

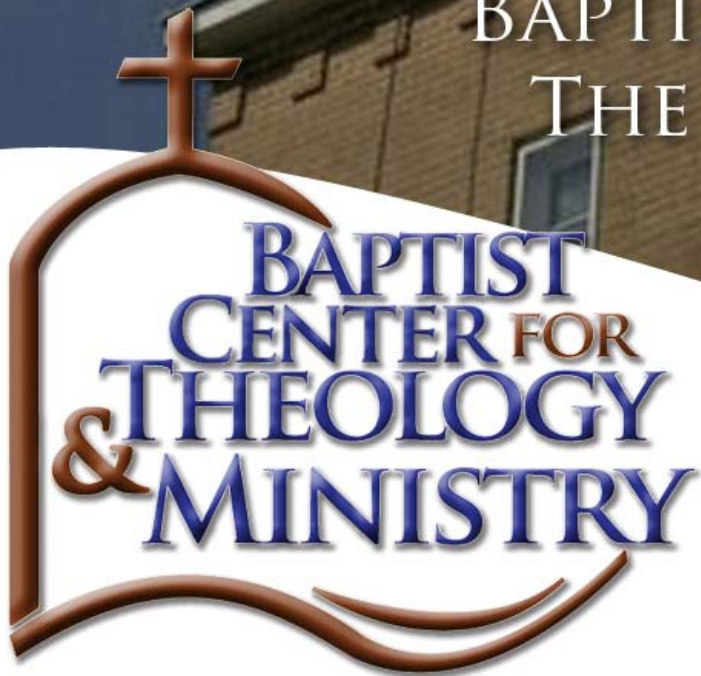
VOL. 4 •

KATRINA ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THE JOURNAL

FOR BAPTIST THEOLOGY
& MINISTRY

BAPTISTS MINISTERING IN
THE MIDST OF DISASTER



A RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF NEW ORLEANS BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE JOURNAL

FOR BAPTIST THEOLOGY
& MINISTRY

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Photo by Dr. Charlie Ray

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The Baptist Center for Theology & Ministry is a research institute of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The seminary is located at 3939 Gentilly Blvd., New Orleans, LA 70126. For more information about NOBTS, please visit our website, www.nobts.edu or call 1-800-662-8701, ext. 3303.

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THE JOURNAL FOR BAPTIST THEOLOGY & MINISTRY

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Upcoming topics for future issues of the *Journal* include “Proclaiming the Gospel,” “Baptist Theology and Polity,” and “Baptists on Mission.” Contributors are invited to submit articles or book reviews on all topics appropriate for these themes or other issues consistent with the mission of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry.

All past issues of the *Journal for Baptist Theology* are available online at **baptistcenter.com**.

Send your submissions for **articles** and **book reviews** to:

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or, you can send a digital submission to **slemke@nobts.edu**.



EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION: BAPTISTS MINISTERING IN THE MIDST OF DISASTER

DR. STEVE LEMKE

ACTING DIRECTOR, BAPTIST CENTER FOR THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

On August 29, 2005, the greatest natural disaster in American history struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Some of the greatest devastation from hurricane Katrina was on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where the storm surge wiped out houses and businesses anywhere near the Gulf Coast, and hurricane-force winds crashed tree limbs into power lines and houses, causing even greater devastation. New Orleans, which is 80 miles inland, suffered only modest damage from the hurricane Katrina winds. The New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary campus, for example, could have been operational again within a week or two.

And then the levees broke. In many ways, Katrina was more the greatest engineering disaster in American history than the greatest natural disaster. Water poured through the broken levees like a mud tsunami, demolishing hundreds of houses in its wake. The flood waters flowed into many residential areas in New Orleans, submerging many houses five to eight feet deep. Although the academic classrooms, offices, and library of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary suffered only minimal flooding, the houses and apartments of residential areas were flooded. This was not the kind of flood that receded in a day or two, but the waters continued to flood the houses and businesses for weeks. The Seminary family was not able to even step on campus until over a month later, when in early October many of us attempted to salvage what if any possessions we could. My own house was flooded with about four feet of water, and at least another foot of mold grew above that. It was impossible to salvage my Jeep Cherokee in the garage, much less most of our appliances, clothes, towels, furniture, books, electronics, and on and so forth. Like most Seminary faculty and students living in first floor apartments, we lost most of our possessions.

Each family went through a nightmare for the next few months, dealing with insurance and FEMA claims, finding a place to live, getting clothes, helping our children get adjusted to new settings in which they had no friends, enrolling them in new schools that had already begun the school year, and starting over again. Some of us relocated to the Atlanta area, living over five hundred miles away from our families. It was a horrible experience that we pray never have to go through again. Many in Southwest Louisiana and Southeast Texas had similar experiences a few weeks later from the impact of hurricane Rita.

But in the midst of this tragedy, we saw the hand of God at work. Baptists from all over the nation expressed an outpouring of the love of God not only to Seminary faculty and students, but to thousands of New Orleans refugees in ways that could only make us weep gratefully. Baptists and other Christians provided us with clothes, places to live, books, financial assistance, and their prayers. The stories of assistance by local churches, associations, camps, disaster relief teams, state conventions, and SBC convention entities are simply too many to recount.

Southern Baptists mobilized like no volunteer army in history. By the thousands, Baptists descended on New Orleans and the Gulf South region. They brought feeding units, chain saw teams, repair crews, counselors, and countless other helpers. Before Katrina, Baptists (who comprise only six percent of the population of South Louisiana) were not on the radar screen of many New Orleanians. After Katrina, the word “Baptist” came to be associated with caring people who get the job done right. Reeling from the flood damage and less organized to do immediate disaster relief work than are Southern Baptists, the response of the Catholic church and some other denominations was delayed. While their full efforts were slowed several months, Baptists were there the day after the storm. One letter to the editor in our local newspaper even advised the regional Catholic diocese (regarding published reports that a Catholic church building which had been warned that their building would be condemned if repair efforts did not begin soon) that they should contact the Baptists to get the job done. Literally hundreds of persons who were previously immune to the gospel were won to faith in Christ when they saw the Christlike spirit of these volunteer workers, and knew they wanted a faith like that.

Just one example that must stand for hundreds of other examples: a local church hosted a disaster relief team which helped repair the house of an elderly woman. The woman kept asking how she could repay them (Catholic churches sometimes request a “suggested donation” for various activities), and the Baptist disaster relief workers kept replying that they were doing so freely because of the love of Jesus. Finally, when she persisted, they told her they could repay her by going to church with her Sunday at the Baptist church that was hosting them. She went, and was touched by the love of the congregation. A lifelong Catholic, when she left the sanctuary, she said to the pastor, “Father, I have never experienced worship and the love of Christ like I have today and through your church. Can I give you a hug?” Indeed the pastor said yes, and the woman began attending the Baptist church regularly. Now over 80 years old, she was saved and baptized, and now goes out with FAITH teams from the church to share her newfound faith with her neighbors.

Meanwhile, all around the country, hundreds of other churches, associations, Baptist camps, and state conventions were providing emergency housing for Katrina refugees. People who had never attended church or knew nothing about religion except the Catholic church were stunned as they received an outpouring of love from Baptist churches. Hundreds of them came to faith in Christ through these efforts.

While mowing and trimming a vacant lot as a part of our NOBTS Katrina second anniversary work day, I was reminded of a truth. The sidewalk that we were sprucing what had once been clean, straight, and well-manicured. But now it was covered not only by storm debris, but also with two years of growth. In our subtropical climate, you do not have to nurture plants that much for them to grow. They grow naturally. This once clean neighborhood sidewalk was totally overgrown with weeds and covered with debris. The same is true about our Baptist identity. Unless we keep maintaining it, other beliefs and traditions will overgrow us. As Jesus warned in the Parable of the Sower, the good seed can spring up, only to be choked out by the thorns and weeds (Matt. 13:7, 22), and in fact the Evil One sows weeds amidst the good crop (Matt. 13:24-30). Or, as G. K. Chesterton pointed out, to keep a white fence white, you have to keep painting it white. Part of the task of every Baptist teacher and pastor is to keep Southern Baptists focused on sound biblical doctrine and Baptist distinctives.

All along the Gulf Coast in areas impacted by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the name “Southern Baptist” has come to represent a caring people who minister effectively in the midst of crisis. Baptists are without parallel in disaster relief. The Red Cross and other relief agencies would be unable to do their work without hundreds of Southern Baptist volunteers. Southern Baptist churches, associations, and state conventions, working in conjunction with the North American Mission Board, can deploy more trained disaster relief workers and ready vehicles than any disaster relief organization in the world.

The last issue of the *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* was released in Spring 2005, just a few months before hurricane Katrina. With all the damage to campus facilities and the relocation of faculty and staff, publication of the *Journal* was understandably suspended. A key factor in this delay was the move of Dr. Stan Norman, the founding Director of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry and Editor of the *Journal*, to the position of Vice President for University Relations at Southwest Baptist University in Missouri. Dr. Norman played a crucial role in the creation and development of the Baptist Center and the *Journal*. We very much appreciate the great contribution that Dr. Norman made through the Baptist Center, and we miss him both personally and professionally. I have been named the Acting Director of the Baptist Center and Editor of the *Journal* until a successor is named. We are delighted to be resuming publication of the *Journal* with this special Katrina anniversary issue, with the theme “Baptist Ministering in the Midst of Disaster.” We intend to publish another issue in Fall 2007 addressing the issue of “The Proclamation of the Gospel.”

This issue of the *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* tells the story of how Southern Baptists respond in times of disaster. In the first section, “Discovering God’s Purposes in the Midst of Crisis,” several authors provide biblical and theological perspective on disasters. The first article is authored by Dr. Scott Drumm, Associate Professor of Church History in Leavell College, who is writing a book recounting the personal stories of various members of the NOBTS family of the impact hurricane Katrina on their lives. In his article entitled “Hearing from God in the Midst of the Storm,” Drumm tells the Katrina stories of three NOBTS faculty families. “Lessons Learned from Katrina,” is a chapel message that NOBTS President Chuck Kelley shared with the NOBTS seminary family about theological insights that he discovered in moving through the Katrina crisis. “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?” is another sermon preached in chapel at NOBTS, in which I addressed that perennial question about why God allows His people to suffer. Jim Elliff, President and Founder of Christian Communications Worldwide, provides his theological perspective on these issues in “Natural Disaster and Pastoral Comfort.” Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, also provides his theological perspective on natural disasters in “God in the Storm: The Goodness of God and the Reality of Evil.” Under Dr. Mohler’s leadership, Southern Seminary sent several relief groups to the Gulf Coast and took up an offering for hurricane victims.

The second set of articles, “Ministering God’s Love in the Midst of Crisis,” deals with the more practical issues of how Christians can best minister to the needs of disaster victims. Dr. Jim Richards, Executive Director of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, frames this section with a Biblical rationale for how Baptist associations and state conventions work together to accomplish the practical work of disaster relief. The churches of the SBTC played a key role in ministering to the victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In

“Hurricane Katrina, Gulfport, and the Second Commandment: The Impact of Love,” Dr. Chuck Register, Pastor of First Baptist Church of Gulfport, Mississippi, tells the story of his church was a channel for the love of Christ, even in a situation in which the church’s facilities and many of the houses of many church members were totally demolished by the storm surge of Katrina. In “Bringing Light to a City of Darkness: A Pastoral Perspective on Urban Transformation,” Dr. David Crosby, Pastor of First Baptist Church of New Orleans, traces the remarkable story of how God led him to initiate a building project in the low income Ninth Ward section of New Orleans even before Katrina came. Marilyn Stewart, a frequent contributor to Baptist publications and wife of NOBTS faculty member Dr. Bob Stewart, provides an overview of the contribution of volunteer Baptist organizations to the rebuilding of New Orleans. “An Associational Perspective on Disaster Relief” is authored by Dr. Joe McKeever, who served heroically as Director of Missions for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans (BAGNO) in the aftermath of the storm. Dr. McKeever recounts how BAGNO helped its churches to hold together despite damaged facilities and displaced members, and to serve as a channel for disaster relief. “State and Associational Missions Involvement in Natural Disasters,” explains how the organization afforded Baptists through associations and state conventions uniquely enable Baptists to have a quicker and more comprehensive response to disasters. Dr. Turner serves as Executive Director of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, which made such an impact in New Orleans and the entire Gulf Coast. Arkansas Baptists served nearly two million meals to the hurricane victims and first responders, provided laundry and showers for them, and cleaned and rebuilt many dozens of homes and churches.

In this year of 2007 we not only remember the second anniversary of hurricane Katrina, but we also celebrate the tercentenary anniversary of the Baptist association. The Philadelphia Baptist Association was organized in 1707. It is no accident that each the articles in Section 2 specifically address the crucial role that associations and state conventions played in the Katrina disaster relief. The organization afforded Baptists through their associations and other cooperative efforts uniquely makes possible a prompt and coordinated response in disaster relief. This issue of the *Journal* celebrates the tercentennial of Baptist associational life by noting the unique contribution it makes in one area of its work—disaster relief.

This issue of the *Journal* gives us and the New Orleans seminary family an opportunity to express our gratitude to Southern Baptists for the dramatic way that they came through to help us as individuals, as a seminary, and as a city. We will always be grateful for how Southern Baptists stepped up to help us in this time of crisis. However, although prompted by the second anniversary of hurricane Katrina and the generosity of Southern Baptists, this issue of the *Journal* celebrates all the marvelous contributions of Southern Baptists in disaster relief. The love of Christ compels each of us to respond with a cup of water in Jesus’ name when disaster strikes.

In Christ,

Steve W. Lemke

Acting Editor and Director of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry

MOST OF THE INFORMATION AND RESOURCES OF THE BAPTIST CENTER ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE AT BAPTISTCENTER.COM. AMONG THE ACTIVITIES OF THE BAPTIST CENTER FOR THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY ARE THE FOLLOWING:



THE JOURNAL FOR BAPTIST THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

Access articles on topics of interest written by Southern Baptist leaders and scholars with healthy sense of Baptist Identity. You can access every issue through the online Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry archive.

ANNUAL EVENTS

The Baptist Center sponsors annual events which give attention to topics of interest to Baptists, particularly concerning issues impacting Baptist identity and Baptist distinctives. Conferences were held in February 2004 on "Issues in Baptist Polity," in February 2005 on "The Mission of the Church," and in March 2007 on "What Is a Baptist? Marks that Separate Baptists from Presbyterians." Many of the papers from these Baptist Center events are posted on the baptistcenter.com web site. The next Baptist Center conference is April 4, 2007, in coordination with the NOBTS Baptist College Partnership Program and the Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum. The next following conference will be on September 25-27, 2008, which will feature the inaugural James and Diann Davison Lectureship Series on Baptist Distinctives.

THE BAPTIST CENTER BLOG

The Baptist Center Blog on the baptistcenter.com web site provides an opportunity for interaction with fellow Baptists on issues relating to Baptists. Read interviews and interact with key Southern Baptist leaders as they tackle the important issues facing SBC churches and entities today.

CHURCHES OF EXCELLENCE

The Baptist Center, in coordination with the Leavell Center for Evangelism and Church Health, recognizes outstanding Southern Baptist churches which are exemplary as healthy, growing churches. These churches meet at least the following five criteria as measures for healthy growing churches: (1) an increase of church membership of 10 percent over five years, (2) at least one baptism each year for the past five years, (3) a total membership-to-baptism ratio of no more than thirty-five to one, (4) at least twenty-five percent of the additions each year coming from conversions, and (5) in addition, the percentage of members involved in discipleship/Bible study and the church's contribution to missions are taken into account as well to indicate spiritual vitality in the congregation.

RESOURCES FOR CHURCHES

The Baptist Center web site has a number of articles and white papers posted on a number of topics, including papers delivered at the annual Baptist Center meetings. A number of Baptist confessions and doctrinal statements are also posted on the Baptist Center web site to assist Baptists to frame their theological convictions within historic Baptists parameters.

BAPTIST CENTER RADIO

Also on the Baptist Center web site are downloadable MP3 audio files of sermons and papers delivered on topics of interest to Baptists.

SECTION 1

DISCOVERING GOD'S PURPOSES IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD,
"plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope
and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and
pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when
you seek me with all your heart.*

JEREMIAH 29:11-13

*When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you...*

ISAIAH 43:2A

*The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the
LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind
tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the
LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the
LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the
LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.*

1 KINGS 19:11-12

HEARING GOD IN THE MIDST OF THE STORM

DR. SCOTT DRUMM

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL STUDIES
ASSOCIATE DEAN OF LEAVELL COLLEGE

INTRODUCTION

The New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary is one of the world's leading providers of quality theological education, training over 3,000 students annually. With a focus upon training students for practical ministry, the institution offers a number of courses designed to prepare students to minister within some of life's toughest situations. Theology courses challenge students to wrestle with tough issues like the problem of evil--how a loving, just God can allow suffering to occur. In pastoral ministry courses, students are exposed to troubling situations that can severely damage a church, and address issues related to ministering to families in crisis or who are suffering the loss of a loved one. Through courses on counseling, students learn how to help people deal with some of life's most difficult circumstances. These practical emphases enable the seminary to produce highly skilled and qualified ministers—men and women who are ready and able to face any difficult ministerial situation that may confront them.

With all the faculty and resources of one of the largest accredited seminaries in North America, it might seem that the seminary's students should be prepared for any situation or challenge in which they might find themselves. However, that was before the storm. When Hurricane Katrina's storm surge crumpled New Orleans' levee protection system on August 29, 2005, the seminary campus, the homes of many students, faculty, and staff, and ultimately 80 percent of the city of New Orleans were inundated with water. This cataclysmic disaster confronted the seminary and its faculty with a difficult situation, the likes of which no seminary course had provided adequate preparation. Indeed, the faculty members who had been instructing students in how to maneuver through and provide leadership in the midst of life's trying circumstances found themselves in what would prove to be perhaps the most difficult situation they themselves had ever faced.

As God so often does, He used the difficult circumstances of life to teach the various members of the seminary community important lessons—some of which were more personal or individual, while others concerned all the members of the seminary family and the entire Gulf region. Many of these were lessons the participants knew in an intellectual sense, but God used the circumstances of the storm to teach them in such a deep way as to become more real and more clearly understood than ever before. These lessons became more than just spiritual platitudes or pietistic slogans. What follows are the simple stories of three seminary faculty members who had God teach them—in this intense, experiential way—an important lesson through the trials of the storm. Perhaps these lessons cannot be grasped to the depth that these faculty members experienced them without actually living through a major crisis. Recounting these stories, however, may convey to you these experiences in such a way as to allow you to begin to view these truths with a deeper appreciation for their real meaning.

DR. KRISTYN CARVER'S STORY

Dr. Kristyn Carver serves at the seminary as an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Counseling. Having taught at the seminary full time since 2003, Dr. Carver is both a talented educator in the classroom and an experienced, licensed counselor. In addition to her teaching responsibilities at the institution, she also has a private counseling practice and serves as Director of Casa Hope, a Christian counseling center located in Cutoff, Louisiana. Dr. Carver and her husband, Kim, live in a stately, historic home in the 2700 block of Carrollton Avenue, in the heart of New Orleans.

Having been born and raised in Baton Rouge, Kristyn has always been mindful of hurricanes and the kind of threat they pose to southern Louisiana, yet Katrina came as something of a surprise. In fact, the Carvers did not realize a hurricane was threatening the city until the Friday night before the storm. While at a local bookstore, they overheard several people discussing a coming storm and possible evacuation plans. Upon returning home, they turned on the news and realized that New Orleans was indeed threatened by this approaching storm named Katrina. Yet, they did not panic or begin to make immediate preparations. Having lived through so many storm threats that always seemed to miss New Orleans, they were not too concerned. In fact, they continued to watch the news reports Saturday morning, but did not actually leave until later in the day.

Late in the afternoon on Saturday, August 27, the Carvers locked up their home, boarded up the front window, and evacuated to her parent's house in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Like everyone else in New Orleans, they expected to return to their home on Tuesday or Wednesday, so they only packed a couple of days worth of casual clothes. In fact, rather than trying to chase down and pack up her uncle's cat, which she was pet-sitting, Kristyn put out extra food and locked the cat in the house, thinking she would be back in two days.

It took them over seven hours to complete the seventy-mile journey. They, like thousands of other residents of the city and surrounding areas, were stuck in the gridlock of bumper-to-bumper traffic as everyone attempted evacuate in the face of the coming storm. After finally arriving in Baton Rouge late Saturday night, the Carvers waited restlessly as the storm approached. When Katrina made landfall, the strong winds knocked out the electrical power throughout Southeastern Louisiana, including large portions of the Baton Rouge area. Finding themselves without electricity, the Carvers sought information from and about New Orleans from the only power source they could find, their car radio. Sitting in the car, listening to the initial reports, it appeared as if the city had successfully weathered the storm without major incident. On Tuesday, August 30, they ventured to the student center at LSU (which had both electricity and air conditioning) where they were able to plant themselves on a couch and watch the television footage documenting a city under water.

The Carvers were hopeful that their home might be spared, especially since they knew that their house was raised about four feet above the street level. While not seeing their house specifically on the television, they did see helicopter footage of areas near their home. They watched people from their neighborhood wade through waist-deep water, so it seemed as if their house might be just high enough to have remained dry.

However, when the news coverage began to show pictures of a huge fire, which was consuming a whole city block on Carrollton Avenue, they feared that everything they owned had been lost. Within minutes of the news showing images of the fire, friends and family began frantically trying to call the Carvers to tell them the news. Although they could not clearly identify their house because of the fire, smoke, and unsteady nature of the helicopter camera, the Notre Dame Seminary, which sits across the street from their home, was not hard to miss. For the next three weeks, the Carvers lived thinking that their house had initially survived the flood only to burn to the ground.

When the city finally opened their section of town and allowed residents to return for the first time, Kim ventured into New Orleans in order to inspect the house—or whatever might be left of it. When he arrived, he was shocked to see that the house was still standing. It had been the homes on the adjacent block which had burned down. Furthermore, the floodwater had risen to the level of the porch, but it had not risen high enough to enter the house. Thus from the outside it seemed as if the Carvers had been graciously and miraculously spared any flood or fire damage.

Unfortunately, the interior of the house told a different story. Because the house had been just high enough to avoid the floodwater (and had not burned), it had been broken into, lived in, ransacked, and looted. Kim found food and trash littered throughout the house. Over 150 used water bottles were spread throughout every room of the house. All of the pillows, linens, and towels were missing (along with the silverware, jewelry, clothing, and money). In addition, the home had suffered roof and rainwater damage to the second floor. The damage was of such a nature that the Carvers were not able to live in the home until January 2006.

In the wake of such trying circumstances, Dr. Carver initially attempted to employ her counseling skills and help a group of New Orleans evacuees at a Red Cross shelter in Baton Rouge, just down the street from her parent's house. At the time, experienced, licensed counselors were both needed and in extremely short supply. On the Wednesday after the storm she went to the shelter and quickly became overwhelmed. She explained, "I had gone to the shelter to try and help and I just realized very quickly that I was not stable enough—there were still too many unknowns in my own life for me to be effective in helping people with their unknowns. And so it was several weeks before I was actually able to go into shelters or begin to work with people again." Reflecting on that experience, she concluded that "When it is your occupation to help people who are hurting it is hard to figure out what to do when you are hurting too. You feel this burden for other people but you are not exactly in a place where you can really help." Her own sense of loss and uncertainty diminished her ability to help other evacuees deal with their issues.

Today, some two years later, Dr. Carver believes the experience has made her a stronger counselor, able to identify with many of the stresses with which her New Orleans based clientele deal. The experience left her with a profound understanding of the need for a care-giver or minister to take care of themselves—mentally and spiritually—before they attempt to help others. Dr. Carver learned anew that being a minister does not make you immune from the difficulties and trials of life. When trials come, caregivers must address their own condition before attempting to help others.

DR. PRESTON NIX'S STORY

Dr. Preston Nix officially began his employment with the seminary on August 1, 2005. Dr. Nix had spent the previous two decades serving as the pastor of several growing churches. Hiring Dr. Nix was no small victory for the seminary administration. Dr. Nix is a very gifted preacher and experienced minister who had rebuffed efforts by a sister seminary to coax him into the world of academia. Generally speaking, hiring someone with Dr. Nix's skill set and pastoral experience is a very difficult task for a seminary as most experienced pastors do not want to make the transition from the local church to the academic world. Even though Dr. Nix agreed to meet with the seminary administration, it was more out of courtesy than a desire to accept any seminary position. He was serving in his eleventh year as the pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma and he had no intention of actually leaving his church to go to the seminary.

However, as he heard what the seminary was looking for someone to teach preaching and evangelism classes and oversee the supervised ministry program, he realized that the seminary's needs coincided perfectly with his own loves and desires. It was as if the job had been created and tailored especially for him. This created quite a dilemma as Preston struggled to identify God's will regarding the seminary position. Indeed, toward the end of the interview process he was still not sure what God wanted him to do. As he prayed, seeking some direction before he gave the seminary a final answer regarding whether or not he would come, the Lord directed him to Isaiah 30:21

Your ears will hear a word behind you, "This is the way, walk in it," whenever you turn to the right or to the left.

Nix recalled, "This is the way, walk ye. That is really what helped sustain me, because I had a clear word from his word, this is the way, come this way, you walk this way. He opened up every door." Although he did not know it at the time, this direction he received from the Lord, which led him to come to New Orleans, would ultimately sustain him and protect him from doubting that decision during the year that would follow. Having received the direction he was seeking, Dr. Nix accepted the position at the seminary and resigned the pastorate that he had held for over a decade. During the first week of August, he and his family packed up all of their belongings and moved to live in a faculty home located on the seminary campus.

The entire month of August was a time of extreme transition for the Nix family. Preston was adjusting to life as a professor, where the authority one wields is significantly different from that of a pastor. He was struggling to prepare syllabi, write lectures, and plan for the classes he would be teaching. Diane and the children were having to adjust from being the "pastor's wife" and the "pastor's kids" to just being "another" faculty family. Added to this transition in roles, they were all getting accustomed to a new life in New Orleans, a very old city with a unique culture which is quite unlike Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Although the Nix family had dealt with the threat of tornados back in Tulsa, they had no experience whatsoever when dealing with hurricanes. When Katrina turned toward

New Orleans and they heard the mayor and newscasters recommend immediate evacuation, they decided to leave the city. Having just moved, they were still in the process of unpacking thus many of their belongings, especially those sentimental items which were not used on a daily basis, were still in boxes. They searched through the boxes and found a photo album full of their wedding pictures and some pictures of the children, which they placed in their van. They only packed four days worth of clothes, thinking like everyone else that they would be returning to the campus in a few days. Leaving his car in the driveway, they loaded everyone (including the family dog) into their van and began to make their way out of town.

The family headed east to Panama City, Florida, where a relative owned a beachfront condominium on the 13th floor of a high-rise unit. When Katrina came ashore, she was so large her effects were felt in Panama City, some 300 miles from New Orleans. The Nix family was glued to the television, watching the weather channel as fierce winds and rain beat against the condo windows. It was at that point that Preston began to worry about the status of his house and the seminary campus. If the winds were that strong in Panama City, he shuddered to think what the full force of the hurricane was doing to New Orleans. Those fears were realized on Tuesday when the family watched the news coverage in horror as they saw the city of New Orleans engulfed in floodwaters. Having only lived in New Orleans for a few weeks, Preston was not familiar enough with the city to recognize all of the areas being shown and referenced on the news coverage. Preston was however relatively sure that the seminary and the house they had occupied for less than a month, were both inundated by the floodwaters.

One of the most difficult days for the Nix family was the day they were finally able to return to their home on the seminary campus in order to scavenge anything that might be salvaged. Due to the extensive level of flooding, the city did not allow anyone into the section of the city wherein the seminary is located for the first five weeks after the storm. Thus it was the first week of October before anyone was allowed into the Gentilly and Lakeview areas. The Nix's came back to their home prepared for the worst, with professional respirators and hazardous materials suits. When they opened the door to their home, they were immediately confronted with the horrible smell of mold, rot, and decay. Even though they were breathing through respirators, the smell within the house was nauseating and the scene was more than they had anticipated. With their home having taken on roughly five feet of water, they were only able to salvage a few items, all things which had been left on the second floor.

As bad as the inside of the house looked and smelled, the most devastating moment for Preston came when he opened the garage door and peered into the space. Preston's pride and joy had been a very extensive library built over the course of thirty years of ministry. Over one hundred and ten book boxes had been needed to transport the library from Tulsa to New Orleans. In fact, the professional movers had been forced to use a second truck exclusively for the library contents. The library had contained thousands of books, thirty years worth of bible study notes, sermons, and all of Preston's notes from seminary. The library had served as a tangible legacy of Preston's ministerial career. And yet more than that, it had been the foundation upon which he had intended to build his professorial career. The materials, which he had been collecting through 30 years of ministry, were going to guide and inform his teaching. The library was not only a link to his past, but was to provide for his immediate future as well.

When they had left the seminary campus, Preston's two car garage had been filled from floor to ceiling with the boxes of books, notes, and sermons. Now, some five weeks later, Preston saw the devastating effects that the toxic soup of flood water had wrought on this valuable collection of paper. The treasured library had been reduced to a mushy, moldy, rotting mound of pulp. None of the books, notes, or even the framed diplomas could be salvaged.

The loss of his library was a significant blow to Preston. As he struggled with the destruction and loss the storm left in its wake, he was brought to tears thinking about the loss of his library. It was within the struggle over the meaning of the library's loss that God imparted one of his most important lessons for Preston. Preston explained, "This is what I heard, I want you to depend totally upon me. Now, I didn't know all that meant, but I just knew it meant trust. When I looked up to heaven and asked, why did I have to lose my library? Not defiantly, but really struggling—Why did I have to lose my library? I want you to trust totally on me, depend totally. That is what I heard from the Lord. I bowed my head and started crying . . . So, I learned to trust in Him."

Two years removed from the loss of his library, Preston has managed to become a successful classroom educator, training the ministers of the future. Dr. Nix is busy teaching freshly prepared material and preaching newly crafted sermons. He lost the collection of thirty years worth of research, but in the process, Preston learned more of what it truly means to depend solely on God.

DR. JEANINE BOZEMAN'S STORY

Dr. Jeanine Bozeman first came to the seminary in 1967 when her husband, Welby Bozeman, began his graduate studies. At that time Jeanine was working as a social worker in the public school system. They originally only intended to stay in New Orleans for one year, but they fell in love with the city—its culture, food, and people—and decided to stay long-term. Welby accepted the call to pastor the First Baptist Church of Chalmette, Louisiana and thus the Bozemans have remained in Louisiana ever since. After earning a master's degree in Social Work from Tulane University, Jeanine enrolled in the seminary and earned both the M.R.E. and Ph.D. degrees from the seminary. In 1985, she was hired to teach social work at the seminary. Over the course of her twenty plus years of service, she was eventually promoted to chairperson of the Christian Education division. Dr. Bozeman is the only female to have served as a division chairperson in any of the six Southern Baptist seminaries. Recognized as the Outstanding Teacher of the Year in 2003, she is a much loved professor, an accomplished writer, and a highly sought after conference speaker. She currently serves as Senior Professor of Social Work.

The Bozemans' living situation prior to the storm was quite unique. They lived in one of the faculty townhouses on Iroquois street during the week, usually from Monday afternoon to Friday afternoon. On the weekends they would travel across Lake Pontchartrain to Covington, where they had purchased a home in which they intended to live full-time once Jeanine decided to retire from the seminary. On the Thursday prior to the hurricane, the Bozemans traveled from the seminary campus to Pineville, Louisiana

where Jeanine was booked to speak at a Sunday School Leadership conference. Immersed in her conference duties, she was completely unaware of the impending storm until a friend called on Saturday, urging them to get out of New Orleans immediately. Hoping to be able to return to their campus home, the Bozemans headed back to New Orleans but they only made it as far as their Covington house. The state police had already initiated the contra-flow evacuation procedures, converting all in-bound lanes of interstate and causeway traffic into out-bound lanes leaving the city. There was simply no physical way to cross the lake and return to New Orleans. Thus they were not able to pack, move items upstairs, or make any storm preparations for their campus home.

Having just come from Pineville on Saturday, the Bozemans evacuated back to Pineville on Sunday in order to escape the storm's fury. On Tuesday, one day after the storm, they returned to their Covington home, which had survived the storm with only minor damage. Even though they did not have electricity for nearly two weeks, they remained at their home in Covington. When they were finally able to return to the seminary campus during the first week of October, they were stunned and saddened by what they found. Everything on the first floor of their townhouse had been completely and utterly destroyed. As an only child, Jeanine had inherited a number of family heirlooms such as pictures, porcelain tea sets, and very old antique furniture. All of this was lost. As she reflected back upon that day, she noted "I think the saddest thing for me about that day, was when I piled everything up in the middle of the room, knowing it was just going to be thrown away and I just looked at it. I thought, 'My goodness, there is your life—all in a pile'."

Yet in the months that followed, Jeanine began to understand that her loss was greater than the material possessions which the flood had destroyed. As a "people person" who had spent her whole career at the seminary investing her life in the lives of others, she missed the relationships she had built as well as the relational nature of her teaching ministry. The neighbors who had lived next to her on the seminary campus were scattered to Atlanta, Georgia, Dallas, Texas, and Little Rock, Arkansas. The fellowship she treasured with faculty colleagues was torn asunder as the Katrina-induced diaspora scattered the faculty across ten different states. The tight knit community that had characterized the seminary prior to the storm was absolutely shattered.

Jeanine, who had always valued people and relationships, learned just how valuable those connections with people truly are. Jeanine explained, "It is the importance of people . . . we saw how quickly a group of people that you are very fond of can be totally removed from your life forever either by choice or by circumstances. This was a major disaster for a lot of people. A lot of the friends that we had in Chalmette—they are not there anymore. They are scattered from Picayune to Baton Rouge to who knows where. So the community of care that we knew—they are gone. They are not there."

Two years later, Dr. Jeanine Bozeman is sharing her many talents with the seminary community, although she no longer resides on the campus. Everyday she makes the trek across Lake Pontchartrain in order to invest her lives in her colleagues and students. Perhaps now more than ever, Jeanine has come to understand anew that loving people—and investing in relationships—is more important than anything else we might spend our energies doing.

CONCLUSION

Every person at the seminary during Katrina, whether faculty, staff, or student, has a unique hurricane story. All of us have experienced loss of one degree or another and we all have suffered and endured an upending of the order which typified our pre-Katrina lives. Indeed, our lives are and forever will be marked by the storm that has so neatly divided our consciousness into pre-Katrina and post-Katrina. And each of us, through the course of that hellacious year that followed the storm, learned important lessons about God, our relationship with him, and ultimately about ministering in the midst of turmoil, pain, grief, suffering, and trial.

One of those scripture passages that we all thought we understood before Katrina is James 1:2-4. James begins his epistle with the words

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

While few who lived through Katrina would be able to describe the events as joyful or joyous, we would all agree that Katrina was an intense testing of our faith. We not only endured, but through the painful process have been made more complete—more complete in our trust in God, more complete in our connection to each other, and more complete in our ministry. It was an extremely difficult lesson—one which we would not choose to ever endure again—yet, one through which God certainly taught us more than any seminary class ever did.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM KATRINA*

DR. CHARLES S. KELLEY, JR.
PRESIDENT, NEW ORLEANS BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Thank you so much and welcome to the graduation of the Katrina class of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

As we were in procession, one or two of our faculty happened to notice that I looked a little bit different than normal at this occasion. Please relax. I am starting the ceremony this way, but I will finish it in a cap and gown. We simply have to acknowledge the fact that this is not a typical graduation—that we are still under construction. It was about nine months ago that Hurricane Katrina blew ashore. After it passed the city by, the winds it created pushed water into the city, the levees broke, and 80% of the city of New Orleans was covered with water—the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States. We don't know yet all the things that it changed forever, but we do know that the lives of every one of us, as a part of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary family, were deeply affected. Those who were here on campus and studying at the time had to go through a period of unspeakable suffering. We must never minimize the fact that with all of our testimonies of God's grace—and oh, do we have them—and with all that we've experienced of the wonderful providence of God in the midst of our sorrow, nevertheless, it has been a brutal year for this seminary family. Even those who were not in the strike zone, who were a part of our extension center system, and who were a part of this graduating class, were affected by the way your classes were delivered, by the people that you took in, by the families that you helped out. Truly Southern Baptists all over this nation reached out as they never have before, to embrace the city that care forgot, and to remind us that though care may have forgotten New Orleans, God never did, and it demonstrated that in such powerful ways. We have all been affected by this unspeakable tragedy. It gives me such incredible joy to be able to say after nine months of this experience. I feel safe in saying no one can show more of the love and grace of God, and more of His winsome joy, and more of His stubborn strength than you would find in this Katrina class of New Orleans Baptist Seminary and in the whole seminary family. I am grateful for the witness that you have been to a watching world.

We would not be here today, at all, if it were not for the efforts of a very special group of people. As you noticed when you came to campus, our main buildings, here at the front, were largely unaffected by the flooding. They had no floodwater in them, although there was some wind and rain damage in many of them. We took our hardest hit in our housing. One hundred percent of our faculty homes were flooded and those families lost nearly everything they had. Forty-five percent of our students were flooded out—losing nearly everything they had. A few of the students even got flooded out although they lived on the second and third floor. I talked with one of our dorm students who came in for the October Exodus, when we had to remove anything worth saving from all campus housing.

*A graduation address at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary from May, 13, 2006. This was the First main campus graduation following Hurricane Katrina. Kelley walked in with the faculty and graduates wearing a construction zone hard hat and casual clothes.

He was laughing with his friends because they all lived on the first floor when they year began. The week before the storm, however, he had moved to the second floor of the dorm. He kidded his friends for their misfortune in being on the first floor and was very proud of the fact that he had moved to the second floor and put everything in the center of his room before the storm. Only later did he discover that all of the stuff he had moved was directly under a vent on the roof that got ripped off by the storm. All of it was soaked! [laughter] It is easier to laugh now, but losing our homes and our stuff was a tough hit. Indeed the mark that this year has left on our children—some positive, some negative—is something that we will always carry with us the rest of our lives.

But in the midst of all of the chaos and loss, there was a very special group of people who met together and decided that somehow, someway, they would find a way to keep you graduates on your degree plan, so that every student who wanted to continue their studies would be able to do so. Three days after the storm a group of faculty leaders and our administrative team met in Atlanta, and they made the decision that we would have December and May graduations. They determined to find a way. That first group came up with a basic plan. Ten days after the storm, we gathered the entire faculty in Fort Worth, on the campus of Southwestern Seminary. In forty-eight hours, they finished the plan to completely reinvent the curriculum and teach an entire year without a campus in ways that they had never taught before. And ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know, there is no more dedicated, professional, and passionate group—passionate in their love for Jesus and passionate in their love for students—in the world of theological education. Demonstrating the highest level of professionalism and consummate skills as teachers, this faculty did the impossible. They kept teaching! I wish you'd express your appreciation to the faculty of New Orleans Baptist Seminary.

To quote an ancient Hebrew expression: “Wow!!!” What a group! What an effort! One for the ages. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the only faculty in New Orleans among all our schools of higher education that kept teaching through the entire Katrina event. Somehow, some way, they found a way. They undertook a magnificent work because you matter to them, students; because they love you, and they love Jesus. And they were determined, if you had the discipline and focus to keep studying, they would do whatever they had to do to make it happen. And it truly has been an effort for all of us.

But we have learned many things during this year. My wife has decided the thing that she most remembers and has learned the best is the fact that whenever she evacuates for a hurricane, she's going to pack more underwear. She's announced this to our trustees and many other groups, including our donors! We've learned many things. Some of them have been quite humorous; others have been quite somber, and quite serious. We can never forget that we have been through a time of unspeakable tragedy and great heartache. But when I think about what we ought to take away from this experience, there is one thing that I hope all of you have discovered anew and afresh. It is something that God has been teaching me. All of us know that seminary is a time of testing. If it's Dr. Norman's quizzie-poos, or if it's Dr. Warren's exegetical papers, or if it's those essay questions from Dr. Lemke or Dr. Stewart, all of us know that seminary's a time of testing. But God never tests with ink and paper. He always tests with life events. And for someone who's going to spend a life in ministry, God has one question in particular that he will test us on to be sure we are ready to spend our lives proclaiming the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, and doing ministry in his name, to the lost, to the hurting, to the broken people of the world. That

question is this: “Do you believe what you know about God?” Let me ask it again. “Do you believe what you know about God?” For of everything that you can take away from an experience such as this, that is the most important thing that we all have had to decide. We know what we believe, but do we believe what we know?

It was a very dark place and the smell was extremely offensive and would have probably had us gagging, had we walked in. There was no light—unless artificial light was brought in, which was rare—it was intended to be dark. Rats and other kinds of vermin prowled around, always just out of the reach of the people who were put there. It was a very dark, a very unwholesome—and intentionally a very uncomfortable place. To make it worse, two men, before they were put in this dark and loathsome place, were beaten all over with rods—thin rods—about three feet long. Their backs covered with blood and with bruises. Their clothes were in shambles because they were stripped down and their clothes torn before they were beaten. To make sure they didn’t go anywhere, they were put in the very inner most prison, the very darkest, worst part of the prison. They were also put in stocks—their feet in stocks—set up in an uncomfortable position, so that it would be virtually impossible for them to leave or to escape or to get out of prison. It was a dark, and a loathsome, and a hopeless place, and the smell of fresh blood, and the cries of people who had been wounded and the other prisoners, the horrible food, the terrible conditions suddenly were intruded upon by a sound that had never been heard in that place before. It was the sound of hymns, of hymns being sung with great gusto and great joy. The names of the singers: Paul and Silas. The dark and loathsome place: the prison in Philippi. They’d been beaten. They’re clothes had been ripped to shreds. They’d been put in stocks. They’d been left in the darkest part of the prison. They knew not how long they would be there.

Yet they started singing at midnight—the Bible tells us. Why in the world would people in conditions like that begin singing hymns of joy? It was because they believed what they knew about God. What did they know? He is a redeemer. He has the power to take any circumstance and transform it for His glory and for the good of His children. They knew He was a redeemer. They knew that He was a holy, righteous, all-powerful God, who moved heaven and earth with a word, and that their lives were in his hands, and that whatever they were facing, He would use it to accomplish His purposes. They knew that no matter how difficult the circumstances were at the beginning of the day, at the end of the day God was going to be glorified. They just decided to start early, to start singing the hymns before they knew what God was going to do. An earthquake followed, which just may indicate just how bad their voices were, but still they sang. And in the earthquake all the doors of the prison were loosed, all the stocks flew open, and everybody was free. The jailer went to kill himself because he had to pay the penalty—under Roman law—of every prisoner that escaped. But as he was about to kill himself, Paul and Silas said, “Don’t do it, we’re all here.” Not a single prisoner left their cells or moved. I guess they were wrapped up by the concert—Dr. Gabrielse, you can hold a congregation spellbound with a concert—and when the jailer came rushing in with the prisoners looking on, Paul and Silas began talking about Jesus. And at the end of that night the jailer, his household, and who knows who else was born again and saved. God did not wait long to start the act of redemption for the blows on their backs, their shredded clothes, and their extreme discomfort. They believed what they knew about God. When they believed, they saw redemption happen before their eyes. This has been our examination question for the Katrina class.

I know as I sat on the end of a bed in a hotel room in Birmingham, Alabama, and watched on TV what all of you watched, as our whole city fell apart, descended into chaos and almost total destruction, wondering what in the world was going to happen next. What God brought to my mind was one of my favorite passages of Scripture. It was the first passage of Scripture that I read when our administrative team and faculty leaders gathered three days after the storm—Psalm 46:

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help
in trouble.
Therefore, we will not fear,
even though the mountains are shaking,
even though the sea is roaring.
There is a city, the stream of God,
makes glad the City of God,
and God is in the midst of her;
God will help her, and that, right early.
The Kingdoms shook;
the heathen raged, but God just uttered his voice,
and the earth melted.
The Lord of Hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

*Come behold the works of the Lord,
what desolations he has wrought in the earth.
He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth.
He breaks the bow in two. He cuts the spear in half;
he burns the chariots of war with fire.
Be still, and know that I am God,
I will be exalted in the earth,
I will be exalted among the nations.
The Lord of Hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

My precious students, do not ever lose hold of the Godness of God. Know that whatever you are facing—whether rough, or hard, or dangerous—understand that God is always good and, that there's never a moment when things are out of His control. There is never a microsecond when he steps away from full attention to your life and circumstances. He is always with you. When you pass through the waters, he will be with you; and through the flood, it will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, nor will the flame scorch you [Isaiah 43:1-2]. He is God. What difference does it make? It makes all the difference in the world when you know the end of the story.

When I was in college a friend and I were going to have to travel almost all the way across Texas and we could not leave until late in the afternoon or early evening. All afternoon, I was cleaning up my apartment, packing up, and getting ready. While I was packing and cleaning, I had the television on. I watched one of those football games where

one of the teams got very far ahead and then ended up losing at the last second. I turned off the TV at the end of the game, and five minutes later my friend arrived. We loaded the car and off we went. He was driving first, and we agreed that the driver got to choose the radio station. As he fiddled around the radio—he liked football and he knew I liked football—we came to this football game. As we were listening I quickly realized it was the game I'd been listening to that afternoon. Apparently they had taped the game and just announced at the beginning, "This is a tape delay broadcast," pushed the button, and then let it roll without another word about it having been played earlier in the day. So we're driving along, and my friend didn't know it was a tape delay broadcast. He started talking about what a rotten team this was who was being beaten so badly, how sorry they were, and what a bunch of wimps, and so on.

After a while—when he just went on and on—I finally said, "You know, I believe in those guys." [laughter] "I believe they have what it takes. I believe they can do it. And you give this coach a half-time, you'll be amazed at what he can do."

He said, "There's no way. They're going to get creamed."

I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I know in a while, we'll have to stop and get gas and food, and I'll make a deal with you. If your team wins, I will buy the gas and food. If my team wins, you buy the gas and food."

He said, "But Chuck, that isn't fair. They're too far ahead."

I said, "I know it isn't fair. But I'm willing to take a chance if you are."

He said, "Okay."

Well, they scored once before halftime. They came back after the half and it was a completely different game. They got closer and closer and closer. Finally they scored a touchdown to put them within five points of the lead, but there were only thirty or forty seconds left in the game. My friend said, "Well, I'll give this to you, at least they made it a game. At least they fought hard."

I said, "Oh, it's not over yet."

He said, "Man, if they were to win this, first of all, they'd have to cover an on-side kick. Do you know what the odds are against them being able to do that?"

I said, "These guys are good. I really believe these guys are good."

He said, "Well, even if they got the on-side kick, they'd only have time for one play. The whole defense would be line up on the goal line. There's no way!"

I said, "Way!"

They covered the on-side kick. Ten seconds left in the game: Forty-five yards away from the goal line. The whole defense, almost, lined up on the goal line to stop any touchdown effort. The quarterback goes back to pass. Finally, a couple of defensive linemen get through and start to tackle him. He is falling to the ground. He throws the ball as far as he can. He can't even see where he's throwing the ball. A whole pack of people are down there. And suddenly, out of the pack, one guy jumps, catches the ball about one inch off the ground, pulls it in as he falls to the ground in the end zone, scoring the touchdown and winning the game.

My friend sat in stunned silence for a moment. And I let him enjoy it. I was a bad boy. Finally, he said, “Man, you really did have faith.”

I have often thought about that time, and it finally dawned on me. He was right. More right than I realized at the time. Faith isn’t what we hope or wish will happen. Faith is what we know God is going to do. And we have learned, in the service of Jesus, you may not always be safe. Your service of Christ may lead you into harm’s way. You may be at your most devout, but bad things, heart-wrenching things, can happen. Yet still you are never out of his grip. And in his grip, though trials may come and difficulties may pile up, so will the redeeming power of God. At the end of the day, we will always be singing, “It is well with my soul.”

I leave you with the words of a black preacher that I’ve remembered ever since I heard Tom Elliff tell the story of him trying to explain to a young man that as long as he had given his life to Jesus, he could stop worrying. He was secure forever with God. The preacher said, “If the devil ever came after my soul, first of all, he’d have to pry open the fingers of my heavenly Father that are holding me close to His heart. If he managed to do that, the devil would then have to wade through the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross for the forgiveness of my sin. If he managed to do that he would then have to try to crack open the seal of the Holy Spirit, protecting my soul forever. And by the time that Devil did all that, he’d be one saved Devil.

Do you believe what you know? That’s the test question. At the foot of the cross, where God himself experienced unspeakable suffering for the forgiveness of our sin, He finished it with resurrection from the dead. We stand as a testimony to New Orleans and to this world. We know we belong to Jesus. It may get rough, and it may get very hard, and the tears may flow, but we are never out of the grip of God. In that grip the last chapter of our story will always be the joy of his grace proving to be sufficient for our need.

God bless you. And congratulations Katrina class, for a job well done.

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?¹

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“Why do good things happen to good people?” Now, by asking that question, we have already set the teeth on edge of any good theologian among us because it is a poorly framed question. First of all, none of us are really good people, are we? We’re not righteous, for “there is none righteous, no not one” (Rom. 3:10; c.f. Ps. 14:1, 3; 53:1, 3; Isa. 64:6; Rom. 3:12, 23).² No one of us can claim to be truly and completely good except God (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). None of us are so good that we deserve to be exempt from the vicissitudes of life. Secondly, it is difficult in some situations to know that something is indeed a bad thing, because God may work a blessing out of what we initially took to be a bad circumstance. We realize in the end that it was not really a bad thing after all.

But let us suspend those theological reservations for the present, because this is a question raised repeatedly in the Bible. Job, Jeremiah, Asaph, Habakkuk, Peter, and James raised this issue, just to name a few. And this is a question that, not adequately answered, has been a hindrance to faith for many persons who have suffered loss. I am addressing today many persons who were deeply and personally impacted by hurricane Katrina, as was I. Perhaps your minds turn immediately to the impact of that disaster on your own personal lives. But I am directing these remarks not just to the impact of Katrina on persons, but to all the many kinds of suffering that invade our lives.

What challenges confront you in your life? Are their problems or health issues that you face in your family? Are you struggling with relational issues? Do financial challenges weigh upon your spirit? Do you wonder how you will ever have the time and energy to complete all these academic assignments on the syllabi you’ve just received in your courses while you work two jobs and serve in a ministry?

If you are here, it is because you feel called into the ministry. You have come here as an obedient response to God’s leadership and direction in your life. And yet, you suffer all these challenges. Some of you had just arrived on the seminary campus, in obedience to a very clear sense of God’s leadership, only to have most of your possessions destroyed by the flood waters that followed hurricane Katrina. Why does God allow such things to happen to His people? This is the same issue that Asaph, a psalmist in the court of David, struggled to understand. The words he penned under the inspiration of the Spirit of God in Psalm 73:1-5 reflect his consternation about this problem:

Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart. But as for me my feet

¹Given in chapel at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary August 31, 2006 one year after Hurricane Katrina.

² Scriptural quotations are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful; when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; Nor are they plagued like other men.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF EXTREME DEUTERONOMIC THEOLOGY (Ps. 73:1)

The claim in verse 1, “Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart,” is an example of one of the oft-repeated themes of the Old Testament, usually described as “Deuteronomic Theology.” Deuteronomic Theology asserts that righteousness pays -- that God blesses the faithful and opposes the ungodly. For example, in Deut. 30:16-18, the people of God are told that if they do good and obey God’s commandments, statutes, and laws, then He will bless them, but if they are disobedient then God will punish them. That central affirmation of Deuteronomic Theology is often repeated in the Wisdom literature of Scripture. In fact, the Psalms begin with just such an affirmation, with a contrast between how God will bless the righteous man but the way of the ungodly man will perish. In fact, Psalm 2 and Psalm 73 stand in interesting apposition to each another. Psalm 1 is the beginning of the first of the five books within the Psalms (Psalms 1-41), and Psalm 73 is the beginning of the third book within the Psalms (Psalms 73-89), the first ten of which are attributed to Asaph. In the construction of the Psalms, then, Psalm 1 and 73 are set as bookends in apposition to each other. Psalm 1 affirms that God is going to bless the righteous man who meditates on God’s law day and night, like a tree planted by a river of water. God is going to bless his life, such that he brings forth fruit in due season and whatsoever he does will prosper. But it is not so for the ungodly, who shall be like the chaff which the wind drives away. They will not stand on the day of judgment.

Psalm 73 begins by echoing this same theme of Deuteronomic Theology: “Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart.” That is the “Sabbath School” answer that Asaph had been taught by since he was a child. You know that in Sunday School, whatever the question is, a good answer is “Jesus.” A boy was once asked once in Sunday School, “What is it that has a fuzzy tail, eats nuts, and lives in trees?” The boy answered, “It sure sounds like a squirrel, but I know the answer must be Jesus! So much for “Sunday School” answers. The Sabbath School answer that Asaph had been taught was that God is good, especially to the righteous. Asaph was mirroring the Deuteronomic Theology of Psalm 1.

But then Asaph took a detour from the theology he thought he was supposed to believe. He protested, “But as for me . . .” It becomes immediately apparent that an immense gap has opened up between the standard Deuteronomic Theology to which Asaph paid lip service, and his own experience. His beliefs and his experience were not matching up very well. In verses 2-12, Asaph cited counterexample after counterexample that seem to indicate that God does not always bless the righteous in Israel and punish the ungodly. In fact, God seems to be letting the ungodly get away with their unrighteousness. These counterexamples flowed from Asaph’s pen like a creek overflowing its banks after a heavy rain. This inconsistency between his belief system and his experience seems to have been

pent up within him for a long time, and he just can't take it anymore. "But as for me"
"But as for me"

Have you ever asked that question? "Why me Lord?" "Why did this have to happen to me? We can understand why things would happen to an unrighteous person, of course, but why would You let it happen to a righteous person? Why would You send or allow Katrina to hurt us that badly, to hurt Your churches, to hurt Your work along the Gulf Coast? Why would You allow that to happen?"

Do not feel guilty about challenging God with that question. Many other saints have asked that question. When Job experienced extreme hardship and loss in his life, he cried out to God, "Lord, what's going on? I don't understand! Why?" The book of Job drives this issue home because Job was a particularly righteous man, but in spite of that he lost almost everything. Throughout the book, Job kept asking the "Why?" question. Likewise, the book of Habakkuk takes this issue to a national level. Habakkuk is told by the Lord that the unrighteousness of Israel was going to be punished by their being captured and exiled by the Babylonians. Habakkuk is stunned that God would use an ungodly nation to punish His own people. Habakkuk protests: "Wait a minute! I realize that Your people have been unrighteous, but at least we are better than the Babylonians! Why would You do that? Why would You allow an unrighteous people to chastise a comparatively righteous people?" Habakkuk was asking the "Why?" question. And when the Apostle Paul suffered from his thorn in the flesh, he kept praying for God to remove the thorn in the flesh so that he could be much more effective in God's service, but the answer was "no." Paul was also asking the "Why?" question.

So, the "Why?" question is not a bad question to ask. We have no trouble with Deuteronomic Theology when God is good to his own, or when He punishes evildoers. Nor do we have a problem with sinners suffer the consequences of their sins. We figure that they deserved the punishment they got. Deuteronomic Theology is absolutely true in this sense. God does bless the righteous, and punish the ungodly. But the problem arises is in what we shall call *extreme Deuteronomic Theology*, which attributes a one-to-one correspondence between righteousness and blessing, on the one hand, and sin and suffering on the other. Thus, in extreme Deuteronomic Theology, *every time* something bad happens, it is because of a sin; and *every time* something good happens, it is a reward for some good deed we have done. This kind of Deuteronomic Theology is a commonly held misconception of many people. Whenever something happens, they assume that they are being blessed because of their righteousness, and if something bad happens they assume that they are being punished for their sins.

If you'll allow me to digress just a moment and utilize the language of my discipline of Philosophy, the *logical* problem with extreme Deuteronomic Theology is that it commits a simple logical fallacy. A valid argument (a mixed hypothetical syllogism) would reason in the following way:

- (a) If we obey God, He will bless us.
- (b) We have obeyed God.
- (c) Therefore, He will bless us.

Or,

- (a) If we disobey God, He will punish us.
- (b) We have disobeyed God.
- (c) Therefore, He will punish us.

These basic affirmations of Deuteronomic Theology are valid and true, as affirmed in Scripture. However, while those who affirm extreme Deuteronomic Theology use language that sounds very similar to this valid argument, in fact their argument is invalid because it commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent:

- (a) If we obey God, He will bless us.
- (b) John is blessed in some way.
- (c) Therefore, John is righteous.

Or,

- (a) If we disobey God, He will punish us.
- (b) John is suffering.
- (c) Therefore, John must have disobeyed God.³

Scripture calls extreme Deuteronomic Theology into question in a number of occasions. Job's so-called friends, who imbibed deeply of extreme Deuteronomic Theology, challenged Job to confess his sins, reasoning that he must have been guilty of terrible sins since he had experienced such devastation in his life (Job 3-37). In the end, however, God rebuked the "friends" of Job and blessed Job (Job 42:7-12). Likewise, speaking to people who were desperately dependent on the weather for the success of their crops, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that God sends the sun and the rain on both the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). God does not just bless the agricultural needs of the righteous.

There are three specific examples in the Gospels in which Jesus specifically addressed this issue of extreme Deuteronomic Theology. He first addressed the issue of *moral evil*, when people hurt other people. Evidently some people in the crowd were talking about a recent event in which some Galileans had come down to Jerusalem to worship. For reasons we do not know, Pilate had sent a squadron of soldiers who attacked these Galileans. The crowd, assuming extreme Deuteronomic Theology, evidently assumed that this was God's punishment for these sinful Galileans. Jesus asked them if they supposed

³ If the invalidity of this argument is not immediately obvious to someone who has not studied Logic, note the following parallel invalid argument: the consequent:

- (a) If this animal is a dog, it must have fur.
- (b) This animal has fur.
- (c) Therefore, this animal must be a dog.

Obviously, many other kinds of animals have fur than just dogs, so the conclusion of the argument is clearly invalid. Likewise, not all suffering is divine punishment. For example, Paul's thorn in the flesh was not a divine punishment, but an instrument God used to bless Paul by teaching him dependence on God rather than on the flesh in his ministry.

that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered such things (Luke 13:1-2). If extreme Deuteronomic Theology were true, then this would account for why they suffered in this way. But Jesus said, “I tell you, No. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”(Luke 13:3). These people had walked many miles to come to Jerusalem to worship God. They did not suffer because they were ungodly. They suffered because we live in a fallen world in which anyone can suffer such a tragedy. Jesus specifically rejected the explanation of extreme Deuteronomic Theology regarding moral evil.

Jesus then addressed the issue of suffering due to *natural evil*—suffering that comes from natural disasters such as wind storms and floods. He referenced another fairly recent incident, in which the Tower of Siloam fell on eighteen unfortunate people. Again, Jesus asked if their suffering in this way indicated that these eighteen were the worst sinners in Jerusalem (Luke 13:4). This reminds me of the fact that the police in some cities hosting a Super Bowls have conducted an ingenious “sting” operation in the weeks before the big game. The police send notices to all the people in the area against whom there are outstanding warrants. The notice announces that the recipients have won free Super Bowl tickets. The would-be “winners” are instructed to come to a hotel ballroom at a particular time and place with identification to confirm their identity in order to receive their Super Bowl tickets. When the “winners” confirm their identity, of course, what actually happens is that they are arrested and taken to jail. In a similar way, Jesus was asking His hearers if these eighteen people were in essence the victims of a divine sting operation. God works through mysterious ways to attract all the eighteen most wanted sinners in Jerusalem to the northwest corner of the Tower of Siloam at 3:30 one afternoon. The sinners are told they will win tickets to the Olympic Games. And then God smacks the tower down on them and wipes them all out with one blow. Jesus was asking, “Do you think that is the way God works?” His answer again was, “I tell you, No” (Luke 13:5). These people were not the worst eighteen sinners. They were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Anyone of us in this fallen world could experience a tragedy like that. Again, Jesus specifically rejected the explanation of extreme Deuteronomic Theology regarding natural evil.

The third example Jesus addressed was *physical evil*—a physical disease or disability. It is particularly interesting because it is His disciples who raise the question this time, and their question clearly indicates that they presuppose extreme Deuteronomic Theology. In the account in John 9, Jesus encountered a man who was blind from birth. This prompted his disciples to ask him whether this man’s blindness was due to his own sin or his parent’s sin. They never even questioned that the blindness might not be the result of sin; they assumed extreme Deuteronomic Theology without question. Their question was about the unique nature of this case – since he was blind at birth, whose fault was it? (John 9:1-2). Jesus’ answer surprised the disciples: “Neither of the above.” It was neither the man’s sin nor the parent’s sin (John 9:3-4). Jesus specifically denied the explanation of extreme Deuteronomic Theology regarding physical evil.

Why did God send or allow Katrina? I don’t know the answer to that question. Ask Him. But I do not accept the explanation of extreme Deuteronomic Theology that many people have suggested -- that God sent this disaster on New Orleans because it is famously such an evil and terrible city. Certainly, God would be within His rights to do so. But I could suggest some other cities whose evil rivals or surpasses that of New Orleans. Others

have suggested that hurricane Katrina was God's punishment on the United States for our participation in the war in Iraq.

There are two indicators that suggest to me that hurricane Katrina was not God's specific punishment for the sins of New Orleans. First, when God sends punishment such as this in scriptural accounts, He typically protects his own people from the punishment (such as protecting those in the land of Goshen from the plagues in Egypt, the deliverance of the people of Israel by the waters of the sea parting in the exodus, and taking the few godly people out of Sodom before the wrath of God fell upon it). In the aftermath of Katrina, however, believers and their churches were hurt at least as badly and in most cases worse than the ungodly, the French Quarter, and the casinos. Second, such a view of divine punishment suggests a very low view of the sovereignty of God. A year after Katrina, half of the churches in the immediate New Orleans area have been forced to close their doors, and those which remain are struggling to survive with a fragment of their membership. One of the largest seminaries in the world has been disrupted and its ministry hindered, and its students and faculty have suffered grievous losses of personal property. Meanwhile, the infamous French Quarter was hardly damaged at all by the storm, and the casinos all along the Gulf Coast have begun gobbling up property that was unavailable to them before the storm. If this God they speak of were trying to knock sin out of New Orleans, He missed and hit a lot of His own instead. This picture of God as an impotent, bumbling fool is an insult to the sovereignty of God, I find that conclusion absolutely unacceptable.

God is sovereign, and He is still on His throne. He never misses. He knew from timeless infinity that on August 29, 2005, the atmospheric conditions in the Gulf region were such that a great hurricane would strike the Gulf Coast. He created the laws governing those atmospheric conditions. He knew the hurt and damage the hurricane would cause, but He allowed these natural laws to produce their normal effects. He could have intervened had it been His will, but He chose not to change the course of the storm. However, He prepared thousands of Baptists and other Christians to come provide relief and help in the name of Christ to the praise of His glory. None of this was a surprise to God, and He has woven it into His plan for the redemption of many souls before time began.

THE SHORT TERM PERSPECTIVE (PS. 73:2-16)

It is not surprising, however, that many of God's children might ask why He allowed hurricane Katrina to happen, and especially why He did not save their houses, their business, or their churches. It is not surprising, when they see the prosperity of the drug lords, the French Quarter strip clubs, and the casinos, that they wonder why God seemed to spare these ungodly people while harming His own people. But this "Why?" question is precisely the issue that Asaph was dealing with so many years ago. "Why, God? Why am I suffering?" As he looked around, Asaph saw so many ways that God appeared to be blessing the ungodly in ways that He was not blessing Asaph. Knowing that he was supposed to believe that God is good to the pure in heart in Israel, Asaph could not square this with his experience. He felt his faith begin to slip away (Ps. 73:2). He began itemizing his complaints in counterexample after counterexample.

We do not know exactly which ungodly persons Asaph had in mind in his complaints. Perhaps he was simply observing ungodly persons who lived around Jerusalem. He may have been thinking about the insurgents within Israel who threatened the stability of King David's rule. Or, he may have been thinking about the ungodly nations around them—the Syrians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. Whatever the identity of the ungodly whom Asaph was addressing, he saw them prospering in a way he was not, and he found this difficult to fit within his theology. In his *short term perspective*, it seemed that there was no justice in this life.

His first complaint regarded the prosperity of the wicked. He was envious of their prosperity (Ps. 73:3). In fact, Asaph alleged that the ungodly appeared to have anything that their heart could desire, and they were so wealthy that their eyes bulged with abundance (Ps. 73:7). In our day, of course, we do not think of being obese as a sign of blessing, but in that day, in which starvation was an ever-present reality, to have such abundance that you were fat was a sign of wealth and blessing. To Asaph, the ungodly were lapping up luxury (Ps. 73:10), enjoying their leisure while their riches kept increasing (Ps. 73:12).

Not only were the ungodly experiencing prosperity, but Asaph noted that they were healthy as well. The ungodly were strong and did not seem to suffer the typical burdens and struggles that most people face (Ps. 73:4-5). Asaph found it difficult to accept that people in his family were facing all kinds of medical challenges, while his ungodly neighbors seemed to never get sick. Why, God?

Asaph's third complaint concerned the arrogance of the wicked. Not only was their behavior ungodly, but they had an arrogant, prideful attitude that was an offence to God. Asaph described the ungodly as being dressed with a necklace of pride and a garment of violence (Ps. 73:6). He characterizes these unrighteous persons as having callous hearts and scoffing mouths as they bulldoze anyone who gets in their way. They were proud of their ungodliness, and deported themselves with arrogance. They even practiced blasphemy against God. They raised their mouth to heaven and challenged God (Ps. 73:9). They were dismissive of God, saying, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" (Ps. 73:11). These ungodly people didn't care what God thought. They didn't care what God thought. God was the furthest thing from their minds. They lived their lives totally without reference to God and His will for their lives.

When Asaph pondered these realities, he just could not understand it (Ps. 73:16). It made no sense. It did not fit within his belief system or theology. This tension between his beliefs and his experience plagued him and tormented him (Ps. 73:14). It appeared to Asaph that all his work for the Lord, all his righteousness was in vain (Ps. 14:13). It appeared in the short term that there was no reward for righteousness, and no punishment for the wicked. Asaph found these thoughts very painful and confusing (Ps. 73:16). "But as for me," he said, "my feet had almost stumbled" In this short term perspective, life seems very unfair.

Do some similar thoughts trouble you and me? As persons called into the ministry, we have committed our lives. We have made sacrifices. We see people from our high school and college graduating classes who are making a lot of money in business, and here you we struggling with financial challenges. We see people living an ungodly lifestyle who

are living the life of luxury. We see the people who own casinos, sell drugs, or run night clubs, driving around in chauffeured limousines and living in mansions. On the other hand, we who have dedicated our lives to serving God may be just eking by financially. While we may be experiencing medical problems ourselves or in our families, the ungodly seem to have no problems at all. The ungodly seem to enjoy this apparently blessed life despite living a totally ungodly lifestyle, and despite their callous arrogance and their blasphemy against God. What is going on here? How can they get away with this? In the short term perspective, it appears that life just isn't fair. The ungodly get away with their unrighteousness, and righteousness does not seem to pay.

THE LONG TERM PERSPECTIVE (Ps. 73:17-20)

Asaph was troubled within his soul because his determined efforts to live a good righteous life seemed to go have gone unrewarded. Emotionally he was stuck on the horns of the dilemma that the ungodly went unpunished and the righteous went unrewarded. He didn't understand it, didn't know what to say about it, didn't know how to explain it (Ps. 73:15-16). "Until . . . !" It was painful and he couldn't accept it "Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I understood their end" (Ps. 73:17). Asaph's perspective totally changed when he went into the temple, into the sanctuary of God. Asaph went to the right place to find an answer to the dilemma he faced. We should, like Asaph, lay our problems before God. We should not imagine that God does not know when we have an emotional struggle or an intellectual obstacle in our faith. We should not run away from Him with our problems, but rather we should run to Him with our problems.

When Asaph had that experience with God, he came to see things in a totally different perspective. He was looking only from within the short term perspective, and in this life there is not always justice. But God gave him a vision of the long term, from the perspective of eternity. In that *long term perspective*, he came to realize that people may seem to be getting ahead by cheating and by unrighteous acts, but in fact, they are not getting away with it. In the long run, they are going to suffer for the choices that they have made. Asaph began to realize that the ungodly people whom he previously had envied were in fact to be pitied. He began to feel compassion for them, when before he had felt envious of them, because now Asaph realized what was going to happen to them in the long run. As the wise proverb says, "There's a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12). Asaph now recognized that it was not his own feet that were slipping (Ps. 73:2), but it was the ungodly whom God had set in slippery places (Ps. 73:18). Asaph saw how vulnerable the ungodly were to divine punishment: "You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors" (Ps. 73:18-19). In the end, God will destroy them and they will perish (Ps. 73:27).

As Asaph reflected on the destiny of the ungodly, he also caught a vision of the future that God has promised His children. Somewhat echoing Psalm 23, Asaph realized that God walks beside him and uphold him each day of his life (Ps. 73:23), but also "afterward receive me to glory" (Ps. 73:24). This life is in God's hands, and the life to come is in God's hands.

The future God has promised His own children is affirmed in so many verses in Scripture. The Apostle Paul described it in these glorious words: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). And Paul perfectly summarized the long term perspective in his words to the Romans: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

In the short term perspective, it looks like the ungodly are getting ahead. But in the long term perspective, we realize that their destiny is very grim. Suppose you were along in your old car with about 100,000 miles on it, dutifully driving the speed limit because you can’t afford to get a ticket. And then here comes a new bright red sports car zooming past you. He honks on the way by because you have been an impediment to his driving a hundred miles an hour. What is your reaction? You get mad. First of all, you are envious of the snazzy new red sports car. Secondly, you would like to be able to drive a hundred miles an hour and reach your destination ten minutes early. So you grumble to yourself about the cost of righteousness as you’re driving along. And then, up ahead of you, you see those glorious red and blue lights. That red sports car has been stopped by the police. Justice! And as you pass him, driving your dutiful 55 miles per hour, you smile and wave, thinking, “Praise the Lord! Righteousness pays!”

A person speeding can get away with it driving a hundred miles an hour for the first mile, the second mile, or the third mile, but if he keeps driving at that speed, eventually he is going to get a ticket and go to jail. It’s inevitable. This long term perspective is the vision that Asaph caught when he came into the sanctuary of God -- however the ungodly seem to be getting ahead in this life, in the end they will receive their due punishment. Life may not seem fair in the short term perspective, but in the long term perspective it is fair. If there is not justice in this life, there will be justice in the life to come. This realization led Asaph to reaffirm his confidence in the sovereignty and sufficiency of God and in the justice of God. In the end, he realized, God is going to right the wrongs. In the end, God is going to punish unrighteousness and reward righteousness. In the end, there is going to be justice, and even mercy.

THE INNER PERSPECTIVE (Ps. 73:21-28)

After Asaph encountered God in the temple, his perspective on life changed. He recognized the inadequacy of his short term perspective, and caught a vision of the long term perspective. He was embarrassed for his shortsightedness and lack of faith. His heart was grieved and his mind was vexed because he was so foolish and ignorant about these matters (Ps. 73:21). He felt as stupid as a beast before God (Ps. 73:22). One might expect the psalm to stop here with Asaph’s change of perspective. But it doesn’t. Something more profound changed within Asaph that we might call the *inner perspective*. Having resolved his doubts about God’s fairness, Asaph’s priorities and his whole attitude toward life changed. *Before*, what had been really important to him and what he had yearned for was better circumstances. *Now* he yearned for a closer walk with God. Asaph now recognized the presence of God through his daily walk: “I am continually with you. You hold me by my

right hand. You will guide me with your counsel” (Ps. 73:23-25). Asaph now cherished and yearned for this daily walk with the Lord, not for those circumstances that had so troubled him before. *Before*, Asaph had defined “good” as having money, health, and things. *Now* he defined “good” as nearness to God: “it is good for me to draw near to God” (Ps. 73:27). Asaph now recognized that nearness to God is the ultimate good, even better than health and wealth. *Before*, Asaph sought satisfaction in possessions and things. *Now* he found satisfaction in God alone. As he exclaimed, “Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon the earth that I desire besides You. My heart and my flesh fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25-26). In the end, Asaph came to reaffirm from the heart what he had paid lip service to in the beginning, that God truly is good to His people (Ps. 73:1, 27).

Do note what change took place. God did not change. Asaph’s circumstances did not change. What changed was Asaph. He was a changed man, with new priorities and a new perspective. He had found that God was His portion, that God alone was enough.

Blessed are those persons who discover God as their portion! Be mindful of what your portion is, what it is that satisfies you. One of the most important issues in life is that we have the right treasure, and that we treasure the right treasure. God is the only treasure really worth treasuring. God is all-sufficient. He is enough. He is our portion forever.

Many of you know the background of the hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul.” It was penned by the words of a Chicago businessman named Horatio Spafford.⁴ Spafford was a fairly wealthy businessman who was heavily invested in real estate until the Chicago fire, which destroyed most of his possessions. Soon afterward, he tragically also lost a four-year old son also. The Spafford family was still reeling from these losses in the early 1870s when he decided to go to England for a Dwight L. Moody revival. Spafford was a supporter of Dwight L. Moody and his evangelistic campaigns, and Moody was having an evangelistic campaign in London. Since Spafford had some business deals to wrap up, he sent his wife Anna and his four daughters on ahead, planning to take the next ship and join them in London. Tragically, the ship that Anna and the four daughters took, the *Ville du Havre*, crashed into an English vessel and sank in the Atlantic on that cold November night. The witnesses say the steamship sank in twelve minutes, killing 126 passengers. Anna was knocked unconscious, but was rescued out of the sea and was one of the few passengers who survived. The four daughters, however--Annie, Maggie, Bessie, and Tanetta--all died. When Anna reached land, she sent a Western Union telegraph to her husband Horatio that began with the haunting words “Saved alone,” for all the others had been lost. Spafford took the next ship across that Atlantic to join his wife and comfort her. Reflecting back on that experience, a daughter who was born later to the Spaffords said it was during this journey, as the vessel neared the section of the Atlantic where the *Ville du Havre* had gone down, that Horatio Spafford wrote on a page of hotel stationery the words of that song that have come to mean so much to many of us, “It Is Well With My Soul.”⁵ In the midst of all

⁴ The well-documented and oft-retold story about the writing of “It Is Well with My Soul” is outlined in William J. Reynolds, ed., *Companion to the Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Broadman, 1976), 241-242, 433; or online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horatio_Spafford or at <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/t/i/itiswell.htm>.

his trials, as Spafford saw the place that his four daughters had been lost, still recovering from losing his son and from losing his wealth in the Chicago fire, but even in the midst of these tragedies, he found God as his portion. God was his treasure. And he could say, “It Is Well with My Soul.”

Many of you whom I am addressing have recently experienced the loss of your possessions. Perhaps you have also experienced loss of family members. You may also face health challenges or financial challenges. But can you say, “It is well with my soul”? Can you say with Asaph, “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever”? Trust God with your life, and make Him your portion. He is more than enough to satisfy all your needs.

⁵ During the chapel message, pictures of Spafford, his family, the sinking of the *Ville du Havre*, the telegram from Anna to Horatio, and the manuscript on which Spafford penned the words for “It Is Well with My Soul” were projected on a screen. These images can be seen at:
<http://aquarelles.com/spafford/html/manuscript.html>;
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/images/ac0005s.jpg>;
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/images/ac0001s.jpg>; and
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/images/ac0006s.jpg>.

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NATURAL DISASTER AND PASTORAL COMFORT

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First, we must acknowledge that the most troubling problem emerging from any large scale natural disaster is not that people die. That is a real human and emotional issue, but not the most significant one. Hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, fires, tornados or floods do not change the statistics on the number of the human race experiencing death by even one digit. A typhoon in Bangladesh swept away between 300,000 and 500,000 lives in 1970,¹ and the worldwide influenza pandemic of 1918 exterminated between 50,000,000 and 100,000,000,² but neither of these catastrophic events changes the grim prognosis that *every* member of the human race will die. We are dying at a hundred percent rate already.

It is also not the overarching dilemma that natural events destroy what we have made—our homes, buildings, roads, etc. No one should be surprised when a house or building is brought to nothing in a mudslide in view of the fact that God declares that decay will eventually destroy all things anyway.³ We are promised the cataclysmic destruction of the entire earth as we know it in the future.⁴ Some have lost these things earlier than they had hoped they would, but *that* they would be destroyed should never be in debate with evangelicals. So there is nothing new here either.

Furthermore, it should not be a conundrum to us that many people face an alteration of their existence due to catastrophe. A new order will come to everyone eventually; heaven and a new earth will be experienced by some,⁵ and hell for others. Death alters everything, as will Christ's return.

We should also remember that there is no meaningful dissimilarity in the horribleness of death in a natural disaster as opposed to normal times. If it were possible to ask a man in the sanitary environment of a hospital what it is like to breathe his last breath when he is drowning in his own fluid, he would tell you it is every bit as horrific as being

¹NOAA News Online (<http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories/s334b.htm>).

²Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu). Some estimates are lower (20,000,000 to 40,000,000) but even the lower estimates make it the worst pandemic in history.

³Matthew 6:19; Romans 8:20-25.

⁴2 Peter 3:11-13.

⁵2 Peter 3:13.

drowned in a flood. Because God mercifully allows the body to experience shock in times of fright, many will thankfully have some anesthesia when they die, whether natural or narcotic. But death is still a ravaging enemy *wherever* and *however* it is encountered. Some may linger in the hospital room for days before they die, while others under the rubble caused by an earthquake painfully expire from dehydration. A woman may die instantly when a hurricane pushes her house down, while her sister may end her two-year struggle with an insidious malignancy with screams. Which is easier?

Everyone will die; everyone will lose whatever he or she has; everyone will face a completely altered existence; everyone will experience the horror of last moments on earth. We have already bought into all of these as theological verities. So what is so arrestingly unique about a natural disaster? Why do we become poetic and communicative about it? Why do we *not* hear news commentators saying, “Today an earthquake in India did the normal: It took a few thousand lives, destroyed property, took people to another existence and did it in the typically horrible way. The stock market was up today with heavy volume.”

We are alarmed because a natural disaster brings dramatic *focus* to these universal inevitabilities. It paints them in vivid color right before our faces so that we cannot escape them. We see how impotent *we* are. Our invincibility evaporates; our vulnerability parades in front of us and mocks us. We watch as people just like us, going about their business, lose everything and die in a moment. It grabs us precisely because it *is* us we are hearing about. Natural disaster is not about something *new* happening, or even about something *unusual* happening, but about something that has *always* happened and is inescapable for each of us—and more precisely, for *me*.

All death and destruction comes from the most cataclysmic event of history, the fall of man, and from the resulting just judgment of God.⁶ Our natural world groans under the resultant bondage.⁷ Believers, of all people, should learn to reconcile themselves to this fact. One pastor was reminded by God after the loss by flood of all his awards and letters from important people not to be concerned. Reportedly, God said to him, “Don’t worry . . . I was going to burn them anyway.” Whether he heard these words directly or not, the sentiment was true.⁸

The certainty that death, decay, and destruction are going to happen anyway to all of us and to all of our things, however, does not eradicate the internal pain that believers may experience. Even Christ, who said, “Let not your heart be troubled,” was “distressed and troubled,” and “deeply grieved, to the point of death” by the weight of sin placed on Him. With perfect knowledge and absolute trust, He still worked out His peace with the cross on

⁶Gen. 3.

⁷Romans 8:18-25. This passage shows without question the connection between man’s fall and the bondage that all nature suffers under. Creation awaits the freedom that men will experience from their sins. At the restoration of all things, the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1) are seen as a world in which righteousness dwells. When redeemed man is set free from his sin in this last sense, the universe itself is restored to its original freedom from decay simultaneously.

⁸Charlie “Tremendous” Jones, as quoted in a sermon by Dr. Ron Dunn, date unknown.

Gethsemane. Granted, His was an infinitely bigger burden than ours, but there is surely a lesson here.

Some of the greatest of saints have also been depressed about losses or disruptions (David, Elijah, Spurgeon, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones, etc.). Ongoing emotional troubles remind us that disaster of any sort is often an immense trial, spinning off secondary disasters, like hurricanes spin off tornadoes, even among believers. If this is so, we more-average saints must have much aid in understanding and coping with natural disaster when it affects us or those we love dearly. What can help?

When disaster occurs, the mental/emotional state of the believer is directly bound to his spiritual perception. Ultimately, and often immediately, believers can overcome a debilitating freefall into anxiety over what has transpired. It becomes the pastoral job not only to empathize, but to lead believers to have a biblical perspective about disaster and loss as soon as possible—preferably *prior* to the event occurring. It is concerning this perspective that I wish to direct our attention.

NATURE OBEYS GOD

The disciples said of Jesus, “even the winds and the sea obey Him?”⁹ This verse is often employed apologetically with skeptics for the purpose of proving that Jesus is actually God. The believing world has almost always asserted, in pacific times, that God controls nature. The farmer prays to God for rain for his dry fields, just as the Christian schoolteacher requests from God clear skies for the class picnic, because we assume that God has everything to do with it. But does this general, almost presupposed, evangelical belief extend far enough when times are more difficult?

As an illustration of how God’s oversight of nature may be addressed, the Second London Baptist Confession clarifies the extent of God’s control in its first and second section under “Divine Providence.” It is worth a careful reading:

1. God who, in infinite power and wisdom, has created all things, upholds, directs, controls and governs them, both animate and inanimate, great and small, by a providence supremely wise and holy, and in accordance with His infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable decisions of His will. He fulfils the purposes for which He created them, so that His wisdom, power and justice, together with His infinite goodness and mercy, might be praised and glorified. (Job 38:11; Ps. 135:6; Isa. 46:10,11; Matt. 10:29-31; Eph. 1:11; Heb. 1:3)
2. Nothing happens by chance or outside the sphere of God’s providence. As God is the First Cause of all events, they happen immutably and infallibly according to His foreknowledge and decree, to which they stand related. Yet by His providence God so controls them, that second causes, operating

⁹Mark 4:41. Also Luke 8:24 states that Jesus “rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm.”

either as fixed laws, or freely or in dependence upon other causes, play their part in bringing them about. (Gen. 8:22; Prov. 16:33; Acts 2:23)¹⁰

This historic confession has not overstated the biblical principle. The Psalmist speaks convincingly concerning the control of God over natural events:

Whatever the Lord pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places. He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth. He makes lightening for the rain; He brings the wind out of His treasures.¹¹

It was God who ordained each of the natural plagues on Egypt, for instance, including turning water to blood, filling the land with frogs, sending hail, and devastating locusts, etc. Even Pharaoh recognized this.¹²

Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the Lord rained hail on the land of Egypt.¹³

Prior to this, the Noahic flood was also attributed to the direct intervention of God. Its finish was also God's act.

For after seven more days, I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights; and I will blot out from the face of the land every living thing that I have made.¹⁴

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided.¹⁵

God fought for Israel by sending large hailstones on the Amorites:

As they fled from before Israel, while they were at the descent of Beth-horon, the Lord threw large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died from the hailstones than those whom the sons of Israel killed with the sword.¹⁶

Jonah experienced God's sovereign control over the natural sphere.

¹⁰ *A Faith To Confess: The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 Rewritten in Modern English* (Leeds: Carey Publications, 1975), 23.

¹¹ Psalm 135:6-7.

¹² Exodus 9:27-28.

¹³ Exodus 9:23.

¹⁴ Genesis 7:4.

¹⁵ Genesis 8:1.

¹⁶ Joshua 10:11.

So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head.¹⁷

And regardless of one's millennial view, there can be no question that the vision of John on the isle of Patmos reiterates that God is perfectly in control of all nature and uses it however He wishes, especially in judgment.¹⁸

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC PROVIDENCE

In James P. Boyce's *Systematic Theology* attention is given to what he considers a false distinction between *general* providence and *special* providence. By this the noted early Baptist theologian means that some distinguish between God's general care of the universe, and the "minute care by which some events are supposed to take place immediately under his supervision or by his direct providential action." He states:

It is unquestionably true that the acts of Providence extend to the minute objects and specially marked events. But this is no reason for making this distinction, which would seem to imply an indifferent, careless providence about all things else. The truth is that the providence is of such a nature as to reach every natural event by the operation of general laws. It is a marked proof of the wisdom of God that he can so direct all the affairs of the universe as, without need of special action, to accomplish all the events He chooses. All providence, therefore, is general, because operated through general laws. It is also special, because every individual event comes to pass under God's own inspection, and through His one will and work.¹⁹

Boyce quotes Princeton's A. A. Hodge in this respect, who says, "A general and a special providence . . . cannot be two different modes of divine operation." He continues:

The same providential administration is necessarily at the same time general and special, for the same reason, because it reaches without exception equally to every event and creature in the world. A general providence is special because it secures general results by the control of every event, great and small, leading to that result. A special providence is general because it specially controls all individual beings and actions in the universe. All events are so related together as a concatenated system of causes, and effects, and conditions, that a general providence that is not at the

¹⁷Jonah 4:6-8.

¹⁸See Revelation 16:18, etc.

¹⁹James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Christian Gospel Foundation, reprint, 2006), 227.

same time special is as inconceivable as a whole which has no parts, or as a chain which has no links.” [*Outlines of Theology*, 266]²⁰

As those most responsible for the spiritual comfort and strengthening of the courage in our people, we must not avoid the obvious in our counsel and preaching related to natural destruction. To say that God is not involved in natural calamitous events and that what has happened is entirely due to mere natural causes untended and unintended by God is simply untrue. And it is patently unhelpful to the sufferer. We cannot blame all weather patterns either on chance or “Mother Nature.” In fact, the personifying of nature through that term is evidence that we cannot comfortably live with an impersonal universe in which God has no caring involvement. And “chance” by definition cannot do anything, as if it had powers or were human-like. God is the ultimate cause of all secondary causes and takes full responsibility. It may be subzero weather, but “not even the sparrow falls apart from the father’s will.”²¹ There is no such thing as nature out of control.

THE GOODNESS OF GOD

The doctrine of the providential care of God is not complete, however, in its assertion that God controls nature. This essential doctrine so vital for pastoral care emphasizes God’s goodness as well, not just for the believer, but also for His universe.

The acts of God through nature may be construed wrongly. When a criminal is apprehended and put in prison, is it good or bad? Most of us would affirm that it is a good thing for criminals to be taken out of society and put into isolation. However, the criminal does not think so. Perspective is everything—but not just perspective, rather, righteous perspective. And this perspective about the goodness of God is what we must convey to those suffering when an event of nature has caused damage and death.

Here are some *good* reasons for natural disaster coming from a caring and *good* God:

1. *God is recognized as powerful and not to be trifled with.* God has often asserted that cataclysmic events were done to display His power to men (Exodus 9:14-16; 14:31).
2. *Society is warned of the greatest calamity, eternal judgment.* A physical disaster is nothing compared with eternal damnation. A hurricane is an announcement: “If you don’t repent, worse than this is coming” (Luke 13:1-5).
3. *Some people are deservedly punished for their rebellion.* The Bible states “the wrath of God is revealed [lit. *is being revealed*] from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). Hurricanes are just one of the ways that might happen (cf. Psalm 7:11-13). We should rejoice in the goodness of God in winning His victory over the ungodly.

²⁰Ibid., 227.

²¹Matthew 10:29.

4. *Some true believers are tested or disciplined and made stronger in their faith.* The same storm that judges a non-believing man may be the crucible of testing and/or chastising for a true Christian, and will toughen and purify him for the future (James 1:2-3; Hebrews 12:5-11).
5. *Believers may be taken to heaven; and some enemies of God may be removed from the earth.* This is a reality that is hard to accept, but nonetheless true. The Bible says our days are ordained by God even before one of them is lived (Psalm 139:16). He also promises that many rebellious people will face a calamitous end (Psalm 73:18-19).
6. *The godly are given an opportunity to love sacrificially.* Because of the nature of the true believer, you will always find Christians among those on the scene helping to relieve the distress (1 John 3:17; Gal. 6:10). Their love may point many to Christ.²²

GOD'S DISPOSITION TOWARD THE BELIEVER

There is even more reason for comfort for believers in particular. Peter reminded believers for all time that they were “called to this, to inherit a blessing.”²³ God, in fact, showers the believer with blessing. David wrote, “How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.”²⁴ This promise of blessing throughout the Scripture toward God’s own finds its origin in the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 12. Among other promises, all of which are fulfilled in Christ and accrue to the believer,²⁵ is this promise of blessing:

And I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.²⁶

This “blessing” or favor of God, on the lives of the believer is the birthright of all Christians, Jew or Gentile.²⁷

It is out of this confidence in God’s disposition toward the believer that Paul can assert in Romans 8:28 that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who

²²Adapted from “Do Hurricanes Just Happen?” Jim Elliff, 2004, <http://www.bulletininserts.org/hurri.html>.

²³1 Peter 3:9.

²⁴Psalm 139:16-17a.

²⁵In my view, the land promise in chapter 12 is realized for the believer in the new earth. See Hebrews 11:8-16,39-40.

²⁶Genesis 12:2-3.

²⁷Because we are all “sons of Abraham” by faith, all New Testament believers share in the promise. This is clearly discussed by Paul in Galatians 3.

love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”²⁸ Verse 29 places this “good” in context. Each aspect mentioned proceeds to the final and quintessential good gift of glorification. On the one hand, we can say, “whatever ends well must be working out for the good.” But, there is more here. In verse 29 Paul ties the good He is working out to sanctification (the unfolding of his “purpose” in verse 28), for those who are foreknown are predestined to be “conformed to the image [icon or likeness] of His Son.”

*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*²⁹

God purposes to make us eternally happy and to pour out “the riches of his kindness toward us.”³⁰ In preparation for that unadulterated happy state, He is subjecting us to whatever is necessary for our sanctification. In Paul’s thinking, the conforming activity of God, consisting of all that makes us like Him, is part of the good He “works out” for us prior to our final glorification. Suffering is good for the believer because conformity to Christ is good.

God intends either discipline or testing by what is suffered, and both produce the good of improved sanctification.³¹ We are not allowed to take “natural calamity” out of that package of necessary suffering for the believer. God in His providential care designs the calamity as a blessing in sometimes macabre dress. We are to “consider it all joy . . . when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.”³² Suffering is a foundational aspect of sanctification. “What if we have more of the rough file, if we have less rust!” wrote puritan Thomas Watson.³³

As I stated, the final good is glorification. In the same chapter of Romans Paul asserts that all future “heirs” will “suffer with him.” He is describing the “groaning” that all creation experiences due to the entrance of sin into the world. Now our bodies are subjected, along with all of creation, to the “futility” that man’s sin brought into the universe. It is not an easy “futility,” or a gentile “corruption” that we face. But all will

²⁸Romans 8:28.

²⁹ Romans 8:28-32.

³⁰Ephesians 2.

³¹see Hebrews 12:10 where we are told that discipline is “for our good, so that we may share His holiness.”

³²James 1:2-3.

³³Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986 reprint), 29.

change for the believer who is now suffering the ravages of this corrupt world. He will one day be glorified at “the redemption of our body.” Nature will be set free from that corruption, and this includes our own bodies first of all. In fact, it is the setting free of our bodies that precipitates the creation’s freedom. It is waiting for us. Paul says, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us.”³⁴ What hope we have!

In our pastoral preaching and counsel during natural calamity, we do no service to those in physical and mental pain to avoid speaking of the sovereignty of God and the divine plan of sanctification ending in glorification. Their suffering is not wasted and God is good in it all. Though the sufferer is brought low and will often struggle through immense pain and loss, there is a realistic hope for him, both in what the losses will bring to his spiritual development and in his future anticipation of glory. We will honor God the most, not by attempting to shield people from understanding His attributes and purposes, but by asserting His kindness to believers regardless of the form in which His blessings are administered. In heaven we will appreciate and praise God for the timing and perfect execution of His plans, for God does all things well. Though we will be imperfect in our comprehension on earth, we must lead our people, in as much as it is possible for now, to rejoice and have faith in the God who is both sovereign and good.

³⁴I prefer the reading “in us” rather than “to us” due to these facets of Paul’s argument: 1. We will be glorified *with* Christ (vs. 17), 2. “The anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing *of* the sons of God,” and, 3. Paul ties the glory coming to the universe to the “freedom of the glory *of* the children of God.” These passages may be studied in context to verse 18. Emphasis mine.

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GOD IN THE STORM: THE GOODNESS OF GOD AND THE REALITY OF EVIL

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It has been two years since Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast. By the time the storm ended, it had become one of the costliest and deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States. The memories of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina once again raised questions about the goodness and power of God. These are not easy questions, and they are not questions that simply fade away. Not just any answer to them will suffice. If we are to understand how to think rightly about God and the storm, we must look to the testimony of Scripture.

In Job 37, Elihu, one of Job's friends, speaks to him:

Out of the south comes the storm, and out of the north the cold. From the breath of God ice is made, and the expanse of the waters is frozen. Also with moisture He loads the thick cloud; he disperses the cloud of His lightning. It changes direction, turning around by His guidance, that it may do whatever He commands it on the face of the inhabited earth, whether for correction, or for His world, or for lovingkindness, He causes it to happen. [Job 37:9-13]

At the end of the book of Job, God rebukes three of Job's friends for making inaccurate statements both about Job's suffering and about God. Elihu, however, is not rebuked. Elihu spoke truthfully, saying to Job, in effect, "You cannot take God out of this equation. You cannot say that God is not in the storm. He is." Throughout the Bible, but particularly in the book of Job, we are reminded that we simply do not have the option of saying that God is somehow not involved. If we say we believe in the sovereignty of God, we must believe that God is always and everywhere sovereign—even over the storm.

The playwright Archibald MacLeish wrote a work entitled *J.B.*, which was a modern rendering of the book of Job. In that play is the famous line, "If God is good, He is not God. If God is God, He is not good." This is the equation many people wrestle with in the face of destruction like that of Hurricane Katrina: If God is sovereign, and if He controls every atom and molecule of the universe, then how in the face of so many evils can modern human beings affirm that He is good? On the other hand, if we believe that God is good, then He must not be in control. He must not be able to keep these things from happening, and therefore, He is not the all-powerful God of the Bible. In the end, it is asserted, if God is God, then He cannot possibly be good; but if He is good, then He is not God.

As Christians, we must be able to give a biblical answer to these questions. No superficial answer will do, and we will either take our stand with God's self-revelation in the Bible, or we will invent a deity of our own imagination.

SOME BAD ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION

Unfortunately, but inevitably, there are several bad answers that have been offered in an attempt to handle these issues. One of the most common is this: “God is doing the best He can under the circumstances.”

In 1981, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner published a book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner's answer to his own question was that it is because God simply cannot help it. He cannot stop evil. Essentially, God is a God of limited power, doing the best He can under the circumstances, and therefore, we should just trust Him to do all He can to prevent evil. Of course, we might wish He could do better, but finally, there is only so much that God can do. When a person faces a dread disease or a storm, an earthquake, or a tsunami, his only course of action is simply to believe that God is doing the very best He can do and to know that God really could not have kept this from happening. After all, if God could have kept it from happening, He would have done so. Proponents of open theism make a similar argument, saying that God is infinitely resourceful even though he is not sovereign. In other words, he is always ready with Plan B when Plan A fails.

Against that argument, the Bible reveals that God is omnipotent and omniscient. These are unconditional and categorical attributes. The sovereignty of God is one of the bedrock affirmations of biblical theism. The Creator rules over all creation. Not even a sparrow falls without His knowledge, and he knows the number of hairs upon our heads. God rules and reigns over all nations and principalities. Not one atom or molecule of the universe is outside His active rule. Even King Nebuchadnezzar recognized this by the end, and confessed that God “does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” [Daniel 4:36]. This is no limited sovereignty. The God of the Bible causes the rising and falling of nations and empires, and His rule is active and universal.

A second inadequate answer when we ponder God and the storm is to say, as some might, “Sure, God could have stopped the hurricane, but He did not do so because He has an evil intent. Our days are numbered, and He is going to get us all one way or another. Cancer for one person, an earthquake for another. Life in the end is meaningless, and God is like the Hindu deity Shiva, the Destroyer.”

The Bible, however, does not allow that argument. God is absolute righteousness, love, goodness, and justice. Most errors related to this issue occur because of our human tendency to impose an external standard—a human construction of goodness—upon God. But good does not so much define God, as God defines good.

Both of these arguments therefore fall infinitely short of the biblical testimony. The God of the Bible cannot be described as “doing the very best He can do under the circumstances.” Nor can one read the Bible and seriously affirm that God is a God of evil. He is a God of love, mercy, and holiness.

How then are we to put all of this together? At a bare minimum, we should listen to how the Lord answers Job out of a whirlwind in Job 38:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who enclosed the sea with doors when, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; when I made a cloud its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and I placed boundaries on it and set a bolt and doors, and I said, "Thus far you shall come, but no farther; and here shall your proud waves stop? Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the ends of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? [Job 38:1-13]

And then:

Who has cleft a channel for the flood, or a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land without people, on a desert without a man in it, to satisfy the waste and desolate land and to make the seeds of the grass to sprout? Has the rain a father? Or who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb has come the ice? And the frost of heaven, who has given it birth? Water becomes hard like stone and the surface of the deep is imprisoned. [Job 38:25-30]

Throughout this chapter, God rebukes Job, saying in effect, “Who are you to question Me? What right have you, the creature—a suffering creature, yes, and a creature with many questions—but who has given you the right to interrogate Me?” At the beginning of chapter 40, the Lord concludes His argument: “Then the Lord said to Job, ‘Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.’” [Job 40:1] It is hard to imagine a more severe and direct indictment than what God says here to Job. Where were you when I made the world? Remind Me again how you set the sun on its course. Remind Me of how you set the limits on the waters.

Job's response is entirely appropriate. “Then Job answered the Lord and said, ‘Behold I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; even twice, and I will add nothing more.’” [Job 40:3] He continues,

I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore, I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me. I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees you. Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes. [Job 42:1-6]

What we should learn from Job's response is that while we are to seek to understand what God is doing in the midst of this crisis, we must do so with a humble heart. Thus we should never act as if we can explain exactly why God allowed this tragedy to happen, and we should never give in to the temptation to say, “I know why this storm hit, and I know why this storm hit *where* it did.” “New Orleans is a sinful city,” some say. “The Lord sent this storm because of the casinos in the gulf and because of the wickedness in the city of New Orleans.” To make such a claim, however, is to go far beyond the bounds of human knowledge. We are simply not given the right to say with such precision why this tragedy—

or any other natural disaster—has occurred. Jesus made this same point in John chapter 9. Jesus and His disciples came across a man who was blind from birth. His disciples wanted to know if it was this man's sin or the sin of his parents that had caused his blindness. Jesus responded, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him." [John 9:3] God's purposes are beyond our understanding, and the Lord simply does not explain or seek to justify His ways to humankind. Thus, Christians should consistently affirm the sovereignty of God and the righteousness of God's ways, even as we await the full revelation of His purposes in the age to come.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE BIG PICTURE

An event as large and catastrophic as Hurricane Katrina can only be understood rightly in the context of the full teaching of Scripture. It is not enough to focus on one or two texts. On the contrary, we must look at the big picture and draw our conclusions only in light of the entire storyline of the Bible. Then we will be able to affirm both the goodness and sovereignty of God as the ground of our salvation and the assurance of our own good.

Genesis chapter one states: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters." [Genesis 1:1-2] From there, God creates the entire cosmos—light, the moon, the sun, stars, fish, birds, and animals—simply by speaking them all into existence. And at every point of creation, Scripture tells us that God declared His work to be "good." Throughout this entire sequential unfolding of creation, the divine verdict is consistently, "It is good." In fact, at the end of chapter one, "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good." [Genesis 1:31]

The big story thus begins with God bringing glory to Himself by creating an order, a cosmos, a universe, a planet, and everything on this planet is very good. The Lord looked at His own work and declared it good—not just better than it could have been, but very good, which is to say, *perfect*.

In Genesis chapter two, the story continues with the creation and differentiation of man and woman, and the institution of marriage. So we read, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." [Genesis 2:24-25] At the end of chapter two then, the world is still a picture of perfection. One might wish that the story had ended there, with the world in perfect bliss and the man and woman in perfect innocence—naked and not ashamed before their Creator. Unfortunately, however, Genesis one and two are followed by Genesis three.

Genesis three tells the story of the Fall, a story that centers in the volitional, willful act of Adam and Eve to break the command of God, and to do that which the Lord had forbidden. Giving themselves to temptation, they rationalized their desires, justified their action in their own eyes, and ate the fruit that was forbidden them.

“Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ And the woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate it.’” [Genesis 3:13] No one escapes God’s condemnation for this rebellion. In the next few verses, He curses them all—the serpent, the woman, and the man. Finally, and significantly, God pronounces a curse on all of creation: “Cursed is the ground because of you,” he tells Adam. “In toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will be bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” [Genesis 3:17b-19]

When humans sinned, not only did it affect Adam and Eve and their descendants, but the earth—the cosmos itself—was corrupted. After Genesis three, we must speak of humanity as being in a fallen state, but many of us forget that creation itself is fallen, too. The creation is cursed. If the Fall had never occurred, there would be no hurricanes, no tsunamis, no earthquakes, and no forest fires. There would be no droughts and no floods. Before the Fall, the Lord declared the world to be very good. It was, in other words, *perfect*. People did not have to plow and cultivate; the earth simply brought forth produce, giving up its fruit willingly.

But with sin came death, and with death came the curse, so that even the ground is cursed. Understanding this helps us to explain how we get from Genesis to the suffering of Job. It explains how we get to the Psalms where there are similar testimonies of pain and sorrow. To be sure, the world declares God’s glory. The heavens are telling the glory of God, but they are also telling us another story—one of disorder and entropy, a testimony to the curse.

When humans age and die, therein is the curse. When the ground cracks because there is no rain, there is the curse. When a tornado drops from the sky and lightning strikes, when the floods rise and the hail falls, there is the curse. When hurricanes come, there is curse—and yet there is God as well, for God is in the curse. Of course we cannot know exactly how God is in the curse. We cannot say, “This is why there is drought here and flood there.” Such precision is not given to us, not when the disaster is independent of human action.

Ultimately, we cannot say why God does what He does. We cannot explain why some are spared the ravages of Hurricane Katrina while others must bear her full force. Certainly, it is not because we are better than those who were stricken. Certainly, it is not because we prayed harder than they prayed, or that we did more good deeds than they did. No, it is simply because God was in the wind, as Elihu said to Job.

Thankfully, the story does not end in Genesis chapter 3. In Romans chapter 8, Paul reminds us that,

The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even

we ourselves grown within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. [Romans 8:18-23].

We are waiting for redemption, and so is the planet. So is the cosmos. On that glorious day when all things are consummated, the earth itself will be redeemed along with God's people.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." Then He said to me, "It is done, I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. [Revelation 21:1-6].

The great story of the Bible—creation, fall, and redemption—speaks directly to what we saw along the Gulf Coast two years ago, and it also speaks directly to our powerlessness to have done anything to prevent it. In the final analysis, we must point to the fact that Hurricane Katrina, like every other natural disaster, is due to sin—not the sin of the Gulf Coast, not the sin of the people of New Orleans, but *our* sin. Our sin explains in part why the tsunami hit in the Indian Ocean basin. Our sin explains why a volcanic eruption destroyed Pompeii. Our sin helps to explain why Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake in the 18th century. Our sin helps to explain why Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

But thank God that is not the end of the story! For God's purpose is to show His glory in the redemption and adoption of countless sons and daughters when they are revealed on that final day. Then He will create a new heaven and a new earth. Try as they might, human beings cannot reverse the curse that was brought on by their own sin. Only the Lord God can reverse the curse, and He does so in Jesus Christ our Lord. In the meantime, we must pray for those who suffer when disaster strikes. We must give generously. And eventually, we must go and give refuge. In all these actions, we will proclaim God's love to a fallen world—and His glory will be displayed.

ARE SOUTHERN BAPTISTS READY TO "JOIN THE CONVERSATION"?

THE EMERGENT CHURCH, THE EMERGING CHURCH, AND THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS

A PAPER & ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION
LED BY **DR. ED STETZER**
DIRECTOR OF LIFEWAY RESEARCH



APRIL 4, 2008
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SECTION 2

MINISTERING GOD'S LOVE IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS

But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well.

Should I not be concerned about that great city?

JONAH 4:11

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

JAMES 1:27

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

MATTHEW 25:34-36

THE BIBLICAL RATIONALE AND PRACTICAL EXPRESSIONS OF DISASTER RELIEF MINISTRY THROUGH STATE CONVENTIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS

DR. JIM RICHARDS

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SOUTHERN BAPTISTS OF TEXAS CONVENTION
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BIBLICAL RATIONALE

When asked to write about the difference made by state conventions and associations in Disaster Relief, I immediately began a search for this topic. To my amazement most of the articles that surfaced were not from a Baptist perspective. Since the journal is about “Baptist Theology and Ministry”, I wanted to show the interaction of the two, theology and ministry in Disaster Relief. Rather than citing how many meals were served or volunteer man-hours invested in the Katrina tragedy, let’s look at the broader scope of cooperative efforts by denominational entities from a Biblical Rationale.

There are examples too numerous to cite from the Old Testament to show a God who is concerned about the needs of people during crisis. Joseph was sent to Egypt in order to prepare a place for God’s people to be cared for during a famine, Genesis 50:20. Ruth benefited from the law providing for the indigent of the community. God said He was the father of the orphan, Psalm 68:5. His call to cultural social justice is clear in Micah 6:8. Included in social justice is to care for the less fortunate who are lacking due to a calamity. Throughout the Old Testament God is seen as the One who cares for people in time of difficulty. He sought to minister to people by using human instrumentality.

Jesus’ acts of compassion evidences His divinity. He announced that His earthly ministry would be accentuated with acts of mercy, Luke 4:18, 19. Sharing with the poor, touching the hearts of the suffering, giving hope to the captives, helping the blind, freeing the oppressed and telling the Good News are all examples provided by Jesus. He set the standard for His followers. Jesus underscored his innumerable acts of kindness by illustrating a judgment that exposes deficiencies and highlights efforts in touching lives, Matthew 25: 31-36. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and comforting the lonely are direct activities of a Disaster Relief Ministry. Matthew 25 is the quintessential passage for Disaster Relief ministry.

Jesus taught that everyone is our neighbor. The story we call “The Good Samaritan” points out how we are to reach out and help those who differ from us economically, racially, and religiously. Those who are in need are our neighbors, Luke 10:25-37. Service to them is in Jesus’ name represents God’s love.

Jesus addressed a calamity in Luke 13:4, 5. He pointed out that natural disasters and what are called “accidents” happen without explanation. The world system is sin-cursed due

to the fall of Adam. Death and disaster are our constant companions because of Adam's fall. Continually the affects of sin are played out on the innocent and guilty alike. When asked about those who died at Siloam, Jesus did not brush off the incident but used it as an example, explaining that they were not particularly sinful or evil. What was important for the people to know was that spiritual concerns supercede the need for an explanation. The spiritual implications were paramount to any finger pointing toward a cause for the calamity.

Jesus came to seek those who are lost, Luke 19:10. His primary purpose on earth was to be the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins, Romans 4:24. He accomplished this at Calvary. He arose from the tomb never to die again. He lives in a glorified body. He offers eternal life to all who repent and believe in Him. Jesus' propitiation for our sins is His consummate work. While Jesus was on earth, He provided ethical teaching and practical examples. His ministry and life lay the foundation for all that is done through a Disaster Relief effort. Any Disaster Relief ministry fully representing the Lord Jesus will incorporate an evangelistic element.

The Apostle Paul instructed the early churches concerning their duty within the family of faith as well as outside the church. Galatians 6:10 commands all followers of Jesus to "do good". Simple deeds of kindness fulfill the directives of Scripture. In one particular case, Paul was consumed by the compelling humanitarian crisis of the poor saints of Jerusalem. Deprivation, hunger, even death were facing the members of the Jerusalem church. Paul went to the new church-starts in the Mediterranean area and coordinated a cooperative relief effort. Paul coordinated the unity among co-laborers through his passion to alleviate the situation of the Jerusalem church.

Without fear of contradiction, the Scriptures teach a ministry to those who have suffered. Some of the suffering is due to natural calamity. When we are involved in Disaster Relief, we demonstrate the biblical rationale of caring for the unfortunate whether their needs are a result of natural calamities or not.

DISASTER RELIEF MINISTRY THROUGH STATE CONVENTIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS

The Southern Baptist Convention has been recognized as the number three Disaster Relief agency in the United States behind the Red Cross and Salvation Army. Southern Baptist Disaster Relief teams are tremendous first responders to human needs. Considering the polity of Southern Baptists this is a remarkable accomplishment. Churches, as well as local, state and national entities are autonomous. Yet, voluntary cooperation makes Southern Baptist Disaster Relief possible.

Southern Baptists don't operate as Lone Rangers. That is one of the distinctive marks of being a Southern Baptist. It would be improper to insinuate that state conventions or associations act independently of one another, the North American Mission Board of the SBC or other partners. As a part of a voluntary cohesive system, state conventions and associations provide a vital link in the lifeline to those needing assistance.

Churches provide the labor force for the work. Units are usually formed through associational contact. In Texas, because of an unusual circumstance, most associations are comprised of churches from two different conventions. Not surprisingly, the call to minister transcends some of the differences encountered in other areas of associational ministry.

The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention works with associations that will field units affirming the doctrinal position of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. Because the state convention is a confessional fellowship, all ministries funded by in-state Cooperative Program dollars must affirm the doctrinal statement. Some Disaster Relief units are comprised of members from non-SBTC churches but the units affirm the BF&M 2000.

Partnering through associations is the most desirable avenue of relief work. Associations provide the closest connection to the churches. Positive relationships with the Director of Missions and associational leadership are essential. In some cases a church or a consortium of churches provide a unit. While this is not the ideal, the arrangement still provides quality ministry.

The philosophy of the SBTC Disaster Relief Ministry is more than removing debris or feeding the hungry. The basic purpose is to share Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior so people may come to know Him. By asking volunteers to commit to a doctrinal position that honors the Scriptures and exalts the Savior, the integrity of the witness is verifiable.

Second to uplifting Jesus is the aspect of the Disaster Relief Ministry connection to the local church. Jim Richardson, SBTC Director of Disaster Relief, says it is his belief that all Disaster Relief Ministry is essentially a local Southern Baptist church ministry because the church is the platform where the harvest of the Gospel is gathered.

Richardson added, "I believe that one of the functions of the state convention is to empower, encourage, train, and provide opportunities for local Southern Baptist churches to be successful in their disaster relief ministry efforts." He lists developing a vision, purchasing equipment, training and providing coordination during a disaster as just a few of the vital services provided by a state convention.

The Cooperative Program is the funding engine for Disaster Relief. As in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, each church contributes to a common goal with trusted administration disbursing the funds. No other funding mechanism works better than the Cooperative Program. State Conventions provide an over-arching strategy in conjunction with the North American Mission Board. Special gifts play a part in supplying the money, but the Cooperative Program enables all partners a consistent source of revenue.

Southern Baptists are learning to be second and long-term responders as well. After initial needs are met, many organizations such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army leave the affected area. This is not to denigrate the contributions of either of these organizations, but long-term ministry needs extend beyond the initial shock of the first days of disaster.

What about re-build? What about the ongoing emotional and spiritual needs of those who survived the disaster? Southern Baptists are making progress on the learning curve by structuring for the long haul in New Orleans and southeast Texas. Numerous volunteer

builders are willing to go into devastated areas and begin the return to normalcy. Chaplains, youth groups and Mission Service Corp missionaries are being implemented in a re-build effort. As Southern Baptists have become one of the premier Disaster Relief first responders, Southern Baptist will become one of the major contributors in recovery.

The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention is committed to Disaster Relief and Recovery throughout North America and around the world. The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention asked the SBTC to provide leadership on a relief and rebuild assignment in South Lebanon. Volunteers from all over the Southern Baptist Convention are responding to the call. Eternal impact is being made in the area, by rebuilding, clearing debris and distributing supplies while sharing the Good News.

The One who is honored when Disaster Relief is done correctly is the Lord Jesus. The human hero of this ministry is the common Baptist. The man or woman who is willing to answer the call to touch lives through Disaster Relief is being used of God in an incredible way. State conventions and associations are the most effective vehicles for churches to use in sending their resources to North America and the world.

HURRICANE KATRINA, GULFPORT, AND THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

DR. CHUCK REGISTER
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GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI

THE IMPACT OF LOVE

“Look again. The information you are sending me cannot be true, it is impossible! It simply cannot happen. You have made a mistake, look again!” On August, 29, 2005 that was the message my brain was sending to my eyes. “Look again, that is impossible, it cannot be true!” But it was. The images of destruction and devastation transmitted by the cable news networks to my eyes and on to my brain were surreal, but sadly and tragically, they were true. Hurricane Katrina, with her winds in excess of one hundred seventy-five miles per hour and her storm surge in excess of thirty feet, had destroyed a significant portion of Gulfport, Mississippi, the city in which I live and serve as the Pastor of First Baptist Church. In the days immediately following the landfall of Katrina, the nation learned the massive scope of her destruction. Much of the Gulf Coast, from New Orleans, Louisiana to Mobile, Alabama, lay in ruins. While my knowledge of the destruction of the region is limited, my knowledge of the destruction of Gulfport, Mississippi is both personal and complete. From “D-Day plus 2,” I, along with my fellow citizens, have lived the story of “relief, recovery and rebuild” along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. For the residents of Gulfport, this is not a story of governmental assistance or a failure of governmental leadership. This is a story of love overcoming the worst natural disaster in our nation’s history. In this article you will find no ivory tower prose, no academic jargon, none is intended. This is one pastor’s personal account of the Christian Church in America fulfilling what the Lord Jesus gave as the Second Commandment – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39) – and the account begins with a lady named Katrina.

A STORY OF DESTRUCTION

Gulfport’s “Katrina Story” actually began on Friday, August 26, 2005 when Katrina wobbled to the north and Mississippi found itself inside the “cone of landfall probability.” As the weekend passed the storm grew and by Sunday morning Hurricane Katrina had reached “Cat 5” in strength. The experts from the National Weather Center were predicting a direct hit on the Louisiana-Mississippi Coast with Gulfport being in the northeast quadrant of impact, the quadrant of destruction. As Sunday unfolded most of our residents completed the task of boarding their homes and businesses and evacuated the city. Some, regrettably, being either novices to the dangers of hurricanes, or having been survivors of Hurricane Camille in 1969, decided to ride the storm out at home; a decision most would regret within the next twenty-four hours.

As landfall occurred on August 29, the destruction of structures in Gulfport was severe and widespread. In Harrison County, where Gulfport, Mississippi serves as the

county seat 30,000 homes were destroyed and an additional 45,000 homes were severely damaged. With a population of 74,000 residents, the second most populated city in the State of Mississippi lay in ruins. Vital resources such as food, water, ice, basic communications, electrical services and gasoline were non-existent. Governmental services were limited and those limited resources were devoted to search and rescue. Within hours of landfall the residents of Gulfport found themselves without the basics of life. Gulfport was definitely a city in crisis.

A STORY OF LOVE

The Love of Individual Believers

As the winds and water of Katrina began to recede, the Christian community across America mobilized. Individual believers, local churches, denominations and religious organizations flooded the region with volunteers and supplies. Within days of landfall, motivated by the love and teachings of Jesus, volunteers began to make a real difference in the lives of the citizens of Gulfport. Individuals like the two “strangers” from Indianapolis, Indiana who drove their pick-up trucks loaded with food, water and baby supplies arriving in Gulfport on September 1st. Within fifteen minutes they distributed their supplies at a low-income apartment complex in downtown Gulfport. I offered shelter for the night and a cold meal “straight out of the can” but they declined, responding, “No thank you. The good Lord told us to come and bring what we could. We have done that, so now it’s time to go home.” Such was the testimony of thousands of volunteers in the early days following the landfall of Katrina. God spoke to their hearts; the volunteers heard His voice and obediently responded in compassion, racing to our aid with the resources they possessed. When their deliveries were made and their missions accomplished they returned home. Little did we know many of the volunteers returned home simply to recoup, restock and return. Consistently, the residents of Gulfport have discovered the Second Commandment to be at the very heart of their motivation. The volunteers have simply embraced the command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The Love of a Local Church

The story of love is also the story of local congregations. Churches of every denominational stripe; Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, etc., struggled to respond to the massive numbers of hurting people, people whose homes were battered and whose lives were shattered. Not only did these congregations labor to help a hurting citizenry, in many cases they worked together; Baptists with Methodists, Presbyterians with Episcopalians, the young with the elderly, the rich with the poor, Caucasians with African-Americans. In essence, the church simply joined hands to fulfill the admonition of Jesus to “love your neighbor as yourself.” I readily acknowledge and express appreciation for the local congregations who have worked continuously in the relief efforts in Gulfport. My colleagues in ministry are to be commended for their creative response, tireless efforts and total focus on helping our community. However, in this section I have chosen to focus on the response to Hurricane Katrina of which I have the most intimate knowledge, the response of First Baptist Church of Gulfport.

In the days following the landfall of the storm the members and ministerial staff of First Baptist Church found themselves overwhelmed with ministry challenges and ministry opportunities. In the early days ministry was reactionary. Members helped their neighbors. They shared the “basics of post-hurricane life;” water, food, ice, gasoline, chainsaws, flashlights and batteries. Most of all they shared the love and message of Jesus. They led teams of volunteers to remove downed trees, tarp damaged roofs, and deliver truck loads of food to outlying areas. Our members listened, hugged, wept and prayed with their friends next door and strangers across town. They were the hands and feet of Jesus.

Our ministerial staff initiated a “strategic plan” of assistance that evolved with each passing week. During week one the plan was simple. We divided our “ministry field” into districts. Each minister was assigned a district and the minister spent the day traveling throughout their assigned area ministering to church members, distributing food and water and discovering the needs of residents living in the district. Since all communications equipment was inoperable, at approximately 8:00 PM we would gather at my home, enjoy a meal prepared by my wife on the camp stove and share our findings. These sessions ended with assignments to the staff to meet the needs discovered during the day, the assignment of new districts for the following day, and prayer. During week two we formed a partnership with our mission congregation Crosspoint Church of Gulfport. On their property we developed a staging area for volunteer teams that were arriving daily. The staging area provided teams with space for camping, cooking and the accumulation of materials and equipment. Each morning volunteer teams received “work orders” submitted by residents in need, a member of FBC, Gulfport or Crosspoint Church to serve as a team leader, and the equipment needed to remove a downed tree, tarp a roof, or “mud out” a home. Priority was given to the homes of our “first-responders;” firemen, policemen, and rescue personnel. To date this staging area continues to serve the residents of Gulfport under the leadership of Crosspoint Church.

During the months that followed Katrina, additional ministries flowed to our neighbors in Gulfport from the volunteers of First Baptist Church. New work boots were distributed to “first-responders” and new shoes to school-age children. An emergency day care center was established for the children of city employees enabling the employees to get back to work running the day to day operations of the city. In December of 2005, Christmas gift-boxes were distributed to the students at three elementary schools. By the summer of 2006, First Baptist Church, in partnership with the North Carolina Baptist Men, an auxiliary organization with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, had established a volunteer village to host short-term mission volunteers engaged in non-construction ministry projects. To date some 2200 volunteers have led Vacation Bible Schools in smaller churches throughout the county, hosted Bible clubs in FEMA trailer parks, run summer sports camps at local school facilities, prayer-walked neighborhoods, and hosted neighborhood block-parties. Recently, the volunteers at First Baptist Church re-opened Gulf Coast Community Ministries, a ministry evangelism project designed to meet the physical needs of people while sharing the Gospel of Christ. With the landfall of Katrina, the facilities of Gulf Coast Community Ministries were destroyed. Today, in leased facilities, the ministry offers a food bank, medical clinic and pharmacy, Christ-centered counseling, and English classes for ethnic residents. For the volunteers of First Baptist Church it is their way of following the teaching of Jesus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The Love of a Denomination

First Baptist Church, Gulfport is a congregation affiliated on the national level with the Southern Baptist Convention. Southern Baptists have been at the forefront of faith community response to Hurricane Katrina. From the millions of dollars in aid given by the members of Southern Baptist churches to the ministry of Operation Noah in the City of New Orleans, Southern Baptists have gone the proverbial “extra mile” to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

In Gulfport, the response of Southern Baptists has been most admirable. Due to the vastness of the destruction caused by Katrina, the pastoral leadership of First Baptist quickly realized the response needed in Gulfport was beyond the resources of any one congregation or local Baptist association. A request for help went out through the channels of Southern Baptist life and on September 5, 2005 the North Carolina Baptist Men arrived in the City of Gulfport. Their initial relief efforts included the distribution of water and ice along with the serving of three hot meals a day to the residents of our community. Along with these “basics of life” ministries the Baptist volunteers from North Carolina removed trees from roofs, covered damaged roofs with tarps to prevent further destruction from inclement weather, cleaned laundry for residents without electricity, and performed a host of other ministries. Through the leadership of Richard Brunson, the Executive Director of the North Carolina Baptist Men, and Eddie and Martha Williams, the Gulfport Rebuild Coordinators, the North Carolina Baptist Men established a multi-year partnership with the City of Gulfport to continue to provide life-changing ministry to the residents of our city. The North Carolina volunteers have repaired homes, painted schools, built playgrounds, refurbished a high school athletic facility, shared the Gospel of Christ, and brought hope to our city.

In September of 2007, the North Carolina Baptist Men celebrated their second anniversary of ministry in Gulfport, Mississippi. During their two-year stay this organization has served over 550,000 hot meals, hosted over 24,000 individual volunteers, and through an astonishing 1.4 million man-hours of volunteer service, they have rebuilt approximately 600 homes. Their volunteers have come from small churches in towns like Spruce Pine and Franklin and they have come from large congregations like Biltmore Baptist Church in Ashville, North Carolina, a church whose members have comprised thirty-three teams of volunteers on mission in South Mississippi. Whether men or women, teenagers or senior adults, the volunteers from North Carolina have been the quintessential example of God’s people fulfilling the Second Commandment. Through their labors the North Carolina Baptist Men have more than fulfilled the admonition of Jesus to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

A STORY OF PEOPLE RESPONDING TO LOVE

The story of Hurricane Katrina is not a story of residential destruction, devastated communities, the painful loss of personal possessions or the heartache of lives disrupted by winds and water. Ultimately, the story of Katrina is the story of people responding to love. It is the story of volunteers, thousands volunteers, responding to the love of Jesus; a love so powerful it has transformed their lives to the point of sacrifice. They sacrifice their time,

money, vacation leave and personal energy to race from all over the nation to aid complete strangers. And why do they volunteer? Because Jesus modeled His teaching to “love your neighbor as yourself” as He sacrificed His life for them, His sacrifice leads them to sacrifice. Jesus’ love for them and their love for Jesus gives birth to their love for us, neighbors in need.

The story of Katrina is also a story of a community responding to the love of Christ. With each act of kindness, each labor of love, each hug, each encouraging word, each roof replaced, each home rebuilt, each Gospel witness, the “volunteers of Katrina” are validating the life-transforming message of Jesus. Their actions proclaim a loud message of love, a message that is both seen and heard daily in the neighborhoods of Gulfport. Lives transformed by the love of Christ are attracting lives that need a transforming touch of the love of Christ. Ultimately, that is the story of Hurricane Katrina.

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BRINGING LIGHT TO A CITY OF DARKNESS: A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE ON URBAN TRANSFORMATION

DR. DAVID CROSBY
PASTOR, FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

I have visited in many houses as a pastor in New Orleans. I have peered into the darkness of a home with no electricity and all the broken windows covered by plywood. I have seen the pallets on bare concrete where little children slept without heat or air conditioning. I have seen the stairwells of apartment buildings choked with debris where trash pickup as a city service seemed to have been abandoned.

I knew in my heart what a difference it would make if those children could grow up in a house that was safe and bright, warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

First Baptist Church of New Orleans operated a Kid's Club for 14 years in the Florida Housing Community in the Upper Ninth Ward. Every Saturday a group of volunteers went to the community center playground, played games with the children, taught Bible lessons, sang songs, and fed them lunch. Sometimes rudimentary medical care was provided by medical residents and nurses. Clothing and Christmas gifts were distributed to children and adults alike.

We started that ministry the year 17 people were murdered in that one housing community and New Orleans became the homicide capital of America. We helped families bury their teenagers shot dead in the streets. We comforted little children who tracked through the blood of murders outside their doors. We brought them to church, took them to camp by the hundreds, and placed some of them in the Louisiana Baptist Children's Home.

The Upper Ninth Ward, like most areas of high crime and poverty, was largely populated by single mothers and their children. The husbands and fathers were almost universally absent. One deacon at First Baptist New Orleans invested thousands of hours as a volunteer helping these families in every imaginable way, including showing up in jail and in court when they were in need. He gave more of himself in more practical ways to the poor in our city than any volunteer I knew. In conversation one day he told me that he never entered a home in the Florida housing area in which a married couple lived together with their biological children. He visited personally in dozens of homes.

The Florida Housing Community went through demolition and rebuilding before Hurricane Katrina. For a long time social stratification in the area was determined by whether one lived in the "brick" or the "paint." The old buildings were brick and badly in need of demolition. The new and beautiful buildings were painted in pastel colors and were

very nicely appointed. Unfortunately, the entire Florida Housing Community flooded when the levees broke, was boarded up after the flood, and will likely be demolished.

Our church ministry team began to discuss in the fall of 2004 how we could take the ministry in the Florida Housing Community to the next level and what that level might be. We had started two churches in the area in the previous 14 years. We were helping with recreation, school work, food, healthcare, legal services, and moral instruction. We did not know what to do next, but we knew that what we were doing was not enough.

THE MAYOR MAKES A STATEMENT

New Orleans' Mayor C. Ray Nagin initiated a prayer breakfast for pastors at a downtown hotel in the fall of 2004 in an atmosphere of increasing street violence and gang activity. I attended and tried to ask a question. I held the microphone for 10 minutes, but the organizers never recognized me. I gave up and returned to my seat.

In the waning moments of that meeting, Mayor Nagin began to discuss the impact of poverty on the community lifestyle and values. Poverty in New Orleans has proven resistant to all kinds of government initiatives. Government housing projects such as the Florida community where we worked tend to become seedbeds for drugs, gangs, and crime, the Mayor observed.

Then the Mayor said something like this: "The single most important factor in lifting a family permanently out of poverty is home ownership." I borrowed a pen and wrote it down hastily.

That sentence hit me like a lightning bolt. The Mayor went on to discuss other things, but I was captivated by that one affirmation.

"Could it be?" I asked myself as we rose to our feet for a closing prayer. "Is owning a home the most important factor in breaking the family cycle of poverty?" I couldn't get the statement out of my head. I had never before heard such a claim.

Several years earlier I had participated in the formation of a local chapter of Habitat for Humanity in Temple, Texas. The church where I served as pastor, First Baptist Church of Temple, had given the seed money to begin this good work in our community. Several months after the chapter was formed we helped build a home not far from our church. I attended the dedication ceremony for that home and met the new homeowner. I was impressed with every aspect of that process.

But it never occurred to me that owning that home had the potential to change forever the economic standing and future of that woman, her children, and her grandchildren.

Prompted by the Mayor's statement, I went with a friend and fellow church member, Jerry Riggs, to the local office of the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO). Jerry, a native New Orleanian with a great heart for people, owned a number of apartments and

houses in the city and was a principal at a local school. I asked the HANO representative about the Mayor's statement. He agreed with the Mayor's statement. Others confirmed the Mayor's assertion. Even beyond education and job training, home ownership was the most important variable in bringing a family out of poverty into economic self-reliance.

I learned in my research that the majority of the personal wealth of Americans is in their homes. Home ownership is the normal and natural way that many Americans increase wealth and create a financial estate for their children.

A BAPTIST FOUNDATION REACHES OUT

An administrative assistant at Baptist Community Ministries (BCM) called me in the fall of 2004. She asked if I could attend a meeting of a subcommittee of the board of directors. I told her I would be there.

I served for three years on the visiting committee of the McFarland Institute, one of the subsidiary organizations under the BCM umbrella. The Institute offered a program in Clinical Pastoral Education for those training for the chaplaincy and other ministries.

I already knew that BCM was the largest foundation in the state of Louisiana. Byron Harrell, the CEO and president of BCM, was a big man with a big heart. He led the board of trustees of Southern Baptist Hospital to sell the hospital when it became apparent that a single hospital operation could not compete with the large conglomerates in the emerging climate of medical delivery services. The board of directors converted the assets of the hospital into a foundation aimed at addressing the most pressing needs of New Orleans.

Byron Harrell and the board of BCM were focused on healthcare, law enforcement, and education. But they were anxious to join with other Baptist entities to expand our work and witness in New Orleans. Joe McKeever, director of missions for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans, attended the meeting with me. This question was put on the table for all of us to contemplate: "What can Baptists do together in our city?"

I leaned back in my chair. I knew what I was about to say was not common practice for Baptist churches. I knew that it fell outside of the BCM mission focus. But I also knew that I couldn't get it out of my heart.

"Let's build houses," I replied. "Let's put together a building blitz and build an entire city block of homes."

"How many homes are you talking about?" a board member asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "I guess a city block would accommodate 40 homes, 10 on each side. We could establish a partnership with Habitat for Humanity."

"Would Habitat be able and willing to do that?" someone asked.

“I’ll find out,” I answered, and felt a surge of hope and excitement in my soul. “If we did this together, it would be a great witness to our city. It would capture the imagination of our people. And it would change forever the economic future of 40 hard-working families in our city.”

This idea, more than any other, energized the people in the meeting, and everyone left with a sense that we should proceed down this road with further investigation and discussion. I called Jim Pate with the local chapter of Habitat and asked about a building blitz of 40 homes.

“We can do it,” Jim said without the slightest hesitation. And so began the project that, after the great flood, would become the most hopeful place in New Orleans.

AN ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS

Church groups have seen New Orleans as a destination of choice for many years. Inner-city ministry here was full-blown before the storm. Thousands of students arrived every spring break looking for ways to help. And thousands more came every summer to help conduct recreation ministries, children’s clubs, and every conceivable outreach to those at risk and in need.

As a pastor, I watched them come and go. Their numbers and their energy amazed me. They worked on projects of every description and were deployed through a host of local churches and ministries.

I know these volunteer groups made a difference in the lives of thousands of people. But I also know that they came and went like a water spout on the surface of Lake Pontchartrain. When the great volunteer influx of spring and summer was over, it was hard to tell what had been accomplished.

At various times before Hurricane Katrina, I suggested to my friends and local leaders of the churches that we should consolidate our efforts, put a fine point on our purpose, and work together to make a greater impact in the city. That idea was met with interest and affirmation, but we had no central clearinghouse for projects or volunteers.

Building homes seemed to me to be a great way to use the volunteer workforce that came to our city to make a significant and lasting difference in the community. The building blitz was easy to conceive, inspiring to contemplate, and would result in visible, physical, and positive change for our community.

GOD LED US TO BUILD HOUSES

I knew that God had called us to love our neighbors. I knew that deeds of kindness and concern were part of following Jesus. Therefore I knew that helping poor families achieve homeownership was a good and loving work consistent with the character and calling of God.

But I wasn't absolutely certain that "build houses" was a specific word from God just for me. I am not accustomed to having God tell me things like this—a specific instruction to accomplish some concrete task. I always couched my spiritual inclinations with the proviso, "I feel led to..." It seemed too arrogant and arbitrary for a pastor to always be announcing that he had heard a specific word from God to go do a certain thing—unless that certain thing was clearly spelled out in the Scriptures. It seemed to me to be wide open to abuse—and use as a tool for manipulating others.

A good friend and deacon in the church had asked if I really felt that building houses was good for us to do. It seemed to him to be outside the mission and ministry of our church. I went to God again in prayer. I sensed in my soul that we should do this good work. I spoke to the congregation and told them of my earnest prayer for God's direction and my great sense of peace in proceeding with the plan.

I shared the idea of building 40 new homes with pastors who have been my friends for many years. Some of them expressed honest concerns.

"Building houses is not really the work of the church," some said. "Where does it say that we should do that in the Bible?"

"What about 'I was a stranger, and you took me in'?" I mused out loud (Matthew 25:35). But I knew that what I was feeling led to do was too specific to claim a direct biblical mandate.

Some pastors were concerned that the project did not seem to directly benefit the church.

"Will these new homeowners be Christians?" they asked. "It makes more sense to provide homes for God's people so they can be witnesses in that area."

"No," I replied. "Our partnership with Habitat for Humanity will not allow that kind of discrimination. Besides, this project is about following Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan loved his neighbor without regard to his religious affiliation or future religious prospects" (Luke 10:25-37).

Their feedback sent me back to God in prayer, pleading for him to show me if this was not the right way. But I felt a strong sense in my soul that this is what God wanted us to do. I stepped up to the church dais the next Sunday in May of 2005. I opened my Bible and preached from the parable of the Good Samaritan. I told the congregation that I felt led to engage in this unusual work, and I believed that God would use it for his glory and to exalt the Savior in our city.

We had a kickoff Sunday in our church for the home-building project June 5, 2005. Everyone seemed inspired and challenged. We had broad support within the leadership of the congregation, and many churches were already interested in helping with the project. We launched the website www.baptistcrossroads.com.

The church and our partners were enthusiastic in their support, but I was continually checking with God about our direction. Truthfully, I believed it was a good idea—even an inspired idea. But I did not begin to understand how truly God had spoken this word until after the great flood of New Orleans on August 29, 2005.

God did not tell us about the flood. Only God knew that the flood was coming.

God led us to build houses. Because God spoke that word, the most hopeful place in New Orleans after the flood was the corner of Alvar and Roman Streets in the Upper Ninth Ward. Some people know it as Musician's Village. We always called it the Baptist Crossroads Project. Every dignitary who came through New Orleans the year after the flood went to that corner to see the progress the city was making. It is a beautiful and inspiring site—dozens of new homes painted bright colors in the middle of dozens of square miles of unimaginable devastation.

Five vacant city blocks were purchased in the Upper Ninth Ward before the storm in anticipation of “the largest building blitz by a single denomination in the history of Habitat for Humanity anywhere in the world,” according to Jim Pate, the director of the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. We initiated the partnership with Habitat almost a year before the flood.

We had determined that we would build 40 homes in 10 weeks in the summer of 2006 with 3,000 volunteers from churches all over the country. Most of the funding was in place before Hurricane Katrina, and thousands of volunteers were already committed to come.

Then came the terrible storm and the failure of the levees on the interior canals in New Orleans. Some people call it the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States. Others call it the greatest engineering failure in the history of the U.S. Corps of Engineers. Some call it a judgment from God.

Overnight, the city with the worst housing stock in America became the city with the least housing stock. I watched by television from our evacuation perch in a hotel Hot Springs, Arkansas, as the saltwater rushed through the levee breaches and the City of New Orleans became part of the sea. And I began to realize that the home-building venture we had planned was something in a different category, a word of great weight and promise.

And I knew that 40 homes would not be near enough.

THE WORK OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING

We formed the Baptist Crossroads Foundation back in 2004, well before the flood, to facilitate the launching of the home-building project. My first communication with that board after the storm was by email from my evacuation perch in north Louisiana. I suggested to the board that we might have to build 400 homes instead of 40.

I contacted our local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity and suggested the same. Jim Pate was on board immediately. We renewed the commitment for the building blitz in the summer of 2006, and we built 30 homes.

Now we are laying out our plans for the next five years. Mike Flores, a deacon at First Baptist and executive vice president of the Baptist Crossroads Foundation, has formulated an effort to renew the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans in a comprehensive way. He has identified 76 city blocks of residential housing that we will target for new construction, renovation, and demolition. By the end of 2011, Baptist Crossroads will seek to help 1,500 homeowners move into their new home, demolish a home that is no longer viable, or renovate a home for re-occupation.

Concurrent with the housing effort, we are formulating partnerships that will pave the roads, do the landscaping, and start up schools in the community. Churches are joining as partners in the effort along with many other business, public and nonprofit entities. We hope that the Upper Ninth will continue to be “the most hopeful place in New Orleans” as a new community emerges from the ruins of the old.

THE PASTOR OUR CHURCH NOW NEEDS

I have always loved the work of the pastor. The diversity of assignments is invigorating to me. Preaching, staff development, and hospital visitation are delightful for me.

But I have never been a pastor in the way that I am doing it now in our devastated city.

I find that the devastation of the flood, which physically surrounds our church facility, is never far from my mind. It disturbs me every day. And it creeps into my teaching and preaching no matter what the text or theme. When I inquire about the appropriateness of this intrusion, I receive mixed reviews. Some people went through the storm virtually unscathed while thousands lost everything. They sit together in the church pews. One is ready to move on. The other lives in a FEMA trailer still and cannot move on.

Churches and other nonprofit organizations have led the way in the rescue, the relief, and the recovery of New Orleans. It now appears that they will also lead the way in the city's rebirth. As a pastor, I have actively participated in each of these stages of the disaster and its aftermath. My calendar was typically too crowded before the storm. Now I must add to the funerals and weddings and hospital visits and committee meetings another layer of activity—the recovery. This week alone I have had meetings concerning economic development, education, healthcare, criminal justice, and housing. I am continually groping for a balance between the traditional responsibilities of pastoral ministry and the new responsibilities of disaster recovery.

Many new partnerships and coalitions have been formed as a result of the flood. Organizations of all kinds from all over the country are interested in our needs and opportunities. I meet with them eagerly because I know we must have their continued

support. Ministers are gathering to develop unified strategies for dealing with common problems. I want to be there.

The media are interested and concerned. The newspaper asks for a guest editorial, a local radio talk show needs an hour of live conversation, and a radio network in Illinois wants an extended interview. Everyone in higher education and church relations is studying the response to the disaster and needs a moment.

I am fully aware that my assignment has changed. I know that the pastor of First Baptist Church of New Orleans must be engaged in the work of recovery. I did not choose this context for ministry—God chose it for me. Therefore, I must make the adjustments that are required to be faithful in my new role. I stay in a steep learning curve.

CONCLUSION

First Baptist New Orleans is in the most unreal and surreal situation imaginable, sitting in the flood zone of New Orleans with 85 percent of the population still gone, and I am finally having a ball. For the first four months after the storm I felt that we had all fallen under God's judgment. Now I realize that we have all fallen under his favor—we are the chosen ones. We have been given the incredible opportunity to participate in shaping of the future of a great American city. We are operating right now in the land of dreams and legends. From the rich soil of this moment will come the poetry and songs and prose that will bless the lives of thousands and memorialize these days for generations to come.

God knows why, but we have fallen heir to history's turning point. Out of this unprecedented devastation has arisen an unprecedented opportunity—the building of a major city, a beautiful city, an economic and military center, a world class port, the most interesting city in America.

I thought for awhile that we were in limbo—that outer parking lot of heaven reserved for the unbaptized infants. I realize now that our city is in an embryonic position, being reconceived in the 21st century, and we are its parents and guardians.

This great devastation has occurred, not in the tsunami area of eastern Asia but in the United States of America. That means that we have immense resources to apply to this immense need. Out of this seedbed of destruction will come new ideas in economics, politics, and theology that will change the thinking of future generations.

The church of Jesus Christ in America must rise to this unique challenge. We must show the gospel here as well as speaking it. We must consistently love the displaced and disturbed with love that goes the second mile. In the end we will discover that the experience of devastation has been a tool of sanctification in the church as well as in individual believers. And we will see that our determined presence and witness has exalted the Savior and produced abundant fruit.

EMBRACING SACRIFICE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE REBUILDING NEW ORLEANS HOMES AND BRINGING THE GOSPEL TO LIFE

MARILYN STEWART
LOUISIANA BAPTIST CONVENTION
COMMUNICATIONS TEAM CORRESPONDENT

“EMBRACE SACRIFICE”

As a Louisiana Baptist Convention Communications team correspondent covering the Baptist volunteer operation in New Orleans, I have had the privilege of watching the operation from the unique vantage point of both an outsider reporting on its progress and an insider, a resident of the city that is the beneficiary of the extraordinary diligence of thousands of volunteers.

News of the levee breaks that flooded New Orleans reached my family, as it did so many, the day after Katrina made landfall. Looking back, I can see that for some time afterwards we did not fully comprehend the loss to our community, our church family and to us personally. Perhaps even now, the long-term, far-reaching effects of Katrina have not been calculated. But, because my husband is a faculty member of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the faculty home in which we live belongs to the seminary, we were spared the tedious and daunting task that so many New Orleans homeowners have endured. These losses are the reason the work that Southern Baptist organizations are doing in New Orleans is so very important.

Recently, a volunteer team from Spring Hills Baptist Church in Granville, Ohio explained to me the meaning of the black rubbery wristbands they each wore. The “embrace sacrifice” marking on the wristband was the theme they had adopted for the week as a reminder that they were in a special place at a special time and were called to emulate Christ’s sacrifice. Team members, even the youngest, had a sense of the urgent and opportune moment we have before us to present the gospel in a tangible way to New Orleans. As I have watched those at all levels of the relief, recovery and rebuilding effort who are devoting extraordinary resources and energy to this project, I am hard-pressed to think of a slogan that better describes the spirit and demonstration of kinship I have witnessed in my fellow Southern Baptists who have come to this city’s aid.

While this article presents an overview of the Southern Baptist organizations that are leading the way in rebuilding New Orleans, the story would be incomplete without a sense of the personal commitment of each administrator, manager and volunteer who is implementing the plan. Those in leadership positions, many of them without pay, have all come at some personal sacrifice, putting careers on hold and leaving senior positions of employment and families to take on temporary employment. When the job is finished, these men and women will find themselves back in the job market looking for new employment.

Week in and week out, volunteers from across the nation – from the east coast to the west, north to Alaska and even as far away as Hawaii – come out at personal expense, giving up valuable family, work or vacation time. Many volunteers, both individuals and teams, have returned multiple times and on occasion, have remained on task despite difficult complications. How often I have heard organizational leaders or volunteers say that while they came to do physical labor; they were compelled first by the love of Christ to care for others and to carry the gospel as they went. Perhaps someday we will be studying how the massive response of Southern Baptists to the Gulf Coast region affected by Katrina energized the mission fervor of a new generation of Southern Baptists committed to the Great Commission.

The presence of the different organizations in New Orleans is evidence of what we do best as Southern Baptists. While each is a stand-alone operation, they are also part of a cooperative network at work with Louisiana Baptists and in support of each other. Because each drew first from its own base of ministry resources, utilizing individuals and teams already trained for the task, the work was able to begin almost immediately with a workload manageable by volunteers.

What their investment has meant to New Orleans could not be expressed any better than it has been by the homeowners themselves. A single mother of six children, whose home was damaged almost beyond the point of repair said, “I wouldn’t have a home if it weren’t for the Baptists.” A father with young children, who lost both job and home, but found his family in the special care of a Southern Baptist church in Hawaii said, “What they did for my family – they took the gospel right off the pages of Scripture and brought it to life.”

BRINGING THE GOSPEL TO LIFE

Operation N.O.A.H. (New Orleans Area Homes) Rebuild

Operation NOAH is a partnership of the North American Mission Board, the Louisiana Baptist Convention, and the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans and its churches. During its first year, NOAH mobilized more than 10,000 volunteers from around the nation and Canada as they work towards rebuilding 1,000 homes and 20 churches, a goal representing one percent of the 100,000 area homes damaged or destroyed by Katrina. As of the operation’s first anniversary in May 2007, volunteers who have shared the gospel with homeowners and neighbors have seen 203 people come to faith in Christ.

Southern Baptist conventions of six states- the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, the Southern Baptist Convention of Texas, the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Kentucky, Missouri, Alabama and Oklahoma Baptist Conventions - have joined with NOAH by “adopting” a section of the city and concentrating their efforts there. These sister conventions play a vital role in providing volunteer assessors to evaluate damaged homes and have proven faithful in encouraging their own churches to send workers.

Project coordinator David Maxwell oversees the New Orleans team, including staff, office and warehouse operations and volunteer management. A Louisiana pastor who first joined the NOAH team as a construction coordinator, Maxwell and his wife, Wanda, are representative of the spirit and commitment of the NOAH personnel. Maxwell has said, “I left the pastorate, but I didn’t leave the ministry.” In representing NOAH’s mission to others, Maxwell says, “We have a golden opportunity to share the gospel and glorify God.”

Managing the construction operation is Steve Gahagan, a professional builder with more than twenty years of experience, including years of service with Habitat for Humanity and NAMB’s World Changers. While NOAH volunteers handle a variety of job orders, the bulk of their work involves roofing, electrical and plumbing rough-in, and the installation of windows, doors, insulation and drywall. Building materials are purchased primarily through homeowners’ resources but NOAH’s partnership with the Salvation Army provides a link to additional resources for homeowners who qualify. Supplies and materials are managed by the NOAH warehouse housed on the property of a Southern Baptist church during an interim period in which the church restructured its ministry in light of the heavy damage to its community.

NOAH office manager Dianne Gahagan came to the project from a corporate position as chief financial officer and with sixteen years of finance and managerial experience. Gahagan’s staff, many of whom are short-term volunteers and Mission Service Corps missionaries, oversee the process linking homeowners to volunteer teams and other resources. Located on the property of Calvary Baptist Church in Algiers, a region of New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi River, the office is next door to “Fort Calvary,” a small recreational vehicle park that is home to many of the NOAH staffers and to volunteers who travel by RV.

“Volunteer Village,” three floors of the World Trade Center in downtown New Orleans leased and operated by NOAH, provides housing accommodations for volunteers. One floor houses a cafeteria and worship area, with each of the other floors designated as sleeping quarters for men or women volunteers. Gutted prior to Katrina in preparation for renovations, the space was readily modified with showers and bedding to accommodate as many as 450 volunteers per night.

Although Baptists at every level – national, state and local – are involved in carrying out NOAH’s very sizeable construction project, they are mindful that their primary task is to present the gospel in deed and in word. Steve Gahagan has said, “The most fulfilling part of the job is when a volunteer tells me they have led someone to the Lord – that’s why we’re here. God has used Katrina to give us a city open to the gospel.”

Arkansas Baptist Builders in partnership with Kansas/Nebraska

The Arkansas Baptist Convention disaster relief team, as did several other state teams, responded to Katrina with feeding and chainsaw units just days after the storm. Arkansas’ presence in the New Orleans area was continuous even as the disaster team’s focus changed from relief to recovery to rebuilding. When power was restored to the Gentilly neighborhood in July 2006, Gentilly Baptist Church became the Arkansas Baptist

Builders headquarters for operations and a housing site for volunteers. Repairs and renovations made on more than 23,000 square feet of the facility by the Arkansas Builders restored the church building for ministry and provided a base for mobilizing volunteer crews in Gentilly and throughout the city. The completion of additional renovations to the church's gym in February 2007 increased the number of volunteers that could be housed on-site from 95 to 200 per night.

Nearly three thousand volunteers from across the nation, of all ages, backgrounds and abilities, have been a part of the Arkansas project since January 2006. Of that number, almost half were mobilized in the first quarter of 2007 alone. Focusing primarily on restoring a house to the point where repairs are manageable by the homeowner, the Arkansas Builders have filled a variety of job orders, including roofing, installing insulation and hanging drywall. While their work continues to gear up in 2007, the Arkansas Builders have completed assignments at more than one hundred homes and have seen 94 individuals come to faith in Christ since the opening days of the operation.

Jackie James, the director of operations for the Arkansas Baptist Builders' New Orleans project, and his wife Linda, put their family-owned business in the hands of a friend to take on the volunteer leadership position. Living in a trailer on Gentilly Baptist Church property, James spends up to forty weeks of the year in New Orleans overseeing a volunteer staff of five project coordinators as well as a kitchen and office staff.

The New Orleans project is a partnership of the Arkansas and the Kansas/Nebraska conventions, with the Kansas/Nebraska Builders providing the electrical expertise so crucial to a home's restoration. Under the supervision of Elijah "Touch" Touchton, the project's lead electrician, Kansas/Nebraska teams have returned every month to provide an important service at a time when licensed electricians are in high demand. Reflecting the diligence and resourcefulness of the volunteer spirit, Touchton's teams haul a trailer of the supplies, tools and ladders needed to complete their job assignments to New Orleans each trip. To make the most of their resources, Touchton and his crew take the rusted electrical wire pulled from gutted homes, burn off the insulation and sell the copper to cover a portion of the fuel cost for the next month's trip. Touchton, who serves as a Mission Service Corps missionary in Kansas doing the same type of work for missions, ministry centers and churches, said, "We will be in New Orleans as long as we're needed."

"Our primary goal is to rebuild lives," James says of the organization's commitment to first fulfilling the Great Commission. "We will be here until God calls us somewhere else."

Baptist Crossroads and First Baptist Church of New Orleans

First Baptist Church of New Orleans has presented a two-fold response to the needs of the city. In partnership with Habitat for Humanity, First Baptist initiated Baptist Crossroads, a building project that proved timely for the city in that plans were finalized prior to Katrina and construction began at a time when housing was critically needed. The original plan of building forty homes proved so successful that Crossroads announced in early 2007 a five-year plan to generate 300 new homes and refurbish many more in a disadvantaged neighborhood of the city. A project particularly popular with student groups,

Crossroads has drawn volunteers from around the world, often having 200-300 volunteers, or more, on-site per week.

Alongside Baptist Crossroads is First Baptist's home relief and recovery ministry that is focused on helping those affected by Katrina. Travis Scruggs, known as First Baptist's "disaster pastor," has overseen the ministry that has gutted homes, hauled away debris and mowed yards, parks and medians. This ministry filled a vital role in the recovery process by continuing to offer this service as other organizations transitioned to a rebuilding focus.

Through the work of more than 16,000 volunteers mobilized through Baptist Crossroads and First Baptist's recovery ministry, 1,000 homes in the New Orleans area have been gutted and more than 140 have come to faith in Christ.

A Host of Other Faithful Supporters

No less important than the large-scale organizations detailed above are the churches in our area who stepped up to help other congregations even in the midst of their own difficulties. Often, churches that had lost facilities, congregations and homes were enabled to minister to the needs of their own community by fellow Baptists who stood alongside in support.

The contribution of churches and individuals that have given sacrificially through the Adopt-a-Church program, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, the Louisiana Baptist Convention, the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans and other connections, is perhaps incalculable. It would be impossible to list the churches that have given and to put a dollar value on what their investment has meant. So many of those who adopted a hurting congregation have exceeded all expectations, going far beyond the responsibility they were asked to assume.

As a member of a Southern Baptist church in New Orleans, I can attest to the outpouring of love and grace from our brothers and sisters in Christ who have done for us what we could not do for ourselves, walked beside us through a difficult task and joined us on our knees before a gracious Father. We are truly grateful.

Women's Leadership Consultation 2008 New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

beyond Hearing

"...having heard the Word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience" (Lk 8:15, NKJV)

Women's Rally

Thursday, February 7, 2008

7:00 pm

Women's Leadership Consultation XVIII

Friday, February 8, 2008

8:30 am to 9:00 pm

Saturday, February 9, 2008

8:30 am to 12 noon

The **Women's Leadership Consultation** provides a forum for leaders of women's work in the local church to network, learn, and apply biblical truth. Sponsored by the six seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention, the WLC is an annual event; however, it is held at the seminary in New Orleans only once every six years.

Join Priscilla Shirer, Diane Machen, and other national, state, and local leaders in women's ministry for a weekend of equipping and encouragement.

We'll go BEYOND HEARING as we learn to teach the Word and live the Word. We will also put our feet where our faith is by prayer walking through some of the New Orleans areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

Priscilla Shirer - Featured Speaker

Through the expository teaching of the Word of God, Priscilla desires to see women not only know the uncompromising truths of Scripture intellectually but experience them practically by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Priscilla and her husband, Jerry, have founded Going Beyond Ministries through which she passionately proclaims the Word to women. Priscilla is the daughter of Tony Evans and the mother of two young sons.



Diane Machen - Worship Leader

For over twenty years, Diane and her husband, Chris, have served the Lord in full-time music ministry. Traveling throughout the country, they have sung concerts, led worship, and ministered in ladies retreats and marriage conferences. As seasoned songwriters, the music of Chris and Diane has been published widely. Diane is the mother of two young adults.



For more information go to www.nobts.edu/wlc or 800.662.8701

AN ASSOCIATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON DISASTER RELIEF

DR. JOE MCKEEVER
DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS
BAPTIST ASSOCIATION OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS

One morning, early in the winter of 2006, I was driving up Elysian Fields Avenue toward our associational offices and the tears were flowing. All around was deadness and devastation. Hardly a soul could be seen anywhere and there was no traffic on the street. I said out loud, “Lord, I’m not just crying about that Walgreen’s or this Burger King. It’s not just that house or the one over there. It’s the whole thing. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

At that moment, the Lord spoke to my heart: “This is not about you. It’s about Me.”

I cannot tell you how liberating that was. Over these many months since Hurricane Katrina devastated our part of the world, I’ve found myself putting arms around our over-stressed pastors and reminding them of that fact. As 2 Corinthians 3:5 puts it, “We are not adequate to think anything of ourselves; but our adequacy is of God.”

In 2004, after 42 years in the ministry and the last 14 as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Kenner, I became director of missions for the 145 Southern Baptist churches of greater New Orleans, a region stretching from lower Plaquemines Parish upriver through St. Bernard, Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Charles Parishes all the way to LaPlace in St. John the Baptist. No one was more surprised than I at this change in my divine assignment, particularly since I was 64 years old. The associational committee asked me to commit for five years in this position.

During the first 12 months, there were times when I questioned the Lord about this call. “The job is a good one,” I would say, “and the pay is fine. I love the churches and the pastors, but I don’t know why you did this. I can give you the names of a dozen younger men who could do as good or better than I in this position.” This time, no word of assurance came from the Lord.

The answer arrived on August 29, 2005. On that Monday, when Hurricane Katrina slammed into our part of the world and the levees began breaking, flooding most of this city, my family and I were holed up in a hotel in Birmingham, Alabama. As we watched the tragedy unfold on television, we tried reaching pastors and friends via our cell phones, which worked spasmodically if at all. The only thing dependable was the internet. Our associational website had not been completed, so we used the one my son Marty had set up in my name.

On Thursday, September 1, I posted a message on www.joemckeever.com about the hurricane. We had no way of knowing that God would use this method of getting our message out to His people literally everywhere.

Thursday, September 1, 2005

They've been telling us the big one was coming. Finally, they were right. Here's what we know:

- *Our pastors and church members are scattered from one end of this country to the other. My associate, Freddie Arnold, spent hours this morning trying to locate pastors... (and) found no one. Bear in mind that all our cell phones have to go through the towers and centers that took the full brunt of Katrina, and you will understand why communication is nearly impossible even for those of us out of harm's way.*
- *Our associational office is across the street from the University of New Orleans and right on the banks of Lake Pontchartrain—and doubtless... under water Freddie set the computer hard drives on chairs before leaving the offices Saturday. No one has any idea what we will find when we are finally able to re-enter.*
- *It is a bizarre feeling to be in anguish over what's happening back at home, to be crying out to God on the behalf of those left behind, and knowing there is not one blessed thing you can do more. It's the very definition of helplessness.*

At the end of that article, 21 individuals left comments. Some were colleagues from previous places we had served, many were family or friends worried about us, and some were strangers who had stumbled onto the website.

Weeks later, when we were able to enter our offices on Lakeshore Drive, we were delighted to find them high and dry. We had taken almost no hurricane damage and no flooding whatsoever. However, power was not restored for months. Our first day back in the associational offices was January 16. Phone service was restored on April 3. In the meantime, we lived on our cell phones and did all of our Internet work from our homes.

On, September 2, our article spoke of New Orleans being loved in a thousand ways.

Friday, September 2, 2005

The rescuers and national guardsmen and law enforcement officials are giving her tough love. The medical staffs in our city and through the South are showering her people with another type of tough love. In the Astrodome and small towns all over the Southland, citizens are locating displaced New Orleanians in their local motels and ministering to them with tenderness and generosity. In Jasper, Alabama, a large family from St. Bernard Parish, just below New Orleans, was found in the Jameson Inn and made front page news in today's Daily Mountain Eagle. Local citizens gave them food and a job and a hundred other kindnesses. Personally, I have sat at my sister's computer here in rural Nauvoo, Alabama, for the last 4 hours receiving and responding to notes from people all over the nation (and a couple from Africa) saying they are praying for us.

At the time, I had no idea of the scope of the hospitality of the entire nation being extended toward our people. After we returned home, the Times-Picayune ran a color-coded map of the United States showing every county that took in one or more citizens of this area following Katrina. There were very few sections untouched by our residents. Nothing like this and on this scale had ever happened in American history.

In New Orleans itself, rescues were still going on. Buses finally were arriving at the Superdome and the Convention Center to transport our people to safety and security. Large

halls and sports arenas around the country were being opened and provisioned to receive our people. Lives were being uprooted and families being changed forever.

I found it hard to watch the news on television. Later, I was to learn that this was not an isolated phenomenon. Displaced residents were handling the stress and the worry of what was happening to their home, their neighborhood, and their city, in different ways. The worship leader at one of our Metairie churches died of a heart attack on Friday following the storm in the South Mississippi town where they had evacuated. His wife said he was so worried about their home. “Had he just held out until Monday,” she said, “we were able to get into the city for a few hours on Labor Day and he would have seen our home come through the storm just fine.” Stress is a killer, and it was killing our people just as surely as the floodwaters were choking out lives inside the city.

Saturday, September 3, 2005

I learned yesterday that a disaster relief group from Arkansas has been in Kenner feeding hundreds of meals a day since last Tuesday! No sooner had the wind passed into central Mississippi than these good folks pulled into the city and set up operations. They are being housed in and restricted to the Kenner city jail. They prepare the meals, then, police drive the containers to two shelters in the city where the ‘refugees’ are being held. For security reasons, the Arkansans are not being allowed to venture into the city, which is locked down.

At this point, I made arrangements with the Louisiana Baptist Foundation to set up an account so friends and churches could contribute to our ministers and our congregations. We publicized the address on our website and in time, hundreds of thousands of dollars were given. We set up a committee of three pastors—an Anglo, a Hispanic, and an African-American—to take all requests for assistance and make the decisions. A year later, this team was still in operation.

A side note: One of the most foolish things I did during those days was to announce that Freddie Arnold and I would be making decisions about who received financial aid from this fund. “That will keep it simple,” I said. A young pastor in our association called me off to the side one day and urged me to reconsider. “No matter what you do,” he said, “some people are going to be unhappy. Better you let others make those decisions.” As the amount of money mounted up and we saw how huge a job this was going to be, I saw the wisdom in his counsel. Many times since, as these three pastors struggled with the various requests for aid from churches and ministers, I have given thanks for the excellent advice from a young minister.

Wednesday, September 7, 2005

How many churches in our area of Louisiana were hurt? We have no idea. So many regions are still off limits due to the high water, blocked roads, and unsafe conditions. Once we’re able to return, job one will be finding out which churches still exist and which were erased from the map.

Margaret and I drove home on Saturday, September 24, after exactly 4 weeks of evacuation. The next week, Freddie Arnold and I began driving the streets and backroads of these parishes looking for our churches. It would be several days before the streets into Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes were opened.

When I sat down to write a letter to the churches, out of 145 congregations pre-Katrina, we counted 35 that were still meeting. We were to discover that some churches, like Delacroix Hope and Alluvial City and Reggio in St. Bernard had disappeared from the earth. Others, like the First Baptist Church of Arabi and Elysian Fields Avenue and all five Baptist churches of Plaquemines Parish, were forever ruined and would have to be destroyed. Most of the others that had major flooding would have to be gutted to the studs and completely rebuilt.

By December of 2006, nearly 16 months after Katrina, we count 87 Southern Baptist churches up and running. Some, like Edgewater and Poydras, are meeting in their renovated fellowship halls, and some, like Franklin Avenue, are meeting in other churches' sanctuaries. Two new churches joined our association. Good News and New Vision Baptist churches voted to become part of our group and their pastors have become familiar faces at our various meetings. The pastor of one of those churches brought a laugh from our ministers when he confessed, "Actually, we would have joined your association several years ago, but we were waiting on a particular deacon to go to Heaven."

Saturday, September 10, 2005

They're now saying they may have overestimated the number of dead in New Orleans. It beats me how they ever came up with figures of 20,000 or even 40,000 in the first place.... I pray that on reentering New Orleans, we will have surprisingly few funerals to conduct.

This prayer was answered. The total numbers of the dead eventually surpassed one thousand, but most were found over the ensuing weeks and even months. A year after the hurricane, dead bodies were still being pulled out of houses, particularly in the most heavily flooded portions of the city such as the Lower 9th Ward. As I write this, in early December, 2006, another body has been found.

A young pastor of a church in east New Orleans that was fairly well destroyed e-mailed, "What will we ever do? I don't know what to do now?" I wrote back, "My friend, you are about to see something you will be talking about the rest of your life. God is about to do a work that will change your ministry forever, and you will always be grateful you were here to see it happen."

"God has directed the attention of the world to New Orleans, and the attention of all Southern Baptists to the churches of New Orleans. Soon, you will have... churches lining up to adopt your church. They will be sending in teams to help you. If your church has to be bull-dozed and rebuilt from scratch, you'll have lots of friends to help."

By early September, Southern Baptists' disaster relief groups were all over this area, running feeding units and assisting in a hundred ways. High-level denominational leaders were establishing a system for our churches to be adopted by healthy churches throughout the SBC. Our people might have been evacuated and most of our churches shut down, but God's people across America were already at work, planning ways to help us.

At this point, my primary function seemed to be as a connector between our churches and pastors and the SBC congregations across the country that were signing on to sponsor them. For a while, I was using two cell phones to handle all the calls. Every time I

turned my computer on, 40 or 50 new messages were waiting from people wanting to come and help rebuild this city or send supplies or connect with a missing church leader.

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

Understand that New Orleans is going to be different. Understand that this (work) is going to be hard and dirty and you will be uncomfortable. Today in Hammond I was told of two chain saw crews that arrived from another state, but turned around and went home when they discovered we had no air-conditioned accommodations for them to stay in.

Understand that in bringing a team to help us rebuild, at first you will need to send a scouting party in to look over the situation and talk to local leaders to see what your group will be doing. Then go back and select the workers you decide would be right and assemble the materials and tools you will need. The Florida Baptist Convention is asking their people who come to plan to be completely self-sufficient.

As a connector, I found myself repeating the same explanations and giving the same answers over and over, so I developed a rather lengthy article and posted it on the website to brief potential workers on what to expect down here. We had quickly discovered that some churches had their own programs which they wanted to install in our churches, and that their mission trips seemed to be more about meeting their needs than ones down here.

Understand that if your church decides to adopt one of our churches, you will not be able to come in and put in some program you found to your liking back home. This is a local church with members and deacons and pastors, and we ask visiting teams to respect that. They will establish their own directions as the Lord shows them, and sponsors will want to come in and help them fulfill it.

David Hankins, Louisiana Baptists' executive-director, gave his personal commitment that every pastor who was on duty prior to the hurricane would have his financial needs met for the next 12 months. It would be up to Freddie Arnold and me to connect our pastors with these resources.

Tomorrow (actually Wednesday, September 14), I'll be meeting with a group of New Orleans Baptist pastors here in Jackson, Mississippi, at the First Baptist Church. We've sent the word out in every direction, but have no idea whether we will have a handful or a dozen or twenty or more.

Twenty showed up. That was the first surprise. They had driven from Oklahoma, north Alabama, Louisiana, and south Mississippi to get there. The second surprise was how deeply everyone was moved. They were hugging and crying and praying and sharing. We met at 10 o'clock and they were still there, talking and visiting, three hours later. At that point, I realized we were on to something. Our pastors were going to be needing each other.

Prior to Katrina, our monthly pastors' meetings might draw 20 or 25 ministers, most of whom did not know each other. And the next month, even with the same number, it would be an entirely different group. But this had changed forever.

The following Wednesday, we moved the meeting to the First Baptist Church of LaPlace. Pastor Bobby Burt offered to provide lunch. When Hurricane Rita took aim at

Louisiana, we tried to cancel this meeting, but Freddie Arnold went anyway, just in case some did not get the word. Twenty showed up.

For the next 8 months, we met each week at the LaPlace Church, from 9 am to noon, followed by lunch. Attendance varied from 30 to 95. The program was completely spontaneous, depending on who showed up, who had information to share, who needed comforting. A visiting director of missions from Arkansas told us, "When they said we would be attending a 3 hour pastors' conference, I groaned. But you could not have told me it would be so positive and uplifting."

Denominational leaders attended our weekly meetings as well as "scouts" from churches and associations checking out the area before bringing their teams in. Some arrived with gifts such as a hundred backpacks filled with toiletries, writing material, and other necessities. Some brought gifts of money or books. The pastors quickly learned that to miss this weekly gathering might mean losing out on some tangible encouragement!

After LaPlace, we met for 3 months at Oak Park in Algiers, then 3 months at Good Shepherd (Spanish) in Metairie, at the New Orleans Chinese Church in Kenner for two weeks, and then at the Baptist Center on Lakeshore for the duration.

At this point (December 2006), our weekly meeting continues, although we have shortened it to two hours. I keep remembering what a leader from the North American Mission Board said. "I was a pastor in South Florida when Hurricane Andrew went through and destroyed so much of our area. We did not have a regular meeting of our pastors--it was every man for himself--and within a year, most of them had moved away."

I cannot begin to count the number of times people have applied the Esther text to my situation: "You have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this" (4:14). Far from being a prideful statement, that realization is overwhelmingly humbling. The Father's purpose required a pastor in this position, one who already knew the pastors and churches and the city.

To answer the question, "What have you done during this crisis?" my quick response would be this: As a pastor to the pastors, I have often been able to connect them to outside sources of help and encouragement, have maintained our website to inform our transplanted residents as well as friends everywhere of the local situation, and have led the weekly gathering of pastors and friends. Obviously, as with any job, there are another hundred tasks of all kinds, but these were the major ones.

I fully accept that this is the reason the Father called me to this position in May of 2004. Katrina may have surprised us, but it didn't slip up on Him. He knows what He is doing.

Soon after we returned from the evacuation, someone printed up hundreds of small stick-in-the-ground plastic signs with this scripture: "I know the plans I have for you, saith the Lord. Plans for your welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11) The signs were posted at intersections all over the area. It was a message

New Orleans desperately needed and continues to draw hope from. Dr. Chuck Kelley has chosen that Scripture as the seminary's assurance in this ongoing crisis.

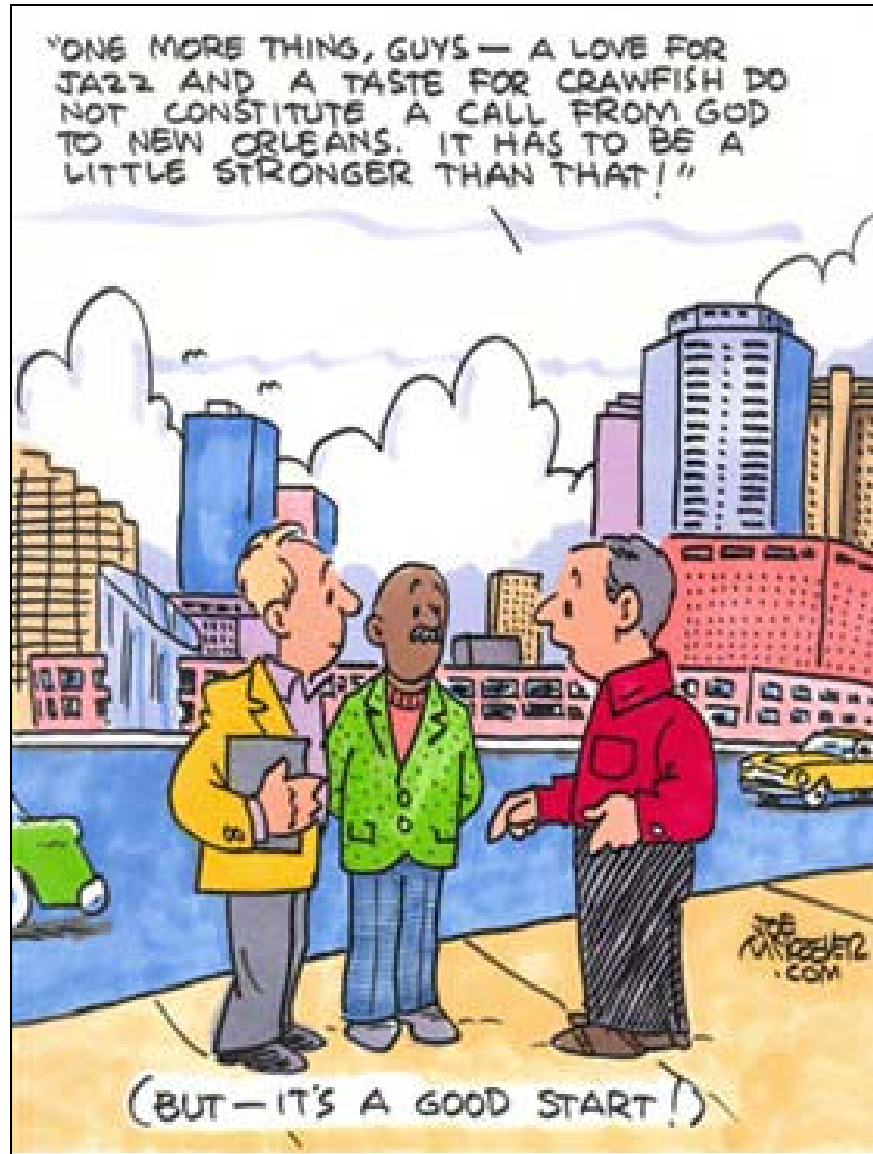
"The Lord knows." Nothing is more comforting.

"The Lord has plans." So liberating.

"The Lord's plans are good." So uplifting.

JOE MCKEEVER CARTOONS

DR. JOE MCKEEVER
DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS
BAPTIST ASSOCIATION OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS



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STATE AND ASSOCIATIONAL MISSIONS INVOLVEMENT IN NATURAL DISASTERS

DR. EMIL TURNER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
ARKANSAS BAPTIST STATE CONVENTION

There was an atmosphere of revival among them. The music was louder, more enthusiastic, the preacher was more animated, and even the Sunday School director was excited about giving the Sunday School report. The church was a rural, “smaller membership” congregation with a bi-vocational pastor, but this Sunday there was a sense of significance that had not been there in a long time.

What was responsible for the excitement? Hurricane Katrina.

Their first mission trip served people who had been displaced by this terrible natural disaster. The impact was tremendous. They fed hungry people, encouraged people who had no hope, gave away possessions to those who had nothing, prayed with people, and led lost people to Christ. The small, rural, congregation had been the Body of Christ serving people in need.

At the second anniversary of Katrina’s arrival there have been reports and news articles that stress the impact of volunteers on the residents of New Orleans. And a few have reported on the impact that has been made on the churches and church members that volunteered. And that impact has been powerful.

But the untold story is the critically important involvement of associations and state conventions in the relief efforts. We can not expect the reporters for major newspapers to understand how Baptist organizations and entities facilitate the relief work. They can not tell our story. While some Baptist newspaper reporters do understand the involvement of foundational Baptist organizations in the relief efforts, they rarely report on this involvement. I am grateful for this opportunity to make a brief presentation of the involvement of state conventions and associations in touching lives at such a critical time.

I do not believe the ministry to Gulf Coast or to other areas ravaged by disasters would have been as effective without the involvement of local Baptist associations and the state conventions.

Southern Baptist disaster relief occurs every Sunday morning when church members give their tithes and offerings. The next step in the process is the vote of the church in its business meeting to give a percentage of those undesignated receipts to the Cooperative Program, and associational budgets. A third step is taken when the church gives to its state missions offering. The state convention and the association are involved at the very outset in promoting and encouraging this giving. Though it takes place in the local church, different personnel in the state conventions and the Associational Missionary has made the case for such financial sacrifice in order to touch lives outside the immediate community of

that local church. This is the fountainhead of the disaster relief work. Without the Cooperative Program, associational giving, and state missions offerings, Disaster Relief as we know it would not exist. And without state conventions and associations, those offerings and gifts would not exist.

Associations and state conventions provide the “hardware” for disaster relief. Feeding units (mobile kitchens that can prepare large numbers of meals), chain saws, building materials, mobile shower units, generators, tractor-trailer combinations, material handling equipment, pressure washers, and a myriad of other items are purchased by state conventions and associations so that when a disaster strikes, the necessary tools are in place. Usually this equipment is strategically located within the state conventions that have purchased or helped to purchase them. When a disaster strikes this equipment is deployed quickly, and precisely to the place where the needs are greatest. The Cooperative Program gifts, associational budgets, and state missions offerings are the resources that purchase and maintain this valuable and often life-saving equipment. Before Katrina’s winds stopped blowing in New Orleans, mobile kitchens were in operation in that city to feed people who had nothing to eat. More than 17 million meals were served by these units. The equipment that prepared the meals, the food that was prepared, and the transportation to the disaster site were all provided by the state conventions and associations.

Not only is the “hardware” amassed by associations and state conventions, but its deployment is coordinated by them as well. This coordination begins long before a hurricane comes ashore or a terrorist flies a plane into a tower. Coordination begins with recruitment and training. Recruiting volunteers is easy in the first few days after a disaster, but state conventions and associations recruit a large cadre of volunteers that are already available before the disaster. If no one was recruited prior to a disaster, the delay in meeting needs could be tragic. Furthermore, in the weeks after a disaster, when volunteers are suffering “compassion fatigue”, the recruiting of relief workers must continue unabated. The exhaustion of a group of volunteers has nothing to do with whether or not the needs have been met. Others must be ready to take their places.

Volunteers who have been recruited must be trained. Sometimes the need for training is obvious, other times it is not. Running chainsaws after a storm obviously requires training, but feeding people requires training in food preparation, hygiene, and resource allocation. Training in basic counseling skills is critical to any disaster relief effort. Because of the compassion of Southern Baptists, associations and state conventions have recruited and trained the largest and most effective volunteer force in America.

Most state conventions have either a staff person or a volunteer whose responsibility it is to put prepare a response to natural and man-made disasters. This person’s work is supplemented by others on the staff of the state convention whose duties parallel or intersect with this responsibility. Prayer coordinators, chaplains, counselors, and others are involved with and subject to the Disaster Relief Coordinator when such an event occurs. Usually, the state convention staff member relates to local emergency preparedness officials and to the Red Cross staff and FEMA representatives. These agencies have come to depend on the resources that associations and state conventions have in place. When a disaster occurs, it is not unusual to find that most of the meals reported by the Red Cross or FEMA,

have really been served by Southern Baptist volunteers who have been recruited, trained, and deployed by associations and state conventions.

The deployment of volunteers is a key component in the response of state conventions and associations to a disaster. Good stewardship of the compassion and abilities of volunteers is left to our Baptist organizations in times of crisis. Unless volunteers are deployed strategically, all of them show up at the same time, minimizing the effectiveness of all. Two years after Katrina has worked her destruction in New Orleans, state conventions and associations are still sending a stream of workers to serve those whose needs have not yet been met. Without this stewardship, help would be neither timed nor timely.

How does a carpenter from Crossroads, Arkansas (population, 135) get involved in hanging sheetrock in a home on St. Roche Street in New Orleans? Does he drive to New Orleans, walk up to the nearest house and offer to hang sheetrock? No. The Associational Missionary in Muddy River Association in northeast Arkansas promotes a training conference for disaster relief workers. The pastor of Crossroads Church responds by talking to church members about how they can grow as Christians and have a ministry to needy people. The carpenter's heart is moved and he signs up for the training. The Arkansas Baptist State Convention buys equipment, pays for a meal, sends trained relief worker to the Muddy River Association. The carpenter learns how his trade can be his ministry. His name is added to a list of trained volunteers. Then Hurricane Katrina roars ashore.

What happens next? Immediately, trained Disaster Relief volunteers and staff evaluate the needs and make decisions about what resources to provide. Sometimes the Red Cross or FEMA may request certain resources, but usually state convention staff members, communicating with locally affected Baptist associations, decide what is needed and begin to call volunteers transport and provide services. As the extent of the disaster becomes clearer, more and more resources are sent to the crisis area. The carpenter back in Crossroads has joined his fellow church members in prayer for those who have been displaced and whose needs are so apparent. Soon the state convention disaster relief personnel, sometimes in conjunction with NAMB, always in conjunction with the local association, establishes an area in which volunteers from the state convention can be channeled. The Muddy River Associational Missionary gets the call that crews are needed to help in New Orleans. The pastor at Crossroads prays and asks God to provide the necessary workers. A crew of men and women from Crossroads and other churches in the association, volunteer to spend a week with the state convention volunteer coordinator in New Orleans. Now the carpenter is "on board". That coordinator will locate a place for Crossroads' volunteers to stay, assign them homes on which they will work, and provide information and resources for them. The Associational Missionary will often accompany them to New Orleans and work along side the laymen from his association. The carpenter will work on a shotgun house in the Gentilly area of New Orleans. The elderly couple who live there will meet Baptists for the first time in their lives. And the carpenter, between sheets of drywall, will tell them how he was saved. They will hear the gospel. Their home will be rebuilt. They will never understand how the Cooperative Program, the state missions offering, or the state convention and the Muddy River Association came into play. But eternity will be changed.

The Sunday after the mission trip, back in Crossroads, Arkansas “there was an atmosphere of revival among them. The music was louder, more enthusiastic, the preacher was more animated, and even the Sunday School director was excited about giving the Sunday School report. The church was a rural, smaller membership congregation with a bi-vocational pastor, but this Sunday there was a sense of significance that had not been there in a long time.”

There is yet another aspect of associational and state convention work that is important to the story. The carpenter from Crossroads learned the extent of the crisis, the opportunity for his skills to be implemented, the potential for making a difference, and spiritual significance of such service because of the ministries of his associational missionary and state convention staff. Without such ministries, while the Crossroads church would no doubt have prayed for the victims of the disaster, it is unlikely that they could have conceived a role to play in the crisis.

Make no mistake; nothing happens without churches, pastors, and laypersons who volunteer. But without the work of the state conventions and associations, many live who would have died, many know Christ who once were lost, many have homes and food who would have had nothing. The impact of associations and state conventions at such a time can not be overstated.

But what is the impact on associations and state conventions? “Great in every respect.”

Associations are given new vision for missions, and associational missionaries become resource “managers” who recruit and allocate personnel and material for service to needy people. The value of the association to local churches is enhanced as the association becomes the key unit in providing ministry. Today there are voices who suggest that associations have outlived their usefulness. But you will not hear these voices in New Orleans, or at the World Trade Center sites, or anywhere relief work is being done.

State conventions are also impacted by such efforts. Their ability to raise the state missions offerings is enhanced as people realize how their gifts are used. The profile of the state convention looms large as church leaders realize that it is the most effective means of accomplishing this vital work. As churches become more sacrificial and more “missional”, the state convention is strengthened.

No one rejoices at the occurrence of a disaster. However, God has always used disasters to reveal what His people are “on the inside”. Recent disaster relief efforts have helped highlight the value of associations and state conventions. May God give us more ways to serve those who have no hope without Him.

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