donatists,” along with “Polygamists, Jesuits, and Arminians.” Baptists, he says, also promote “other damnable doctrines, tending to carnal liberty, familism, and a medley and hodge-podge of all Religions.” Featley concluded: “So in one Anabaptist you have many Heretiques”²³

For Featley, Baptists’ political views were especially dangerous, “in regard of their audacious attempts upon church and State, and their insolent acts committed . . . in the eye of the high court of Parliament”²⁴ Their problematic politics were corroborated, he asserted, by a 1644 book “called *The bloody Tenet*, which the Author affirmed he wrote in Milk; and if he did so he hath much Rats-bane into it.” Here Featley referenced the work of New England divine Roger Williams and his treatise, *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience*, “cryptically encoded in milk, a perilous undertaking in the oppressive religio-political climates of England and America. Like the Baptists, Williams’ ideas were problematic, Featley insisted, because of his (and their) belief “that it is the will and command of God, that since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian Consciences and worships be granted to all men in all Nations and Countries; That Civil States with their Officers of justice are not Governors or defenders of the Spiritual and Christian state and

worship; That the doctrine of Persecution in case of Conscience (maintained by Calvin, Beza, Cotton, and the Ministers of the New English Churches) is guilty of all the blood of the souls crying for vengeance under the Altar."²⁵

As Featley saw it, the Baptists' most ominous dogma was their insistence that the consciences of heretics, atheists, and non-Christian religionists should be free from intimidation by state or church, and their audacious claim that those who facilitated or acquiesced in such harassment (including the blessed John Calvin) were "guilty of the blood" of the persecuted.

Baptist views on religious liberty struck at the heart of "the powers [of the state] that are ordained by God for the cutting off of all heresy." In fact, Featley predicted that should "this Sect prevail, we shall have no Monarchy in the State, or Hierarchy in the church, but an Anarchy in both."²⁶ Thus Featley accepted the challenge of debating the Anabaptists since, had he "declined this Combat, as others did," the group would have "grown most insolent" subjecting the populace to more of "their vaunting brags and confidence in their cause, and our diffidence in ours. . . ."²⁷

Second, not only were Baptists DANGEROUS, they were also IGNORANT, having arrogantly ventured beyond their social class educationally and theologically. And they should know their place. They had carried the priesthood of all believers to its illogical conclusions through actions that had transformed "stables into Temples, Stalls into Quires, Shopboards into Communion Tables, Tubs into Pulpits, Aprons into Linen Ephods, and Mechanics of the lowest rank into Priests of the high places."²⁸ Featley gratefully acknowledged that most seventeenth-century English women and men accepted their cultural location and adhered to the appropriate social boundaries. Indeed, he reported having no personal experience with individuals who attempted to "meddle" in vocations for which they were not prepared. Generally, then, British physicians, blacksmiths, carpenters, and others in the labor force refused to "go beyond" their respective professions.

Regrettably, however, the proliferation of sectarians demonstrated that "only the trade of Expounding Scripture is a mystery which every Artizan arrogateth [claims] to himself." Thus, "every handy-craftsman will be handling the pure Word of God with impure and unwashed hands. This the prattling housewife, this the old dotard, this the wrangling sophister, in a word, this men of all professions, & men of no profession, take upon

the[m] to have skill in, readily teaching that they never learn'd & abundantly pouring out that which was never infused into them."²⁹

In short, persons outside the educated class claimed competency to interpret scripture and doctrine when they had neither intellectual nor theological ability to do so. He asked: "if not only of the lowest of the people . . . ordain themselves Priests and Deacons; if they enter not into the Church, but break into it; if they take not holy Orders, but snatch them to themselves; do we marvel to see such confusion in the Church as there is?"³⁰

Daniel Featley would surely have agreed with his Royalist contemporary who wrote apprehensively in the 1640s:

When women preach,
And Cobblers pray,
The fiends in hell
Make holiday.³¹

The Debate at Southwark: Issues and Arguments

As the debate began, the Baptists inquired of Featley: "we would know of you whether the Baptisme of children can be proved Lawful . . . as it is practiced among you." But Featley refused to respond to their question, and instead demanded that the Baptists explain their theology of the Trinity, so that he might know if they were "well instructed in the principles of Catechism."³² At the end of their exchange over this issue, Featley concluded that he had proven "how unfit these men are to take upon them the office of Teachers, who are so imperfect in the Fundamental points of the Catechism."³³

Featley pushed the class issue further by insisting that to "dispute in Divinity" requires knowledge of the "Scriptures [only] in the Original Languages," of Hebrew and Greek. He asserted that "the undoubted word of God" is without error in the original biblical languages, nonetheless "in translations there may be, and are errors." Translations of scripture were the word of God only as they agreed "with the original, which (as I am informed) none of you [Baptists] understand."³⁴ Without their knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, the Baptist views were faulty from the first, no debate necessary.

Featley contended that Baptists deepened their ignorance by refusing to attend Anglican services, thereby failing to avail themselves of the spiritual and doctrinal guidance of Oxford/Cambridge-educated preachers.

Instead, they listened “only [to] some of your own sect, and those no better than mere Laymen.” To this the Baptists responded with their own egalitarian approach to biblical interpretation, noting: “We do not read of any such distinction in the Word of God, as Lay-men and Clergy men, these are Popish distinctions; the word Lay is not in all the Scriptures.”³⁵ Featley retorted that Baptist lay preachers could not “convince Heretics, and stop the mouths of gain-sayers because they can allege no Scripture but that which is translated into their mother-tongue, in which there may be and are some errors.”³⁶

At that, the Baptists moved the discussion from the external to the internal knowledge of Holy Writ, noting: “though we cannot prove the letter to be well translated, that matters not much, for the letter of the Scripture is not Scripture. . . . The letter of the word of God is not Scripture, without the revelation of the Spirit of God; the Word revealed by the spirit is Scripture.”³⁷ Featley then asked: “How prove you the Bible to be Gods [sic] Word?” The Baptists answered: “By experience. For, whatsoever is written in the Word of God cometh to pass, concerning Christ and Antichrist; experience is the best Doctor that teacheth us.” Featley responded by charging the Baptists with blasphemy.³⁸ Nevertheless, the Baptists had made clear the experiential nature of their faith as it impacted biblical interpretation. Here is where Featley labeled Baptists “an illiterate and sottish sect,” whose members had stepped well beyond their stations in church and society.³⁹

And then there was sex. Indeed, Featley believed that Baptists’ third great danger involved their sexual promiscuity as an “impure and carnal sect.”⁴⁰ This was particularly evident, Featley believed, in their obsession with immersion baptism for men and women alike, present in the water together—often in the evening. In his argument with the Baptists over the proper baptismal mode—immersion or sprinkling—Featley asserted:

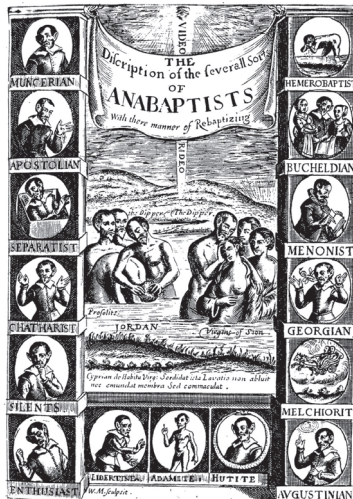
[A]ll the sacraments of the Church may and ought to be administered without giving any just scandal. But the resort of great multitudes of men and women together in the evening, and going naked into Rivers, there to be plunged and Dipt, cannot be done without scandal, especially where the State giveth no allowance to any such practice, nor appointeth any order to prevent such foul abuses as are like at such disorderly meetings to be committed. *Ergo*, The Sacrament of Baptism ought not to be administered with such plunging or *Dipping*.⁴¹

The outdoor, dusky, “promiscuous” immersion of both sexes was not only morally questionable, but also politically forbidden since Baptists had no governmental permission for their heretical practice.

To illustrate the unseemly nature of the licentious practice, Featley included a prurient, no doubt fabricated, sketch of Baptist baptisms as allegedly practiced in the rivers of seventeenth-century England. The immersion scene is surrounded by representations of heretical groups across church history, again linking the Baptists to a heritage of forbidden and/or condemned movements. The drawing is titled, “The Description of Several Sorts of Anabaptists with their manner of Rebaptizing.” The river in which the immersion takes place is labeled “Jordan,” with male and female candidates standing near each other. Toward the right of the picture, two naked, bearded men administer baptism to two female converts (“Virgins of Zion”), essentially fondling the women whose wet garments cling to their bodies, displaying their naked breasts. On the left, three naked, male “prophets” receive baptism from another naked male, who as he pushes one of them toward the water, appears to hold the convert's head at his crotch.

Titillation aside, this startling portrayal of “dipping” reflects a kind of seventeenth-century baptismal pornography intended, no doubt, to give visual evidence of the primary motives for Baptist advocacy of total immersion. The drawing confirms Featley's assertion that Baptists' claims of a biblical mandate for immersion was in reality a subterfuge for carnal exploitation of what appears to be both heterosexual and homosexual activity.

Frontispiece to
The Dippers Dipt, n.p.



Featley did not hesitate to offer his own graphic descriptions of the Dippers' erotic ritual, writing: "They strip themselves stark naked, not only when they flock in great multitudes, men and women together, to their *Jordans* to be dipt; but also upon other occasions, when the season permits: and when they are questioned for it, they shelter this their shameful act, with the Proverb *Veritus nuda est*, the truth is naked, and desires no vale, masque, or guide, which reason, if it were good, would hinder them from holding private Conventicles as they do. . . ."42

Thus Baptist ignorance in matters of theology and doctrine extended to their blindness to Christian moral absolutes in their pursuit of the pleasures of the flesh. Featley asserted, "Because the Baptists turn away their ears from the truth, God sendeth them teachers according to their desire; not such as with their wholesome tongues and doctrine heal their sores, but with their nails scratch gently the itch of their carnal lusts and affections."⁴³

Theologically, ethically, and politically, the Baptists posed great danger to English society, church, and state. Featley summarized their strange views in ways that set them on the margins of establishment Christianity in decent English society. In so doing, he inadvertently articulated the nature of Baptists' radical non-conformity as it would ultimately impact church and state in England, America, and elsewhere. His list of Baptist beliefs is clearly an establishmentarian nightmare. It also provides insight into how seventeenth-century dissenters were perceived by their religio-political adversaries. Featley described Baptists' ideals as follows:

*"First, that none are rightly baptized but those who are dipt."*⁴⁴ The Baptists rejected the culturally and politically mandated mode of baptism.

"Secondly, that no children ought to be baptized." Baptists cast aside the link between baptism and citizenship—i.e. to be born into a "Christian" state required immediate baptism into the Christian Church. During the debate the Baptists declared that "Baptism is the seal of the righteousness of faith, therefore it ought to be administered only to believers; else we set a seal to a blank. But children are no believers, nor can be while they are such, because they cannot understand the assent thereunto. Ergo, children ought not to be baptized."⁴⁵

"Thirdly, that there ought to be no set form of Liturgy or prayer by the Book, but only by the Spirit." Baptists demanded the freedom to determine their own spirituality apart from establishmentarian-enforced forms of prayer. At Southwark they asserted: "None who useth a set form of prayer prayeth by

the Spirit. Every good Christian ought to pray by the Spirit, 1 Cor. 14.15. Ergo, No good Christian may use set forms of prayer."⁴⁶

"Fourthly, that there ought to be no distinction by the Word of God between the Clergy and the Laity but that all who are gifted may preach the Word, and administer the Sacraments." They challenged the status of a privileged religious class that controlled theology and admission to the sacraments. The Baptists told Featley: "We do not read of any such distinction in the Word of God, as Lay-men and Clergy men, these are Popish distinctions, the word lay is not in all the Scriptures."⁴⁷

"Fifthly, that it is not lawful to take an oath at all, no, not though it be demanded by the magistrate."⁴⁸ The oath reflected the loyalty of citizenship. Baptists would swear allegiance to the state, but not when it contradicted their understanding of scripture and conscience.

"Sixthly, that no Christian may with good conscience execute the office of civil magistrate." Like their Anabaptist kinfolk, the earliest Baptists seemed to have believed that the work of civil officials required such unchristian activity that no "born again" person could taint themselves by entering political office.

Baptist historian Edward Underhill wrote that "witnessing as they did the perversion of the civil authority, and suffering inconceivable anguish from its cruel exercise, they came to deem it an office incompatible with their allegiance to their Lord, and thought it a forbidden thing to perform the functions of magistracy."⁴⁹ They soon moved away from that emphasis, but its early practice is instructive regarding Baptist church/state approaches.

Every article in this fascinating list reflects degrees of both political and religious non-conformity among Baptists theologically, liturgically, and politically. Their dissent had clear social, political, and religious implications. Conclusions include the following:

- Baptists offered an alternative spirituality to the religious uniformity of their day, introducing a framework for a new pluralism that would ultimately win the day in much of the West. *The Dippers Dipt* reveals their deep sense of the biblical mandate for believers' baptism, and a rejection of infant baptism, particularly as a state-mandated requirement for all citizens.

- Baptist commitment to a church constituted around a religious experience of God's grace in Jesus Christ led them to insist that faith must be uncoerced, and that neither the state nor privileged religious establishments could dictate to the individual conscience in matters of religion.
- For Baptists, a believers' church was also a peoples' church that gave voice and leadership to clergy and laity alike.
- Theirs was an experiential egalitarianism that carried both women and men into the baptismal waters—together—even when it shocked the sexual sensibilities of their culture to the max.
- Throughout *The Dippers Dipt*, the Baptist representatives often sound almost as radical as their Quaker contemporaries in their emphasis on the direct encounter with God in Christ, creating a context for freeing the human conscience, and unleashing the power of uncoerced faith.

Contemporary implications abound, including these questions:

- When it comes to ecumenical or interfaith conversations and relationships, do twenty-first-century Christians prefer Featley-like caricatures to genuine dialogue/debate, or seek implicit government sanctions against upstart voices representing faith or non-faith?
- Do religious communities want the culture-privilege of Daniel Featley, or culture-witness of the early Baptists?
- Where might our own consciences take us in response to religious traditions old and new, not simply then and there, but here and now?
- Do twenty-first-century Baptists recognize themselves in the debate in seventeenth-century Southwark, or have they become another kind of religious establishment, demanding tax-exempt status and neo-Constantinian ministerial "housing allowances" from the state?
- Do Baptist congregations continue to understand themselves as believers' churches, anchored in personal spiritual experience of uncoerced faith, or has conversion become a mere transaction, a kind of Jesus vaccination that fulfills a salvific requirement?
- How would today's Baptists fare in a contemporary debate over the nature of the Jesus story and its implications for faith and action? **BH&HS**

Notes

1 Daniel Featley, *The Dippers Dipt or, the Anabaptists Duck'd and Plung'd over head and Ears, at a Disputation in Southwark* (London: Printed for N.B and Richard Royston, 1645), A4-5.

2 Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963), 18-21. Torbet distinguished three theories of Baptist origins: 1) The Successionist Theory that Baptists could trace a direct and unbroken lineage from the New Testament, a theory largely debunked by historians; 2) the Anabaptist Spiritual Kinship theory that Baptists had a "spiritual relationship with the early Radical Reformers, but [had] difficulty of establishing any historical connection"; and 3) the English Separatist Descent theory that Baptists evolved out of the English Puritan tradition in its Calvinist and Arminian theological expressions.

3 William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 155. This confession of faith was published about the time that Daniel Featley began his public opposition to the English Baptists, particularly their mode of baptism.

4 Thomas Crosby, *The History of English Baptists: From the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for the Editor, 1738), 147-148. Citing Baptist leader William Kiffin.

5 Daniel Featley, *The Dippers Dipt*, A4-5.

6 *Ibid.*, B5.

7 William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty: The Baptist Struggle in New England, 1630-1833* (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1991), 49.

8 Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for the Author, 1811), 164.

9 Richard B. Cook, *The Story of the Baptists in All Ages and Countries* (Baltimore: H.M. Wharton, 1884), 94-95, 112; H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist History* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 48, 65, 80; William Henry Brackney, *The Baptists* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 45, 90; Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 2, 3, 15, 51, 67; David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 48; C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* (Macon, GA: Mercer university Press, 2008), 22; William Brackney, "The Dippers Dipt: Not Quite So, Reverend Featley," *Christian History* (June 1985).

10 McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty*, 14.

11 Leslie Stephan and Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 18 (London: Smith, Elder, and Co. 1889), 423.

12 Arnold Hunt, "Featley, Daniel" (1582-1645), in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, January 2008.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Stephan and Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography*, 423.

15 David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and in Other Parts of the World* (New York: Lewis Colby and Company, 1848), 279.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 B. R. White, "How Did William Kiffin Join the Baptists?" *Baptist Quarterly* 23 (January 1970), 201-207; see also, Brackney, *The Baptists*, 210-211.

19 Featley, *The Dippers Dipt*, D19.

20 *Ibid.*, D5.

21 William Orme, *Remarkable Passages of the Life of William Kiffin, Written by Himself* (London: 1823), 102-103.

22 Featley, *The Dippers Dipt*, A3.

23 Ibid., A4-5. Familists, or the Family of Love, were a religious sect founded in the sixteenth century, with Anabaptist sentiments including rejection of infant baptism, the call for religious liberty for all, nonviolent resistance, and a refusal to bear arms. They were sometimes falsely accused of practicing "free love."

24 Ibid., A5.

25 Ibid. Williams led in establishing the first Baptist church in America at Providence in the colony that became Rhode Island, but he only remained a Baptist for a short time.

26 Ibid., A6.

27 Ibid., A7.

28 Ibid., B1.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Norah Carlin, "The First English Revolution" (April 1983), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/carlin/1983/04/engrev.html#pt06>.

32 Daniel Featley, *The Dippers Dipt*, C4.

33 Ibid., C5.

34 Ibid., C3.

35 Ibid., C13.

36 Ibid., C15.

37 Ibid., C16.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 253.

40 Ibid., 245.

41 Ibid., 39.

42 Ibid., 239-240.

43 Ibid., 176.

44 Ibid., 36. Italics inserted here to identify Featley's list of Baptists' ideals

45 Ibid., 61.

46 Ibid., 103.

47 Ibid., C13.

48 Ibid., 36.

49 Edward Bean Underhill, *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution* (London: J. Haddon, 1846), lxxviii-lxxix.

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The Holy Well:

Place of Presences and Presence of Place



Linda McKinnish Bridges

Linda McKinnish Bridges is President of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

The conference leader, Irish folklorist, Paidrigin Clancy, speaking on "Ireland and the Divine Feminine," announced that the conclusion to her presentation would be given on the grounds outside the hotel conference center. She gave instructions on how to leave the lecture hall, and then invited us to follow behind her. We were told to walk slowly and quietly and to meet around a birch tree, close to a well of water, in the midst of the large field with Irish bracken.

Dr. Clancy pulled a tin whistle from her pocket and began to play while she led the way down the grassy path, like the little Irish piper. Women and men, of all ages, from several different countries and nationalities, walked out of the heated warmth of the conference hall that day into the cold, damp air of an early October evening in County Wicklow, Ireland.

"Make a circle around the well," she told us. "A well?" I thought, "Why a well?" I was puzzled, silently wondering why the endless supply of bottled water and hot tea in the study lounge was not sufficient. Furthermore, it was

cold outside. When I registered for this conference in a small village south of Dublin, sponsored by Tilden Edwards' Shalem Institute of Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland, I understood from the brochure that this was to be an academic conference on Irish Religious Traditions, not an outdoor hiking experience. "Why a well? What in the world did a well have to do with Irish spirituality?" I thought.

I was very familiar with wells. I had known of plenty of natural springs in Western North Carolina, where my family and I would stop for a drink of fresh water as we rode in the car, making our way up the mountain to a week of revival services. I remember the night that we were traveling to Cedar Springs Baptist Church, outside of Tuxedo, to hear Dad preach in a revival meeting. Mother was dressed in her Sunday clothes. My little brother and I were in the back seat. Dad was looking for the spring. The car was moving slowly when he finally saw it on the right side of the road. He stopped the car. We all got out. My brother and I raced to the cold spray of water spewing out of the mountainside. We cupped our hands to drink of the freshest, coldest water I had ever tasted. Somehow in our rush to race to the water, Mother had stumbled and fallen in the small pool of collected water below the rocks. The water was not deep enough to cause major damage or scare, just deep enough to mess up her pretty Sunday dress.

I also remember the fresh water spring on my great-grandfather's mountain land where the adults used the natural watering hole to keep the watermelon cool and the soda cans cold while the cousins played in the hot summer sun during the Sunday afternoon of the annual family reunion. The natural spring that provided a poor mountain farmer and his family the fresh water necessary for survival in the late 1800s was also the same natural spring that cooled fruit and milk for the generations that followed. I was familiar with wells, or springs of natural mountain water, gushing forth from the earth.

In a poem titled "Rhymer Spring," Robert Morgan, a well-known poet and novelist from my hometown of Hendersonville, North Carolina, uses his special gift of words and deep knowledge of the land to describe the power of those majestic mountain fountains:

This fountain is so deep and bold
it seems to be an oracle
from underneath the rock and moss

and ferns, reciting poetry
or maybe quoting Scripture to
its hidden mountain pasture. Hear
the stir of inlets whispering where
the dancing sand shows inspiration
of water summoned through the veins
from far in rock and tasting cold
as quartz and metal assessed through. See
spring lizards grip the sandy floor
where milk and butter were kept chilled
for longer than a century
Up here the spring still speaks
of lonely cove and mountain peaks,
and rhymes with clearest winter sky
and glitters with the farthest star,
but hints of driest prophecy.¹

Yet here at this Celtic Spirituality conference I learned something new that I had probably somehow always known: that a well can bring healing to a dry soul as well as cold water to a thirsty mouth. On that day in Glendalough, Ireland, I learned that a well, this special place of offering and gift to a weary traveler searching for refreshment, is truly a place of presences and a deep presence of place.

The procession kept hushed and solemn, as we had been instructed. The Catholic sisters with their gray hair and practical shoes mingled with the smartly-dressed urban Dubliners who had traveled south in their fine suits of Scottish wool and with elegant walking canes. Both groups walked beside the middle-aged American women dressed in puffy parkas, blue jeans, and hiking boots.

The river birch marked the spot. The grass was tall, the soil moist, and the ground uneven and unpredictable. The sound of the soft whistle and the sudden awareness of a gentle mist of autumn rain falling gently on my cheeks created a most solemn occasion, even though I had no earthly idea what I was doing there at that moment.

Here I was standing in some field, with a strange collection of people, in the rain, and had followed a stranger playing a flute to a river birch tree growing in a grassy, soggy field in Glendalough, County Wicklow, Ireland.

We formed a circle around the tree as we were instructed. Silence. A grand hush filled the space. I could only see a tree. On closer look, I saw the tree filled with strangely-fitted snippets of cloth tied to the tree's branches. As I moved closer to the tree, and not being hampered by the tall shoulders ahead of me, I looked straight down to the ground: it was a hole—a hole with water spewing out from the ground. A well. A well of water in the middle of a big grassy field beside a river birch tree. “What is so special about that?” I wondered.

What Was I Doing There?

How did I arrive in Glendalough, Ireland, on October 31, 1997? I was on sabbatical leave from my teaching responsibilities at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, where I had begun to research the role of women in ancient Celtic Christian traditions. What drew me to here was a book by Peter Ellis, *Celtic Women*, that I had discovered a few years earlier at an annual meeting for biblical scholars.²

I quickly purchased it, not for a particular purpose other than because it just looked interesting. I then ran to the next seminar, where I was presenting a scholarly paper to the Johannine Studies Group. When I returned to my office, I placed it on the shelf and for months did not even open the contents. I was thoroughly absorbed in biblical studies at the seminary, teaching courses in biblical Greek, New Testament introductions, moving slightly off course to teach Pauline epistles such as 1–2 Corinthians and 1–2 Thessalonians. I was not thinking about *Celtic Women* for sure. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought that maybe this was about a new feminist construction related to basketball in Boston!

Let me be clear: I was not opposed to “fringe research.” I was deep into understanding the many ways to view the Bible, including the work of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. But thoroughly immersed in doctoral studies in linguistics, Greek word studies, philological approaches shaped by German hermeneutical lenses of redaction, form and source criticism, long-honored biblical research methods of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the cutting edge for me was the advent of literary theory into biblical scholarship. And in the context of Southern Seminary in the mid-1980s, and with the urging of my dissertation advisor, R. Alan Culpepper, I stayed the course of living within the biblical tradition, deep into the text and context of the

Gospel of John. Not one Celtic woman in sight! Not many women, period, were in my view. I was advised by colleagues and professors to stay focused on the biblical text, not on feminist readings, which were marginal studies at best, they said.

Now in the first decade of my teaching career, the saturation in biblical studies was wearing thin. I had claimed my space as a woman in the seminary classroom and in the male-dominated field of biblical studies—but not without great sacrifice. I was keenly aware that only a few women were around as colleagues or even students. In seminary I was the first Southern Baptist woman to complete a Ph.D. in New Testament studies. I taught seminary classes in Bible in the mid-1980s when only a few women dotted the classroom rolls. I never, ever, heard the voice of a woman professor in my ten years of graduate theological education in biblical studies at Southern Seminary.

While teaching at SBTS as an adjunct professor after completing the Ph.D. I was challenged, on more than one occasion, by the young men enrolled in my class. They did not believe that a woman should be teaching Scripture. They challenged my authority as their professor and certainly as the one with authority over their grades. They used the very scripture passages I was teaching to assume that “women should not usurp authority over a man” (2 Tim. 1:12). The opposition continued. And the opposition became really intense when I became pregnant with my first child. The men in the class were incensed that a pregnant woman would be teaching them God’s holy word.

The conservative wing of the denomination was gaining a stronghold in the life of Southern Baptists. And the divisive topic, along with biblical inerrancy, was the role of women in the church. On one day I was asked by the administration to stay low and teach Greek language classes until the conflict passed. And when it passed, I would be hired to teach New Testament as a full-time professor. I was so eager to teach at SBTS, I made a plan to stay. And then a faculty member, administrator, colleague, friend asked for a confidential moment in his office. I entered and he quickly said to me in no uncertain terms that I needed to go—to leave Southern Seminary—that the place was about to blow and I would not want to be there when it did.

And so, I left Southern Baptist Theological Seminary—not without pain, however. I followed my husband to Richmond, Virginia, to his new job at Northminster Baptist Church, as a trailing spouse. While I found teaching

positions as adjunct professor at both Randolph-Macon College and Union Theological Seminary, I began to hear whispers that a new seminary was being considered in Richmond, Virginia. In 1991 I was asked to join this new work, thanks to the personal recommendation of Dr. John Trotti, dean of the library at Union Theological Seminary where I had been teaching adjunctively for three years. "Maybe this could be a home for Baptist women," I remember thinking. I also remember the enthusiasm of that possibility dreamed by Lynda Weaver-Williams, Anne Thomas Neil, Alan Neeley, Mary Strauss, Sue Fitzgerald, and a host of other dreamer-believers.

The challenges were immense, for misogyny was deeply rooted in the cultural realities of the South, of both Baptist women and men, and certainly within the genetic markings of the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1996 an amendment was added to the *Baptist Faith and Message* that clearly stated women were the creators of sin in this world and for that reason we could not serve in ordained roles of leadership. In 2000 another amendment was added that stated women should submit graciously to their husbands. This was not easy.

Intellectually, I was in a quagmire. I searched for ways to understand the connection between the depth of my faith and my commitment to the church. I searched for ways to understand how the sacred book that I had spent years studying could be the platform used to express the opposition. It was not enough to say that women should not participate. But when the opposition began slinging Bible verses to prove their point, the internal turmoil bubbled. I could stand against visible enemies, learning to deflect their darts of words and glances. It was harder, however, to refute the teaching of the ancient apostle Paul, whose words and life I had been studying for more than two decades. I was in a deep conundrum. And I asked: "Is this all there is? Has the church always been this oppressive? Have women always been on the outside looking in?"

I chose to spend my sabbatical year trying to find the answers to this primary question: "Has the church always excluded women?" My hope was that if I could see places in the history of the church where women had been leaders in the church, then perhaps I could lead the change against the obvious misogyny so apparent in the Southern Baptist Convention. Oh, the minds of youthful scholars! I then remembered the book, the one I purchased years ago at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) meeting, the one still on the bookshelf waiting to be read, the one on Celtic women. I pulled it down.

I began reading, following every footnote carefully. I read more. I took notes. I read more. I cried. And soon I began to make plans to travel.

I needed a new way, a new way of thinking, a fresh breath of the Spirit, a solemn ending to something of the past and a refreshing hello to that which had not yet been revealed to me. I needed to wander, to meander, to see if there might be a new way not only for the institutional church, but also for me. In reality, I was a pilgrim, searching for my own place of resurrection, not just for the church.³

The Well: Ancient and Modern

And there I was, standing at a well of water in the damp, cold, autumn air in County Wicklow, Ireland. I literally could not move my feet. Immobilized. The teacher explained the significance of wells in the ancient Irish culture, that they were often named for women, that the very landscape of water rushing through a small opening in the ground evoked memories of birth and woman life-giving powers. She also described how women and men would come to the wells, praying for their families, for healing powers, for connections to the Divine. She said that here at this particular well, the ancient Celtic goddess and Christian historical saint, Brigid, was especially remembered. Clancy pointed to the many clusters of cloth tied to the river birch tree, of the ribbons from someone's hair, a handkerchief and scarf from someone's purse.

I stood there, truly frozen in that seemingly timeless moment. I remember thinking, "How could women be so honored in this land, so honored that even the landscape would bear their names? How could these Irish Christians, these ancient people, formed with Christian texts and tradition, with the same scriptures that my Baptist tradition cherished, honor women in this way? Surely, they had another Bible. Surely, they had not heard of Rome. Surely, they were pagan or new age worshippers or something really weird." And I wrote this in my journal at the end of the day:

Somewhere in this huge world of ours, which has been spinning in space for a very long time, there was a moment in time when mothers were sacred, when the feminine was honored, and when women were held in high esteem. Somewhere in time, way back in time, the powers of life, which women have always

held, were cherished and valued. Somewhere, in the distant past, I know that it was not as it is now, that life was lived differently—that women were not battered, made to feel inadequate, bruised, wounded, subjugated, hated, despised, spoils of war, objectified, and victimized. Somewhere long ago and far away, religion was a good place for women rather than a place from which to run and hide. The well has become for me today a place, a symbol, where women were respected, where the presence of the feminine was a place of honor, where life was cherished. It has not always been as it is. I know it. Deep in my bones, I know it. From deep in the stones of the earth, I know it. From the skies and stars, the moon and sun, I know it. The Mother has had a place of honor. We have left her. We need to find Her again.

The Well: A Place of Ancient Worship

Early Irish literature provides a clear glimpse of the power of the well as a place of presences and presence of place.⁴ Landscapes can negotiate meaning that transcends time and provides a “newly created space where the literary, the historical, and the cultural are in an ongoing conversation with the geographic, the personal, and the material.”⁵ The Irish well—more than 3,000 of them recorded in Ireland, and many of those still active and used in religious practices—can negotiate experiences that transcend time and place and become the backdrop for greater awareness of what Mircea Eliade calls a “hierophany”—physical manifestations or revelations of the sacred, that can give access to non-historical time.⁶

The *Dindshenchas*, an Irish word that literally translates the history of strongholds, are texts that describe places in Ireland along with their stories. The well was central in ancient Celtic life.⁷ While the hill of Tara is associated with political leadership, the area of Uisneach was connected to worship. At this epicenter of the physical landscape of Ireland, twelve streams are said to have merged at the Well of Uisneach. Over the wells grew nine hazels of wisdom. The story is told of Oisín, who searches for water to serve at an important feast. At the well of Uisneach, he finds water along with thriving salmon and fresh sprigs of cress. He returns to the feast with his water, salmon, and sprigs and is able to entertain his guests with fine storytelling

and poetry. Tradition bestows the gifts of wisdom, poetry, and storytelling around the sacred waters of the well.⁸

With limited archaeological findings, the Irish mythological tales are the bedrock for understanding the ancient Celtic view of water. James Rattue understands that well worship was something very natural for the ancient mind: "Water is 'other.' Its moods are strange and various. By turns, it is quiet, and violent; it can refresh or it can kill. It emerges in a miraculous way from the earth, for it is neither living, nor inanimate; it possesses life, yet is not itself alive, and unlike fire, can never be fully domesticated. Water, further, comes from below, from darkness, from the place where the dead (in cultures for which that is relevant) are buried, from the brooding presence beneath the feet."⁹

The Well: A Place of Christian Worship

Christianity came to Ireland without violence. No hard-edged evangelism with persuasive political or economic sword was used. The amazing story of the transformation from Druidic thought to Christian experience is one of gentle assimilation rather than exclusion or bloodshed. A study of the well reinforces that story of transformation. Arthur Gribben reports that "papal instructions were given to St. Augustine to convert pagan customs into Christian solemnity, and pagan temples into churches."¹⁰ When Celtic sites were converted into Christian places, the well was included. When Christian monks built their communities, their houses were built close to the well. Walter and Mary Brenneman describe the Irish holy well as the "matrix for the syncretism of Celt and Christian."¹¹

The story of the well of Cliabach, a royal site belonging to the province of Connaught, illustrates the phenomenon.¹² Patrick goes to the well and there meets two Druids, Moel and Coplait. Two young women are also at the well washing their hands at sunrise. One of the women chooses to follow Christianity, and Patrick baptizes her at the very same well. The well honors both the Druidic and Christian traditions.

Modern Christian pilgrims continue to honor Irish holy wells. Special rituals, with wide variations, can be seen throughout contemporary Ireland. Patrick Logan describes the activities surrounding the popular Cruach Patrick.¹³ The ritual includes the following: preliminary prayers in preparation for walking to the well, usually five decades of the Rosary; then when

at the well, kneel and continue to pray. The pilgrim then stands and begins to walk to the right, making a circle three times, reciting more prayers. Some pilgrims choose to walk without shoes or socks. After the third round, the pilgrim may drink water from the well, and may use the water to bless herself. Upon leaving, a stone may be added to the usual collection of stones by the well. Or the pilgrim may choose to leave a piece of cloth or ribbon, often referred to as “clooties,” by hanging it on the nearby tree.

What Meaneth This Well for Me?

George McLeod describes these Celtic holy sites as “thin places.”¹⁴ The well was a “thin place” for me that day—where the grounded reality of time and place is transcended by the physical markers of linear time. In these landscapes, where ancient rituals and symbols abound and the ground has been trod with thousands of pilgrims for hundreds of years, the convergence of homogenous time, linear and unrepeatable, and heterogeneous time, the merging of the profane and sacred, the linear and the cyclical, happens.

This place, a well, to some just a simple hole in the ground with gushing water, became a special “thin place” for me. This was a place where the feminine was honored in ancient Ireland, as the life force of water gushed from the mysterious ground, as well as a place where Christianity had been invited and rituals of cleansing and baptism were performed. This holy well bore such deep traces of the feminine that neither time nor religion could deny.

Dara O’Maolidhia, a former Catholic priest now living and serving the people on the island of Inis Mor, Aran Island, County Galway, as a Celtic priest, describes the Irish wells and their feminine symbolism: “In Celtic mythology, a well is sacred because it is an entrance into the womb of Mother Earth, the goddess Danu or Brid, Ireland inherited its Christian holy wells, and the practice of doing rounds, from this ancient heritage. . . . Wells are symbols of the feminine, representing sexuality, fertility, menstrual cycles, and fruitfulness.”¹⁵

I stood there while the women were making rounds, attaching ribbons from their hair to the river birch tree. One woman pulled the thread from the hem of her beautiful tartan pleated skirt. I was immobilized, stunned. How could anyone honor girls—women—the feminine side of things—women’s world? Were not women required to recede quietly into the background, only

referenced in relationship to someone else, like her husband or her children? In biblical texts she often did not even have a name, referred to as the “wife of Uriah,” “the unnamed woman,” or “a woman from Samaria.” How could this Irish culture be so willing to honor their land and their wells with the names of women?

The questions deepened. How could the feminine survive without a male god to support her? How could there be a place for the feminine in the religious imagination of a group of people shaped by a patriarchal religion? Was not God always male? Even though I wanted to understand this feminine reality of deity, I was embarrassed by all of the language I was hearing: “sacred feminine,” “goddess,” “breasts and wombs.” The language seemed strange—if I listened closely I might lose my salvation, I might fall off some theological cliff, I might become lost and never find home again. I just stood there on the outside of the circle, watching and quietly crying, glad for the soft Irish mist that mingled with the tears on my cheeks so that I could hide the pain seen on my face.

The next day I stayed in silence. And at the end of the day I wrote these words in my journal: “Something is working here. I don’t know what it is, but inside there are stirrings beyond words—chords that are being touched that have not vibrated in a long, long time . . . if ever. The Divine Feminine is very, very close.”

I know now what was happening. I was being introduced to something greater than myself yet within myself. I had always been a religious-type of person. I enjoyed talking about God, scripture, and philosophy rather than weather or neighborhood gossip. I had made my way to Louisville, Kentucky, where I had faithfully studied theology, Greek, Hebrew, and the Bible. I had spent an entire lifetime in the church, always preparing for worship or cleaning the church after worship. But I had no preparation for this.

As a middle-aged woman, I began to remember the baptism of my childhood in Greer, South Carolina, as I reflected on the power of the holy well in Glendalough, Ireland. I evidenced the same washing and cleansing power. And I was different. Jill Hammer captured this day when she wrote “How to Jump Off the Deep End in Thirteen Easy Steps”¹⁶:

1. Read the text.
2. Chew the text into bits. Begin looking for God. Look in places no one told you to look.
3. If someone tells you a story, turn it upside down and look at it that way.
4. Notice where the mothers are absent. Write them in. Make other people read what you wrote.
5. Find poems women have written. Hide them in your Bible. If someone asks what they are, say they are holy.
6. Pretend not to be invisible. Point out when an immutable law put a crick in your neck. Repeat until you get tired.
7. Notice the slow pace of change. Start talking to trees.
8. Read myths of the goddesses until you don't understand what is supposed to be wrong with them. Notice where the mothers are present.
9. Tell the rabbis in your head to take a long walk. Get to know yourself.
10. Go back to the text. Look for signs of God's absence.
11. Notice that the stones are not oppressing you. Observe that they are round and smooth. Say Hello to them.
12. A goddess will walk up to you and ask you to dance. Say yes.
13. Jump off the deep end.

Conclusion

Glenn Hinson was able to zig-zag a career from studies in the New Testament to Patristics to Spirituality, from the Ozarks to Louisville, from Rome to Richmond, and back to Louisville again. The common thread of his thoughts as evidenced in his wonderful life story, *Miracle of Grace*, is the search for the transcendent.

When he took his daily walks during his years in Richmond, he was tuning inward to the transcendent. When he spent time in his study either in front of his old typewriter or in front of his computer, he was searching for the transcendent. When he accompanied rowdy seminarians from Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond to Richmond Hill retreat center for two days of silence, he was helping them and us, the faculty leaders, know more about the transcendent God. When he cautioned a young, vulnerable

seminary against the temptations of a corporate model that favored transactions over transformation, he was helping all of us to keep looking for meaning that we cannot just see with our eyes or our spreadsheets. He was constantly guiding us to see beyond ourselves and in ourselves.

Glenn Hinson is a pilgrim in search of the transcendence of God. And may all of us close the laptop and slide the phone in the drawer and look closely at ourselves, each other, this beautiful world and find the presence of God in our very midst. For as A. M. Allchin, one of Hinson's colleagues from Wales, United Kingdom, writes, "yonder is the God within us." Thank you, Glenn Hinson, for leading me to the well. I am eternally grateful. **BH&HS**

Notes

1 Robert Morgen, "Rhymer Spring," in *The Strange Attraction: New and Selected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 15.

2 Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).

3 I was also reading Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes, *Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives* (New York: Crossroad, 1995); Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996: revised and updated 2016); and Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

4 I am personally thankful for Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing of the English Department of Wake Forest University for inviting me to present this work in a very nascent stage to the Wake Forest University Medieval Studies Group, October 19, 2006. In several discussions around the medieval studies seminar table and morning coffee in local restaurants from 2006–2009, I learned a great deal about the significance of place from these two scholars of the Middle Ages. Their insights are published as: "Anglo-Saxon Horizons: Places of the Mind in the Northumbrian Landscape," *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

5 *Ibid.*, 2.

6 Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. W. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954).

7 See R.A.S. McAlister, *Tara: A Pagan Sanctuary of Ancient Ireland* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), and Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1961), for a description of water beliefs in ancient Ireland.

8 Arthur Gribben, *Holy Wells and Sacred Water Sources in Britain and Ireland* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1992).

9 James Rattue, *The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context* (Great Britain: The Boydell Press, 1995), 11.

10 Gribben, *Holy Wells*, 15; see also W.G. Martin, "Well Worship and Its Concomitants," in *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1970 [1902]).

11 Walter L. and Mary G. Brenneman, *Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 86.

12 Whitley Stokes, trans., *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (London: Cyebra and Spottiswoode, 1887).

13 Patrick Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland* (Great Britain: Colin Smythe, 1980), 22.

14 George McLeod, clergyman in the Church of Scotland, and founder of the Iona Community, Iona, Scotland in 1938. Read also Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 74-93, for a fitting tribute to McLeod, a Celtic mystic and Presbyterian minister.

15 Dara O'Maolidhia, *Legends in the Landscape: A Pocket Guide to Arainn, Inish Mor, Aran Islands* (Inish Mor, Galway: Aisling Arann, 1998), 40. Read also Dara Molloy, *The Globalization of God: Celtic Christianity's Nemesis* (Inish Mor, Galway: Aisling Arann, 2009).

16 Jill Hammer, "How to Jump Off into the Deep End, in Thirteen Easy Steps," *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 22, 1 (Spring 2006): 83-84.



With deep gratitude to Dr. Glenn Hinson, for his scholarship, his influence, his pioneering work in Spirituality, and his commitment to Baptist Theological Seminary as the John F. Loftis Chair of Church History and Professor of Spirituality (1992-1999).

Thank you, Dr. Hinson

The Hinson window, now featured in the Chapel of BTSR, was donated by students, alums, and friends and expresses Dr. Hinson's life vision:

"God's love energies are continually pouring on us. We simply need to open like a flower to the morning sun, allowing God's love to fill us and flow through us to others."



**BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY at RICHMOND**

Light to Darkness:

From Gnosis to Agape in the Apophatic Imagery of Gregory of Nyssa



Gary R. Poe

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Light is often used in spiritual writings to depict truth, virtue, and even God. It is not uncommon for God to be symbolized by brilliant light in Scripture and in other writings. In the early church, Origen (185–254) symbolized God as light in contrast to the darkness of this world. Toward the end of the fourth century a further development of this theme was emerging that would impact the Eastern Church, as Gregory of Nyssa (335–394 CE) developed the images of light and darkness in a unique way.

Knowledge of God as symbolized by light and darkness in Gregory's writings stood in stark contrast to Origen's representation. In Gregory, the closer one moved toward God, the more one was in a state of ever-deepening darkness. Gregory's ideas were a spark in the development of the apophatic nature of Eastern spirituality that would last for generations. As Louis Bouyer points out, "Gregory of Nyssa was one of the most powerful and most original thinkers ever known in the history of the Church. He was also one of the spiritual writers who most deeply influenced the spirituality of Eastern monasticism."¹

The development of this dark/light symbolism is especially evident in Gregory's treatise, *The Life of Moses*.² By utilizing the three theophanies Moses experienced, Gregory was able to demonstrate how the Christian life is a progressive journey from light to darkness. But for Gregory this light/dark spectrum was not unique to the *Life of Moses*, for he developed it in other writings, including his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and his *Homilies on the Beatitudes*. Gregory's ultimate goal was to describe how Christians find union with God, which could only be attained based on purity of thought, as represented in the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8 KJV). Therefore Gregory presented, in the *Life of Moses*, the process Christians undergo as they make progress toward God.

For Gregory, union with God did not represent some sort of heavenly knowledge (*gnosis*), as was the case with most writers of his time, but was more concerned with following and loving God. Vladimir Lossky explains how Gregory's light-to-darkness development focused more on the love of God: "If God appears as light and then as darkness, this means—for Gregory—that there is no vision of the divine essence and that union is presented as a path which goes beyond vision, *theoria*, beyond intelligence, [to] the area where knowledge is suppressed and love alone remains, or rather where *gnosis* becomes *agape*."³

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory developed the process by which the Christian moves toward perfection, and ultimately the experience of God's *agape*. This paper will show that the transition from light to darkness in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* symbolizes the eternal nature of the Christian pilgrimage toward perfection. This will be accomplished by discussing Gregory's influences, methodology, and use of three stages to symbolize the growth in the Christian life. Gregory wrote: "Let us put forth Moses as our example for life in our treatise. First we shall go through in outline his life as we have learned it from divine Scriptures. Then we shall seek out the spiritual understanding which corresponds to the history in order to obtain suggestions of virtue. Through such understanding we may come to know the perfect life for men."⁴

Influences

Gregory did not write in a vacuum. He represented the thought of many philosophers and theologians who had significantly influenced him.

Neoplatonism emphasized a similar stress on purification to that of Gregory. It taught that purification led to deification, which entailed the removal of the passions and acquiring virtue.⁵ More specifically, there were similarities with philosophers such as Plotinus and Philo. In Plotinus there was an awareness of an ever-constant procession toward God. Gregory demonstrated an even deeper tie to Philo, for he was one of the first to picture the image of darkness of the Exodus “in the same sense (knowledge of God), as a condition of the knowledge of God.”⁶ Yet, as with Plotinus, the main difference between Philo and Gregory was the ultimate goal. Philo was more concerned with gnosis and union with the One. Gregory thoroughly Christianized this idea and presented the ultimate goal as following on the path of God, motivated by God’s overwhelming love.

Gregory’s most significant Christian influences came from the leaders of the Alexandrian school. Clement emphasized the unbridgeable gap between humanity and God in ways similar to Gregory’s approach. Clement picked up on Philo’s work “in order to emphasize the absolute transcendence of God, inaccessible to all intellectual searching.”⁷ But the most significant influence for Gregory came from Origen, who had also written on the life of Moses in his commentary on Exodus. Origen described the spiritual life as a developing process, as Gregory did, represented by the Hebrews’ journey through the desert. Danielou points out the most significant similarity in the two: “the idea that the spiritual life is an affair of continual progress.”⁸ Gregory’s understanding of the two processes of scriptural exegesis was also heavily dependent on Origen’s use of *historia* and *theoria*, but the similarities cease there. For although Origen and Gregory utilized similar hermeneutics, they were to arrive at significantly different conclusions.

First, Origen, as Philo, was more concerned with intellectual workings than spiritual experience. Even more significantly, especially for this paper, were the different ways light and darkness were symbolized in Origen in contrast to Gregory. Origen portrayed all knowledge of God as ever-increasing light. Although there is a limitation between what the created can perceive of God, what is perceived is in the form of light. Lossky describes this thought in Origen as “one tiny spark of light.”⁹ Nowhere in Origen is the idea of God as darkness present. Both Danielou and Lossky consider this a serious flaw in the thinking of Origen. Lossky states: “If in Origen darkness is a hindrance which separates us from the light of The Trinity, it seems that for Gregory of Nyssa, the cloud of Sinai represents, on the contrary, a mode

of communion with God which is more perfect and more advanced than the luminous vision in which God manifested Himself to Moses at the beginning of this way, in the burning bush."¹⁰

Gregory was influenced by Origen, but he was not restricted by Origen's thought. Instead he built upon it, carrying the Christianization of the platonic philosophies beyond even Origen. With Gregory, one does not find a simple reworking of another's thought, but a creative and unique contribution to understanding the Christian life.

Method

It is from the deeper meaning, *theoria*, that Gregory distilled his interpretations of the theophanies in the book of Exodus as demonstrating the nature of the perfect life. Gregory pictured the spiritual life as the ascent of a mountain. Using the story of Moses, he compared the spiritual life to Moses' climbing of Mount Sinai. This is not only apparent in *The Life* but is also demonstrated in his other works. In his *Homilies on the Beatitudes* Gregory stated it this way: "Who among those present is a disciple of the Word, and sufficiently so to ascend with Him from the low ground—from superficial and ignoble thoughts to the spiritual mountain of sublime contemplation?"¹¹ In his introduction to the homilies, Gregory explained that the order of the arrangement of the Beatitudes depicts a spiritual progression. This sequential nature of the virtuous Christian life is a common thread in most all of his mystical writings. The same sequential attitude to the Christian life is demonstrated in *The Life*. C. W. MacLeod explains:

He continually indicates how everything achieved by Moses is only a stage . . . The whole is also built round a distinct theology, which is briefly set forth in the preface; it is then successively unfolded in the three theophanies contained in the work, the Burning Bush and the two Ascents to Sinai. The meaning of the Burning Bush is that God is the only reality; the first Ascent to Sinai signifies that to see God is to see that he is utterly unknowable, and the second that God is infinite, that to see him is never to cease searching for him or following him.¹²

MacLeod's three-stage interpretation illustrates Gregory's own understanding of the spiritual life, as evidenced in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which overshadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves below all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she is cut off on all sides by the divine darkness. Now she leaves outside all that can be grasped by sense or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible. And here God is, as the Scriptures tell us in connection with Moses: *But Moses went to the dark cloud wherein God was.*¹³

Gregory therefore used his allegorical exegesis to portray the way of the perfect life by images of light and darkness drawn from the story of the life of Moses.

The Three Stages

The different representations of light, as seen in the theophanies of Moses' life, help describe the Christian pilgrimage toward perfection. These three theophanies represent the three stages of Gregory's depiction of the way of the perfect life. Danielou's analysis of these stages is helpful.

The first stage is based on the image of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), to which Danielou refers as the starting point: "Thus the first way, the way of light, is for beginners. In contrast with the darkness of sin, the supernatural life is an illumination."¹⁴ Gregory emphasized the turn from the ways of the world to the ways of God, as seen in the need for Moses to remove his sandals. With illumination comes the awareness that humanity is unworthy of God and must strive for purity. Gregory described the first

stage by analyzing the symbolism of the light from the burning bush: "That light teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light: Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul."¹⁵

It was also at the burning bush where Moses realized that God cannot be apprehended by the senses. This theophany becomes the basis for understanding the next theophany in the cloud. Gregory wrote: "It seems to me that at the time the Great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists."¹⁶ Thus with this first stage, the Christian becomes aware of the chasm between God and humanity.

The second stage in the development of the perfect life is represented by Moses' first ascent of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–20). At this stage the key element is entry into the cloud: Moses entered into the darkness of God. Danielou describes this second way as "characterized by this knowledge of God 'within the mirror of the soul' . . . It is an awareness of grace. . . . In this awareness, then, there is knowledge of God; but it is not a knowledge of His essence which is inaccessible, but rather an experience of His presence."¹⁷ For Gregory, it was only when Moses entered the cloud and his sensory perceptions were not able to guide him that he was then able to recognize the presence of God:

For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.¹⁸

The first two stages in the spiritual pilgrimage appear to be at odds with one another. First is illumination by the fire of the burning bush. The second level Gregory presented involves recognizing the presence of God when in darkness. Yet Gregory did not consider this a contradiction, but rather a natural part of the progression toward perfection: "Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated."¹⁹

Rowan Williams explains this transition from light to darkness as natural to the development of the Christian life: "Religious knowledge begins with illumination, the putting away of the destructive and imprisoning darkness of sin. . . . But as the soul or *nous* grows and progresses, it becomes more and more evident that the divine nature is *atheoretos*, 'not-to-be-looked-on': there is no illumination that can make the human subject capable of such a vision."²⁰

Thus it is quite clear that, unlike Origen, for Gregory the religious life is seen as a progression from light to darkness. It is by this darkness, Gregory explained, that Moses "then came to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension."²¹ Obviously, for Gregory in no way was the divine nature comprehensible to humanity. Gregory stated this in other of his writings as well. For example, in his *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, he reached a similar conclusion in his discussion of the sixth beatitude: "The Divine Nature, whatever It may be in Itself, surpasses every mental concept. For it is altogether inaccessible to reasoning and conjecture, nor has there been found any human faculty capable of perceiving the incomprehensible; for we cannot devise a means of understanding inconceivable things."²²

Gregory's favorite way to describe this inaccessibility in *The Life* was through the image of darkness, represented by Moses going into the cloud on Sinai. This is an advance from the original illumination represented in the burning bush. Vladimir Lossky sees this darkness as a higher union with God than the bush: "For St. Gregory of Nyssa, the darkness through which Moses penetrated to the summit of Sinai represents a form of communion with God, superior to the contemplation of the light of the burning bush in which God appeared to Moses at the beginning of his wanderings."²³ Thus the final step

is one from light ascending up the mountain into darkness. It is this transition that Danielou points to as representing Gregory's unique significance: "Thus the spiritual life is represented as moving from light to darkness. Paradoxical as this may at first seem, it is precisely Gregory's thought; and thus we may see at once his fundamental originality and, especially, his advance beyond Origen's position."²⁴

The next stage in the spiritual life is represented by the ascent of Moses on the mountain found in Exodus 33, where he asked if he may look upon the glory of the Lord. It is at this stage that Moses recognized that what is important is not seeing God, nor knowledge (*gnosis*) about God, but following God in a personal and loving relationship. Danielou's description of this stage is helpful: "The third way is the knowledge of God in the darkness. . . It means that to man's natural powers the knowledge of the divine essence is impossible. . . It expresses the fact that the divine essence remains inaccessible even to the mind that has been enlightened by grace, and that the awareness of this inaccessibility constitutes the highest form of contemplation."²⁵

Gregory used this last theophany to represent the infinite nature of progression toward the perfect life of the Christian: "This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, since no limit to the good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the good brought to an end because it is satisfied."²⁶ This desire is portrayed in Moses, who asked in Exodus 33:18 if he could not see the glory of God. Andrew Louth explains how darkness heightens this longing for God: "Plunged into the dark, we feel terror and giddiness: the soul which comes close to God finds itself as it were on the edge of 'the slippery, steep rock that affords no basis for our thought' . . . In the dark we can form no finished conception of what is there: this experience is interpreted by Gregory in terms of an endless longing for God, continually satisfied yet always yearning for more, which the soul knows that embarks on the search for the unknowable God."²⁷

Moses' longing for a vision of God could not be quenched, so Gregory gave us God's response. The only way one will see God will be to follow God forever. This is represented in Exodus by the phrases "You shall see my back" (33:23) and "the Lord passed by in front of Him" (34:6). It is helpful to quote Gregory at length here:

So Moses, who eagerly seeks to behold God, is now taught how he can behold Him: to follow God wherever he might lead is to behold God. His passing by signifies his guiding the one who follows, for someone who does not know the way cannot complete his journey safely in any other way than by following behind his guide. He who leads, then, by his guidance shows the way to the one following. He who follows will not turn aside from the right way if he always keeps the back of his leader in view.

For he who moves to one side or brings himself to face his guide assumes another direction for himself than the one his guide shows him. Therefore, he says to the one who is led, My face is not to be seen, that is, "Do not face your guide." If he does so, his course will certainly be in the opposite direction, for good does not look good in the face, but follows it.

What is perceived to be its opposite is face to face with the good, for what looks virtue in the face is evil. But virtue is not perceived in contrast to virtue. Therefore, Moses does not look God in the face, but looks at his back; for whoever looks at him face to face shall not live, as the divine voice testifies, man cannot see the face of the Lord and live.

You see how it is so great a thing to learn how to follow God, that after those lofty ascents and awesome and glorious theophanies virtually at the end of his life, the man who has learned to follow behind God is scarcely considered worthy of this grace.²⁸

The third stage, a second darkness, leads the Christian's way to perfection on a never-ending journey. As one continues to climb the mountain of God, the soul's appetite is continually whetted, and driven on by an unsatisfied desire. But in this quest one is made aware of the love of God, which keeps drawing the Christian in, leading onward and upward. Lossky explains that this spiritual ascent leads one to realize even more the incomprehensibility of the divine nature: "Filled with an ever-increasing desire the soul grows without ceasing, goes forth from itself, reaches out beyond itself, and, in so doing, is filled with yet greater longing. Thus the ascent becomes infinite, the desire insatiable."²⁹

Gregory of Nyssa, by using the symbolism of light and darkness, pointed the way to the perfect life. In the transition from light to darkness, one is led to an ever-increasing desire to follow God, and through this, is able to realize God's personal care and love for humanity. Gregory's *Life of Moses* is in agreement with Rowan Williams' description of faith: "Faith is always, not only in this life, a longing and trust directed away from itself towards an object to which it will never be adequate, which it will never comprehend."³⁰

Reflections

Gregory of Nyssa, in his *Life of Moses*, ably demonstrated how the transition from light to darkness symbolizes the Christian pilgrimage toward perfection. Although he utilized both Christian and pagan philosophies, he was able to make a most unique contribution to Christian spirituality. There are several ideas worth reflecting upon that can be drawn from Gregory's work.

First and foremost is Gregory's emphasis on the progression of spiritual maturity from light to darkness. This element of Gregory's work provides a significant difference from what had been suggested prior to his thought. Platonic philosophers and the Gnostics, although assuming a significant chasm between humanity and the One, believed that with *gnosis*, the soul would be freed from the body and it would eventually ascend back to unity with the One. This ascent moved on toward ever-increasing light. Yet Gregory totally transformed this idea. Not only was the apprehension of God not possible, but there also was no end to the spiritual journey as one moved toward God. This idea of incomprehensibility, found in the imagery of darkness, was to be the basis for the apophatic notion of theology that has had many great proponents after Gregory.

Also significant, along this line of thought, is the emphasis on grace and love. Instead of a focus on *gnosis* or knowledge of God, Gregory wanted to emphasize God's grace as experienced in *agape* or love. While Gregory started with illumination and light as symbolized by the burning bush, the pursuit of the Christian life does not end there. It progresses further into darkness where the Christian experiences and follows the loving God that cannot be "known" through the human sense experience.

Hence, we have in Gregory's *Life of Moses* a most significant contribution to the pursuit of the Christian life. By utilizing an apparent contradiction, the progression from light to darkness, he was able to emphasize the grace of

God in the spiritual pilgrimage in ways that no one before him had been able to do. In this progression he emphasized a focus on the transformation from gnosis to agape. This creative genius is reflected in its continued significance for the church today in recognizing the transcendent yet loving God who calls us on an eternal pilgrimage to love and perfection. **BH&HS**

Notes

1 Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, History of Christian Spirituality, vol. 1 (New York: Desclee Co., 1960), 351.

2 Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham H. Malherbe & Everett Ferguson, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

3 Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse, in the Library of Orthodox Theology, John Meyendorff, ed. (London: Faith Press, 1963), 33.

4 Gregory, *Life*, 33, para. 15.

5 Hilda C. Graef, in the Introduction, *Gregory of Nyssa's The Beatitudes*, trans. Hilda C. Graef, Ancient Christian Writers series (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1954), 18.

6 Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd., 1975), 32-33.

7 *Ibid.*, 33.

8 Jean Danielou, *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (London: Sheed and Ward., 1955), 303.

9 Lossky, *Vision*, 51.

10 Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, 37.

11 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, trans. Hilda C. Graef, Homily 6, 85.

12 C. W. MacLeod, "Allegory and Mysticism In Origen and Gregory of Nyssa," *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 22, 2 (Oct. 1972), 375.

13 Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, ed. and trans. Jean Danielou, trans. Herbert Musurillo (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 247.

14 *Ibid.*, Introduction, 23.

15 Gregory, *Life*, para. 22, 59-60.

16 *Ibid.*, par. 24, 60.

17 Danielou, *Glory*, 24.

18 Gregory, *Life*, para. 162, 95.

19 *Ibid.*, par. 162, 95.

20 Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1979), 59.

21 Gregory, *Life*, para. 164, 95.

22 Gregory, *Beatitudes*, Homily 6, 146.

23 Lossky, *Vision*, 73.

24 Danielou, *Glory*, 23.

25 *Ibid.*, 26.

26 Gregory, *Life*, para. 239, 116.

27 Andrew Louth, "The Cappadocians," in *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1986), 167.

28 Gregory, *Life*, paras. 252-55, 119-20.

29 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1957), 35.

30 Williams, *Wound*, 56.

Contemplation in a World of Action:

*Thomas Merton, Douglas Steere, E. Glenn Hinson, and
The Academy for Spiritual Formation*



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Two major threads that run through the life and ministry of E. Glenn Hinson are ecumenism and spiritual formation. They run together, intertwining and reinforcing one another. He would describe them as a calling within a calling¹ that were often a saving grace for him personally and professionally through the relationships that were formed. But his involvement in both spheres has gone beyond personal benefit and has contributed greatly to the health, wholeness, and future of Baptist life and of the church universal.

In this essay, I will outline two key relationships—namely with Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, and Quaker contemplative scholar, Douglas Steere—that shaped Hinson and propelled these areas of his career. Then I will describe how the threads of ecumenism and spiritual formation in Hinson's life and ministry intersected, influenced, and are being systemically carried forth through a ministry called The Academy for Spiritual Formation. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the mysterious workings of grace unfolding over time to accomplish something abundantly more than Hinson,

Merton, or Steere may have asked or imagined as they were going about their individual lives.²

Vatican II and Thomas Merton

Timing is everything. In January 1959, newly elected Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convene the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, which officially began in October 1962. It signaled a new era for ecumenism as the Roman Catholic Church opened to modernity and to greater conversation and relationship with other Christian traditions. This was happening just as Glenn Hinson was shifting the focus of his scholarship and teaching from New Testament to church history (specializing in Patristics) at the behest of the administration at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.³ The 1960s were also a time when secular theology and the “God is dead” movement were gaining a lot of attention and energy.⁴ These conditions formed the soil in which the seeds of Hinson’s calling within a calling were planted and germinated.

Glenn has often written and told the story of how he met Thomas Merton, but it bears repeating here for context and because it was so foundational. As he was teaching his first church history class in the fall of 1960, Hinson decided to take his students to the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery about fifty miles from Louisville. He wanted to give his students an experience of medieval Christianity. He achieved the intended result, but after touring the monastery, they were turned over to Father Louis (Thomas Merton’s monastic name) who shared with them about prayer and the contemplative life. Merton surprised the group with his charisma, intelligence, humor, and authenticity. He did not fit their stereotyped expectations of a monk. One of the students asked, “What’s a smart fellow like you doing throwing his life away in a place like this?” Merton grinned and replied, “I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation.”⁵

The proposition that someone could conceive of prayer as his vocation was radical to Hinson. As a Baptist, he was enculturated to a more activist belief and posture that the Christian’s vocation is to be the hands and feet of Christ. The idea that prayer could and should have a more central role struck a deep chord with Glenn as he realized the state of the world was desperate if it depended entirely on human effort.⁶

Hinson and Merton developed a friendship after that first fortuitous meeting. A few weeks later, during a trip to Louisville, Merton visited with Hinson and fellow faculty members at Southern Seminary. Hinson continued to take students to Gethsemani and to meet with Merton every semester until Merton died in December of 1968. Even after Merton's death, Hinson regularly took students and groups to Gethsemani to expose them to the contemplative life and Merton's legacy. While Merton was still alive, he began having small gatherings in his hermitage to examine and discuss critical social issues of the day, and he often invited Hinson to those gatherings.⁷

Merton's personhood more than his brilliance was the root of Hinson's relationship with the monk. Hinson knew him as friend and mentor first and foremost. Not until after Merton's death did Hinson begin to read and study seriously the already considerable volumes of Merton's writings that were available at that point. He did so only because he began to receive invitations from Catholic and Protestant groups to talk about Merton (which, incidentally, also furthered Hinson's ecumenical engagement). When Glenn does speak and write about Merton, the personal influence and importance of their relationship is evident. He focuses on Merton the person rather than on Merton the object of study, and Hinson's goal is always to pass on what he learned from this mentor and wisdom teacher. In an article for a publication celebrating Merton's 100th birthday Hinson wrote, "In Merton I found a fellow struggler who had wrestled with the deepest issues about God that we confront in life and put me in touch with a wisdom formulated and preserved by a centuries-long fellowship of strugglers in the contemplative tradition."⁸

This relationship affected the trajectory of Hinson's teaching and helped shape his philosophy of how he approached teaching. Soon after that first visit to Gethsemani, Merton sent Hinson copies of the manuals he created for teaching novices at the monastery. Those became the inspiration for Hinson's first foray into teaching spirituality, an elective course called "Classics of Christian Devotion," in 1963.⁹ The next year the demand for the course was so high, the registrar asked him to offer multiple sections—and even that left a long waiting list.¹⁰ Clearly, he had tapped into a felt need of the students. Hinson observed, "They wanted and needed not just information; they wanted and needed formation, and so did I, if we were to be instruments through which God would carry out the purpose of the church and its ministry."¹¹ Hinson developed a conviction that his work was to teach students, not subjects. His students confirmed this approach. Reflecting in

his autobiography on letters from former students, Hinson writes, “Seldom do such letters mention a brilliant lecture I gave . . . or an anecdote I told. No, without fail they remember me as *a person connected with their formation as persons*. Emphasis on persons and personalism as a philosophy of life may help to explain the rather curious path my career has taken—New Testament . . . church history . . . spirituality.”¹²

In a time when secular theology was getting a lot of attention, Merton offered Hinson, and consequently generations of Hinson's students, a very different model by embodying the contemplative life where communion with God was at the very center of personal and social transformation. It was a vision of the life of faith as integrated rather than compartmentalized, a vision where spirituality was imbued in every aspect of life because God's presence of love was the ground of being from which all of life's activities flowed. This became a core facet in Hinson's own life and teaching. Hinson surmised that Merton's primary message was the importance of contemplation in a world of action and that the contemplative life was not limited to monks, but was available to all persons.¹³ Hinson has spent much of his career seeking to help others understand how to become contemplatives in a world of action outside the walls of a monastery.

Douglas Steere and the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality

Alongside Merton, Hinson names Douglas Steere as one of his two main teachers and mentors.¹⁴ In fact, he speaks of Steere as a father figure¹⁵ who “confirmed what was deepest in me [Hinson] and helped me to realize the gift of God in me.”¹⁶ Hinson's first impression of Douglas Steere came when Steere gave a set of lectures at Southern Seminary in the spring of 1969. He spoke on the importance of studying the devotional classics. As already noted, Glenn had been teaching a course on the devotional classics. The way Steere expressed their value and wisdom provided deep affirmation for Hinson that he was doing something of significance.¹⁷

Hinson describes Douglas Steere as an ecumenical pioneer.¹⁸ A peek at Steere's biography shows that this assertion is no exaggeration. Steere's ecumenical involvement was prolific and productive. He was chosen to represent the Religious Society of Friends as an official observer-delegate at Vatican II, where he made meaningful contributions and contacts.¹⁹ Perhaps

the most lasting fruit of that service began during the second session of Vatican II.

On October 10, 1963, Steere and Godfrey Diekmann, a Benedictine monk at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, had a conversation at a coffeehouse about the need for opportunities where Protestants could have real exchanges with Roman Catholics about the nurture of the inner life. That casual exchange led to the two men co-founding the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality (EIOS), which held its first meeting August 31–September 6, 1965.²⁰

The institute brought together leading authorities in spirituality from Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions to share experiences of various contemplative communities and to have conversation on the frontiers of spirituality. The constituency changed over time, but after that first meeting, the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality continued gathering annually through 2007, varying locations among Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox retreat centers.²¹

Steere's brand of ecumenism distinguished itself in that it was "an ecumenism rooted in a life of prayer."²² As the author of Steere's biography, Hinson writes, "The question Douglas Steere put to ecumenists was whether or not the ecumenical movement had done anything to deepen the inner life, the life of prayer. Action clarifies prayer, but prayer cleanses action and restores its frame. Human beings possess a built-in need for prayer, and the ecumenical movement will have little future if it fails to help them find it."²³ That sounds like Merton's insistence on contemplation in a world of action.

Steere and Hinson began forming a more personal relationship in the early 1970s when they both ended up providing leadership at a retreat in Louisville. At the retreat Steere told Hinson he was going to recommend that he be invited to the next meeting of the EIOS, and Hinson became a member in 1973.²⁴ Hinson has his own very impressive and extensive résumé of ecumenical engagement, but he names EIOS as "the most sustaining group he participated in" and one that provided a central role both personally and professionally, including supporting the emphasis on spiritual formation in his work.²⁵ Hinson says that in this community, "he found *companions of the inner way* who stretched [his] mind and heart and gave [him] rare encouragement."²⁶ Much of what made that group so vital is that when they gathered, in addition to presenting papers and discussing scholarly work, the members shared what was going on in their inner and outer lives, prayed together,

and cared for one another beyond the meetings through calls and correspondence.²⁷ They shared their lives as fellow followers of Christ. Hinson reflects, "I knew that I did not walk alone through a dark and menacing valley."²⁸

Merton initiated Hinson into spirituality and the contemplative/inner life. Steere nurtured and supported Hinson on that journey and gave him a community of practice. As already noted, Hinson's relationship with Steere went far beyond involvement in EIOS. Steere took a personal, sustained interest and played a key role in Glenn's ongoing formation as a person even as Hinson was playing a part in forming the lives of Baptist students and many others. Like Merton, Steere was a living embodiment of God's love because he sought and modeled a life where communion with God was the source of transformation for himself and the world.

EIOS, The Upper Room, and the Birth of The Academy for Spiritual Formation

In 1935, during the Great Depression, what was then the Methodist Episcopal Church began publishing a daily devotional magazine called *The Upper Room* as a way to re-establish the practice of daily prayer and Bible study in individual homes. Ecumenical from the outset, it was intended not only for Methodists but also as a gift to the larger church, with content that was nondoctrinal and inclusive. The magazine is still in publication, having expanded to become the world's most widely-read daily devotional guide. It is available in 35 languages in more than 100 countries.²⁹ The devotional magazine gave birth to an organization of the same name that over time began publishing other periodicals and also books on prayer and spirituality.

By the mid-70s, The Upper Room had begun expanding into programs and other forms of ministry beyond publications. Maxie Dunnam served as the world editor and publisher (essentially the CEO) of the organization, and Danny Morris, director of developing ministries, was charged with leading the program arm of The Upper Room.³⁰ Dunnam, a member of the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality, was impressed with what he experienced there, and upon returning from his first meeting with EIOS reported his surprise to Morris that "they didn't talk about evangelism, church growth, missions, or even 'coming to Christ.' They talked about spiritual formation: ways and means by which persons not only grow, but mature in Christ."³¹ They mused over the centrality of "coming to Christ" in their own tradition and how they

had always longed for something beyond that. They realized that spiritual formation was that something beyond. From that point, Morris began to envision The Upper Room as a place that could provide resources for deeper spiritual formation and maturing in the faith.³²

The seeds for a new dream were planted, and took root because the desire for spiritual formation was personal for Danny Morris, as illustrated by this testimony in his spiritual biography:

I remember my dry period when I was doing so many things and not taking intentional time for my inner work. I needed a depth and reality I didn't have. The study of theology had been wonderful in seminary, but it was not enough. Activity was not enough. My level of achievement was not enough. After twenty years in the ministry, I was desperate for authentic Christian spirituality. I felt uneasy because, as a pastor, I had been in a position of being a spiritual leader, and I was not much of a spiritual leader. This caused me to have a good deal of frustration and pain. Instead of a cognitive approach to God, I wanted to experience a personal relationship with God.³³

In 1977 Morris was granted a three-month study leave. As he prepared for this time, he held the question, "Where can I spend a few months on a study leave focusing on my own spiritual journey in a concentrated way?"³⁴ Episcopal spiritual leader and author Morton Kelsey responded as Morris feared he might, "The sad fact is, you can't find what you want anywhere in this country."³⁵ Kelsey advised him to work with a spiritual guide to devise a personal plan for spiritual growth, so Morris recruited Egon Gerdes for that task.³⁶ They created a pilgrimage of experiences and conversations with the spiritualities of other traditions to help Morris break out of his religious provincialism.³⁷

During his leave Morris visited the Abbey of Gethsemani and prayed the hours with the Trappists (a reform of the Benedictine tradition), had conversations with two former Carmelite priests, attended a camp meeting in the South, and visited the House of Prayer at the Cenacle Retreat Center near Chicago where people came to do Ignatian silent retreats. In addition, Morris experienced what he described as "metro spirituality" when he went to Marble Collegiate Church in Manhattan. Danny and his wife, Rosalie,

spent time at Indiana's Saint Meinrad Archabbey, another Benedictine monastic setting. Morris also took a course in journaling with psychologist Ira Progoff.³⁸

After his sabbatical Morris began to wonder, "Where do lay persons go to specialize in their faith journey when seminary is not an option? Where do clergy go to sharpen the focus of spirituality in their ministry? Are we all (lay and clergy) faced with 'putting something together' and doing our own thing?"³⁹ In response, Morris began to formulate and talk to colleagues about an idea for The Upper Room to create a spiritual academy. He says, "I was not working on the Academy for other people or in order to save the church. I was working on it because my personal spiritual need was so great, and lots of people were telling me they also needed what I was looking for."⁴⁰

After about a year of working with this idea within The Upper Room, Morris assembled an ecumenical consortium of spiritual leaders to help him develop and refine the design for what became The Academy for Spiritual Formation. He called the group the Academy Advisory Board. It is important to note that many of the persons in this consortium were members of the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality, which had provided the first seeds for this vision. The Advisory Board included Douglas Steere, Rueben Job, Tilden Edwards, Bishop Lance Webb, Jack Seymour, Flora Wuellner, Doris Donnelly, Morton Kelsey, Bishop Calvin McConnell, Roy Fairchild, Bob Tuttle, Bishop James Armstrong, Richard Foster, John Mogabgab, Maxie Dunnam, John Meyers, Ezra Earl Jones, Robert Wood, Elise Shoemaker Eslinger, Janice Grana, and Henry Masters.⁴¹

Over the course of four years the Academy Advisory Board members conducted multiple rounds of consultation via written correspondence, telephone conversations, and in-person meetings to create the Academy model. They operated by a principle of spiritual guidance and discernment and made decisions regarding the design by consensus rather than voting.⁴² They sought to create a program to "offer lay and clergy persons an in-depth opportunity to intentionally resource their spiritual formation in a holistic and ongoing manner."⁴³ A document from a subgroup discussing observable outcomes states, "We wanted to affirm that above and beyond everything else, we could see in the graduates from the Academy, people who had been formed in the mind and the spirit of Christ. People who had become more equipped to equip others for growth in faith and witness in the world."⁴⁴

The ambitious and in-depth model that emerged consists of a community of lay and clergy persons gathering at a retreat center for five days in residence. They do this eight times (once every three months) over the course of two years for a total of 40 days in residence (all at the same retreat center). During the sessions they practice a modified Benedictine rhythm of corporately praying the hours. Two topics of study are provided at each session, taught by high quality faculty from various traditions who are experienced in the spiritual life. There are times of silence and solitude, small and large group sharing, rest, exercise, and fellowship. Between sessions participants complete reading assignments, practice spiritual disciplines, and seek to integrate what they are experiencing during sessions.⁴⁵ A leadership team of five or six persons administers and guides each session and also oversees the life of the community. Over the eight sessions participants are exposed to a comprehensive curriculum that includes 16 courses (each taught by a different faculty person) covering a variety of forms of Christian spirituality as it has been practiced throughout history.⁴⁶

On May 17, 1983, after more than five years of prayer, study, and discernment, this model came to life as the first Two-Year Academy for Spiritual Formation was launched at Scarritt College (now Scarritt Bennett Center) in Nashville, Tennessee.⁴⁷ It was a great success, and more academies followed. At the time of this writing, 39 Two-Year Academies have been launched in multiple regions of the United States, and at least one new Two-Year Academy begins each year. As an ongoing ministry of The Upper Room, the Academy has also evolved and continues to expand. In 1985 the first Five-Day Academy was held in Mitchell, South Dakota, as a more accessible, short-term version of the model.⁴⁸ Since then, hundreds of Five-Day and other adaptations of the Academy model have been held throughout the United States and in seven other countries, with more in process.⁴⁹

The Academy articulates its mission as creating safe space for people to be in communion with God, self, others, and creation for the sake of the world.⁵⁰ Hinson has said, "Academies come pretty close to achieving what Bernard of Clairvaux wanted Cistercian monasteries to be—*scholae caritatis*, 'Schools of Love.'"⁵¹ It is a realization of Thomas Merton's vision that contemplation in a world of action is not limited only to those with a monastic vocation.

Glenn Hinson and The Academy for Spiritual Formation

Given the critical role Douglas Steere and the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality played in giving birth to The Academy for Spiritual Formation, it should be no surprise that Glenn Hinson has been heavily involved in and made significant contributions to the Academy over the years and also to other important spiritual formation endeavors by The Upper Room.⁵² In February 1985 Hinson served as faculty at the final session of the first Two-Year Academy.⁵³ He became a favorite presenter for academies and has taught a variety of topics at 19 Two-Year Academies and at more than 20 Five-Day or other adaptations of the Academy.⁵⁴ In 2003 Jerry Haas, hired in 1999 to succeed Morris as Academy director, asked Hinson to provide the keynote address at a banquet celebrating the Academy's 25th anniversary.⁵⁵ In addition, Stephanie Ford and Loyd Allen, two of Hinson's former students, have served on the Academy Advisory Board and as Academy faculty.

One area where Hinson influenced the Academy is personal to this author. In 2004 I enrolled at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky and took Hinson's course, "Ministers as Spiritual Guides." In that course he introduced me to Thomas Merton and took my classmates and me to the Abbey of Gethsemani just as he had been doing with his students for decades. Hinson and my spiritual director, Rick Landon, opened me up to the world of spiritual formation and contemplative spirituality—and I was hooked. Noticing my hunger, they independently told me about the Academy for Spiritual Formation, and in 2006 I became a participant in Two-Year Academy #25 in Alabama. When Jerry Haas was promoted to a new role at The Upper Room in 2010, he recruited me to be the third director of the Academy, a position I continue to hold. Having been mentored by Hinson and having inherited his love for Merton, I hope to carry the imprint of both wisdom teachers as I provide leadership for the Academy.

Passing It On

At the final session of a Two-Year Academy, participants are commissioned to take up the mantle of God's Spirit and pass it on by embodying the love of Christ for the people in their lives. During the commissioning service the leadership team prays the words of Ephesians 3:20 over each person: "May the power of God working in you accomplish abundantly more than all you can ask or imagine." May it be so for all who seek formation in Christ. **BH&HS**

Notes

- 1 E. Glenn Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace: An Autobiography* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012), 157.
- 2 Paraphrasing Ephesians 3:20.
- 3 Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace*, 123-124.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 137-138, 160-169.
- 5 E. Glenn Hinson, "O Happy Chance!" in *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope: Reflections in Honor of His Centenary (1915-2015)*, ed. Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), 211.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 212.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace*, 138.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 135, (*italics mine*).
- 13 E. Glenn Hinson, "Thomas Merton, My Brother: The Impact of Thomas Merton on My Life and Thought," *The Merton Annual*, vol. 11, ed. George A. Kilcourse Jr. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 90-91.
- 14 Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace*, 320.
- 15 E. Glenn Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things: A Biography of Douglas V. Steere* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill; Upper Room Books, 1998), xiv. Hinson had grown up with very little contact with his natural father, who left the family when Glenn was only seven.
- 16 *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 17 *Ibid.*, xii.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 182-188.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 189-191.
- 21 Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace*, 352.
- 22 Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things*, 196.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.
- 25 Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace*, 170, 253, 337.
- 26 Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things*, xiii, (*italics mine*)
- 27 Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace*, 276.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 "Our History," The Upper Room, <https://www.upperroom.org/about/history>, accessed 30 November 2017.
- 30 Nancy Pfaff, *Light & Fire: A Spiritual Biography of Danny E. Morris* (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 2002), 77.
- 31 Danny E. Morris, unpublished paper, "I Remember When We Were Introduced to the Concept of Spiritual Formation," 1 (*emphasis in original document*). This paper was given to me by Danny when I asked him to write down some reflections on the beginning of The Academy for Spiritual Formation.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Danny Morris, quoted in Pfaff, *Light & Fire*, 84-85.
- 34 Danny E. Morris, unpublished paper, "Birthing an Academy," 1.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Egon Gerdes's name as Morris' sabbatical spiritual guide comes from verbal conversation with Danny Morris and an unpublished paper Morris wrote, "My Three-Month Sabbatical."

Gerdes was a German-born United Methodist pastor and professor of historical theology who taught courses in spirituality and the life of prayer at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. See <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9744.1968.tb00137.x/full> and <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/129168790/>, accessed 5 February 2018.

37 Pfaff, *Light & Fire*, 86.

38 *Ibid.*, 86-87. The experiences with the Trappists and Benedictines seem to have made the greatest impression on Morris, as the Benedictine influence is evident in shaping what would become The Academy for Spiritual Formation.

39 Morris, "Birthing an Academy," 2.

40 Pfaff, *Light & Fire*, 87.

41 Letter from Danny E. Morris to United Methodist bishops announcing the first Academy, 8 September 1982. Six of these persons became the leadership team for the first Two-Year Academy: Rueben Job, John Mogabgab, Elise Eslinger, Robert Wood, Henry Masters, and Janice Grana. Many of the other advisory board members served as faculty in the first Two-Year Academy and beyond, including Douglas Steere.

42 Morris, "Birthing an Academy," 2.

43 *Ibid.*, 3.

44 John S. Mogabgab, unpublished notes from the first Academy Advisory Board meeting, 22 September 1982.

45 For a more complete and detailed description of the Academy model, see the Academy Prospectus document found at <http://academy.upperroom.org/about>.

46 John Mogabgab, Henri Nouwen's research assistant at Yale, was the chief architect of this curriculum.

47 Morris, "Birthing an Academy," 3.

48 Danny E. Morris and Jerry P. Haas, unpublished document, "Upper Room Ministries and The Academy for Spiritual Formation," 2008.

49 The Academy has been hosted in South Africa, Korea, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Russia, Singapore/Malaysia, Bolivia, the United Kingdom, and throughout the United States. It is offered in multiple languages (Spanish, Korean, Russian, and English).

50 From the Academy Promotional Folder. Available from the Academy office by emailing academy@upperroom.org.


51 Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace*, 354.

52 *Ibid.*, 353. In addition to involvement with the Academy, Hinson frequently wrote for the Upper Room's *Weavings* journal and served on its advisory board throughout its more than 30-year history. He also wrote for the *Companions in Christ* series of small group resources, and the book, *Spiritual Preparation for Christian Leadership*, both published by The Upper Room.

53 Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace*, 273.

54 *Ibid.*, 389, 397, 408-409.

55 *Ibid.*, 354.

	<h2>MEMBERSHIP</h2> <p>www.baptisthistory.org</p>	
Name _____	USA	INT
Institution _____	1-Year Individual	<input type="checkbox"/> \$40 <input type="checkbox"/> \$55
Address _____	1-Year Student	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30 <input type="checkbox"/> \$50
Phone _____	1-Year Senior [60 +]	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30 <input type="checkbox"/> \$50
E-mail _____	1-Year Institutional	<input type="checkbox"/> \$60 <input type="checkbox"/> \$80

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