



# Louisiana

COOPERATIVE BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP

## News & Views

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# Louisiana Couple: The Presence of Christ Among Gypsies



CBF Missionary Mary Van Rheenen plays string game with Romany child who is a Bosnian refugee.

For Louisiana native Keith Holmes and his wife Mary Van Rheenen, ministry in a "world without borders" is literally true. For eight years now, they have served as CBF missionaries to a people known for nomadic wanderings that ignore national boundaries. Gypsies are legendary in their migrations. The term "Gypsy," which came from the mistaken idea these movements originated in "Egypt," is often now viewed as a derogatory name. "Romany" is preferred.

Their language, "Romani," does not refer to Rome or Romania but is based on ancient Sanskrit which has allowed scholars to trace linguistic clues across the centuries of migration back to Northwest India and Pakistan in the 10th century. Later migration took the Romany to Persia, Turkey, then Europe (getting as far as Paris by the 1400's) and finally to Australia and the Americas in the 20th century. Along the way culture

and language has sometimes been lost. In spite of incredible hardships and persecution, Romany steadfastly cling to their language and ways.

Language, in fact, is a primary focus of the Holmes' ministry. It is a special challenge as centuries of movement have created much diversity. Mary explains, "Romany people in Europe speak over 20 different dialects and languages. Not one of these has an authorized version of the entire Bible! ...These dialects are seldom written down and have no standardized spellings. The Romany themselves have an oral rather than a literate culture. Some groups object to having their language written."

Given such a history of persecution, Romany are naturally distrustful of "gadgo" or outsiders. Thus Keith and Mary face several obstacles: (1) finding or creating books, tapes or videos for myriad dialects; (2) overcoming wariness of "gadgo" and (3) breaking down language taboos and finding media Romany will accept. Through years of patience by missionaries, many Romany are now requesting copies of the "Jesus" video in their dialect. Often they are quite discreet in receiving the videos, quickly concealing them as if they were contraband!

The mission statement for CBF Global Missions is "...to collaborate with churches and other groups to engage in holistic missions and ministries with the most neglected people in a world without borders." The Holmes' work perfectly mirrors that statement. They collaborate with various groups committed to the Gospel. They share the love of Christ by print and recording, preaching and VBS, and



CBF Missionary Keith Holmes works with native speakers in dubbing video "Jonah" into a Romani dialect.

### ROMANY AT A GLANCE

**Population:** 30 to 40 million (estimates vary a great deal because many Romany are not counted in any census.)

**Religion:** Tend to adopt predominant religion where they live

**Language:** Romani and/or languages of countries where they live

**Locations:** India (23.5 million); large concentrations in the Balkans, central Europe, Russian and other former republics of the USSR; smaller numbers in Western Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and the Americas

#### **Persecution History:**

- Ottoman Empire used them as slaves
  - Enslaved in Europe, in parts of Romania as late as 1865
  - Frequently deported, nomadic pattern likely result of not being allowed to settle
  - Christian church hostile because they "practiced magic"
  - Nazis exterminated a half-million Romany, 80% of some tribes
  - Today: Alarming trend of violence and discrimination noted in central and Eastern Europe; from citizenship restriction to mob violence, still a scapegoat minority
- Cultural Characteristics:** Steadfastness, creativity, self-consciousness, love for freedom, strong sense of group solidarity, exclusiveness, holding of traditions as sacred

**Traditional Occupations:** Musicians, acrobats, fair and circus artists, horse riders and traders, fortune-tellers, peddlers and craftsmen

**Common Social Indicators:** High unemployment, illiteracy and death rates, frequently among the poorest of the poor

see ROMANY next page

## ROMANY, continued

supporting special projects that focus on physical, spiritual and emotional needs that empower the Romany people and transform families and communities.

Many Romany are the "poorest of the poor." They have undergone serious deprivation and frequently the social problems that can accompany such conditions. A special program that addresses such needs is Project Ruth of Providence Baptist Church in Bucharest. What began in 1992 as a two-afternoon-a-week tutoring and day care outreach to poor families in the Gypsy community blossomed into something much more. The church discovered many older children were illiterate and due to nomadic lifestyle, prejudice or other barriers "were 3 or 4 years past the age at which they should have started school and effectively already excluded from the education system." When the church approached the authorities regarding this need, the government was skeptical "since primary education is compulsory in Romania and it was therefore believed that illiteracy did not exist." With persistence, permission was finally granted to begin the school in 1994. Project Ruth now reaches over 300 children and their families through the school and satellite programs in other parts of Romania and



and Moldova.

Additional services now include meals, day center activities, medical help, hygiene support, laundry facilities, and humanitarian aid. Its directors note, "Our services ensure a primary education for poor children and help to keep them where they belong—in the family."

Development is a key goal in a number of ministries from the Gypsy Smith School of Evangelism (an off-shoot of Project Ruth) that trains and develops Romany pastors and church leaders— to a new partnership with a Christian micro-economic development agency that will help Romany families improve their lot. This agency offers training for farmers and small entrepreneurs, provides loans, technical assistance and teaches business ethics. All of these activities suggest working for the Kingdom, mimicking Jesus' concern for the

whole person.

Missionaries report an openness of the Romany to the Kingdom, this gospel, when it is communicated in their own language and culture. The Romany people have been adaptable for a millennia. New challenges have come with the modern age. Their nomadic culture is slowly giving way to more permanent residences. Even as they settle though, they continue to find themselves on the fringes of society, still considered outcasts. You have the opportunity to be a part of bringing Good News, to announce to Romany there is room at God's table for them. Support this work with your prayers, go as a volunteer, or give to the CBF Global Mission offering that others may serve. ●



CBF-LA Coordinator  
Lynn Hawkins

### ON GLOBAL MISSIONS

*There is only one offering that supports CBF missions. It is the Global Mission Offering. Individuals and churches are requested at different times to support this offering but most of the gifts come at Christmas time. We have been taught over the years to give to missions at this upcoming holiday season.*

*Large personal gifts the last few years have helped CBF expand its world mission program. These large gifts have been a blessing and we are all thankful. However, the need is to build our base with large numbers of individuals and churches giving to global missions. Gifts from Louisiana actually decreased last year from the year before. We must not let this happen again this year! God has been so good to us and we need to respond by making sacrificial gifts to world missions through the Global Mission Offering.*

*I am asking that this year we, in Louisiana, dig deep in our pockets to give for the expansion of Global Missions. Your Global Mission gift will make a difference. Where it is possible, give your Global Mission Offering through your church. If that is not possible send your mission gift to CBF, or CBF-LA designated for Global Missions.*

KEITH AND MARY ARE COMING TO LOUISIANA IN JUNE. CONTACT THEM ABOUT SPEAKING IN YOUR CHURCH AT: [kh@worldmail.org](mailto:kh@worldmail.org)



*Give*  
Generously to the  
**Offering for Global Missions**  
National Goal: \$6,100,000

YOUR OFFERINGS SUPPORT  
153 CBF MISSIONARIES  
AROUND THE WORLD

### A Missionary's Heart

*How do you deal with overwhelming need? How do you discern the best use of limited resources and yield to the Spirit's moving in being a redemptive presence? How do you explain it to your children? Keith shares his struggle, passion and hope in describing an encounter with a Romany woman in Italy.*

We saw her sitting outside the door to a church in Assisi. The thin woman in mismatched clothes sat up a bit as we approached, waved a Polaroid of two toddlers at us, and clearly asked, in Italian, for money for food. I shook my head and stepped inside. The entire interior of the church was frescoed, each wall and the ceiling. The floor was covered with an impressive mosaic. But as we walked through it, my daughters did not ask about the artwork. They wanted to know about the woman begging on the steps. What was she doing? Why was she doing it? Why didn't I give her any money? The woman was the first Romany person I'd seen in Italy. I knew, from experience elsewhere, that Romany consider Catholic holy places and holy days as prime opportunities to beg. Christian Romany had advised against giving to apparent beggars. There is no way to separate out the people in genuine need from the ones who see this as one of several survival options. I did not drop any coins in the woman's outstretched hands. I will devote all the necessary time, energy, talent, and funds to make her begging unnecessary. Will you join me?



# IS GOD AN AMERICAN?

by Dr. Gregory L. Hunt, pastor, First Baptist Church Shreveport

*Editor's Note: Mercifully, the election season is over. One result was well predicted: a divided nation. As we move now to a season of thanksgiving and then to a time to remember the birth of the One to whom we owe ultimate allegiance, is there a word from God? Is there a role for Christians of all political parties to play in healing our division? In a message originally delivered July 4, Dr. Hunt asks us to consider the meaning of our citizenship in two kingdoms.*

The "Herod Party" and the "Pharisee Party" had politics on their minds when they came to Jesus asking about that delicate intersection between personal faith and public life. Phrasing their question with a noose at either end, they waited for Jesus to hang himself with his response. A straight answer of any kind was guaranteed to alienate half of his followers.

"Tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

Twenty centuries have elapsed since that day when Jesus matched wits with a strange coalition of Roman loyalists and Rome's despisers. The question as put that day no longer heats the blood but, rephrased for our day, it still flashes like a freshly-lit match over gunpowder. Let's take a closer look at this encounter and Jesus words, considering what applications we might discover for our lives as individuals, as the people of God, and as citizens of the United States of America.

First let's do a little background work, so as to more fully appreciate the parallels between the biblical context and our context today. For all the distance of time and differences of culture, some common themes link then and now.

For one thing, a single unrivaled power dominated the political and military landscape of the day—one "superpower," you might say. In the 1st Century, that unrivaled power was the Roman Empire; today it's post-Cold-War U.S.A.

Second, a sense of manifest destiny prevailed. The people of the Roman Empire were saying, "The gods are on our side." Today, in its singular form, the same claim gets made frequently. Many insist that "God is on our side." You can hear this claim with regularity in the locker rooms of America, where athletes thank heaven for their latest victories. It's amazing how many teams God is rooting for! A sense of manifest destiny prevails today, just as it did then.

A third parallel between then and now has to do with how "the powers that were" counted on the endorsement of religious leadership. They knew that if they could have the support of religious leaders, it would add to their base of power, their strength, their influence. They spared no opportunity to connect with and use religion for political gain. It's not an accident that in our day, in a parallel universe, candidates for the presidency have themselves beamed in via satellite to religious bodies gathered for their summer conventions. Politicians use such occasions to signal their faith, thus strengthening their chances at the polls in November.

It is also true that as then, so now, they were and are edgy times. Dangers lurked around every corner, just as they do today. Consider, as we engage this text, that we live in the post-9/11 world. Terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 absolutely and forever altered the landscape of

civilization. In this world, where terrorism looms large, and in this world, where those who thought they could deflate the spirit of American people have instead propelled a new wave of patriotism, the conversation we're about to have with Jesus is colored by both of those realities: the presence of terrorism and the upsurge in patriotism. It is also true that in this edgy time we're in a war. There are troops who are in harm's way.

To add to the edgy character of our time, we can acknowledge that religion is losing society's endorsement; the latest sign being the debate over whether to remove the phrase "one nation under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance. Parenthetically, it was only introduced in 1954, so it hasn't had an extremely long life.

It is also true in these edgy times, that we are going to have a presidential election this fall. A lot is being said, and a lot is at stake for us all.

Tally up the parallels between then and now: one super power, the sense that God is on our side, power plays between politics and religion, the edgy nature of the time. All of these parallels heighten our interest in the question put to Jesus and Jesus' reply.

Now look at who put the question. Herod's people and the Pharisee crowd came to ask this



question. Consider who these two parties were. Herod was the Jewish monarch in the region whose power depended on Rome. To be Herod's person was to be a Roman Empire loyalist...a patriot, if you will. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were purists who, in their desire for purity, disliked all things gentile and were incensed that a gentile power held sway in that holy land. They were anti-administration. They were opponents. How odd that natural enemies would stand together on this occasion: Roman loyalists and Rome's despisers. One thing and one thing alone bound them together in their unholy compact: they shared an animosity toward Jesus. Together, they put the question to him; and, as the writer of the story tells us, they put the question to him to trip him up, to force him into an answer that would alienate at least half the crowd.

The question as they put it is this: "Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" They were wondering: Will he jeopardize his ministry through civil disobedience and end up in jail or will he wrap himself in the flag – the flag of the Empire – and alienate opponents of the current administration? Those were the alternatives they saw, and

they waited eagerly for his response. They thought they had him cornered. They thought they had come up with the perfect question. "Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

As usual, they underestimated the man they had come to defeat.

I am absolutely persuaded that he wasn't just looking at the crowd in general, but had his eyes on the Pharisees when he responded to their question with a question of his own. He looked around and asked, "Any of your guys got spare change in your pocket?" (That's not exactly how he put it, but that's the gist.) One of the Pharisees reached into his pouch and pulled out a denarius, the coin of the realm, and handed it to Jesus. Jesus held it up for a minute, and then said, "Whose image do you see on this coin?" Of course, the answer to Jesus' question was obvious. Dismissively, they responded, "The image on the coin is Caesar's."

Jesus now says, "Okay, you're right. Then give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's! Give unto God the things that are God's." That's his answer.

In one sense, Jesus is being ambiguous. In one sense he evades the question. They're amazed at his answer and they quit asking questions. This is the last of the debates held in the week in which Christ is ultimately crucified. But as he walks away scott free, he doesn't really leave things completely ambiguous. Linger very long over Jesus' answer, and you discover that by saying very little, he has said a lot.

The first thing he is saying is, "Don't be a hypocrite and condemn the very thing on which your life depends. You count on the coin of the realm for your daily life. How dare you pretend that you won't have anything to do with that realm! You're already involved up to your eyebrows!" An application for our day would be to say, "There is nothing sinful, there is nothing un-Christian, about being a patriot." It is okay on this day to wear red, white and blue. It is okay on this day to wave the flag. It is okay on this day to sing hymns of joy to the freedom we enjoy because of our forbears and because of this experiment in democracy that we are favored to enjoy. Not only is it okay—as citizens of this realm we owe it to the realm to do our part in the equation.

Stop and consider all of the ways our daily lives depend on our civic, state, and federal governments. The food you're going to eat today was inspected because of government regulations and people who are paid by the government to see that it is good food and not bad. If you were to get sick today, you would count on some of the support that comes from this government to pay bills that would be astronomical and beyond your

**See AMERICAN page 6**

# PARTNERS IN HOPE

## *rural poverty initiative*

Partners in Hope is CBF's **20-year commitment** to offer hope to people in and around the nation's poorest counties, all located in rural areas. This is done by **listening** to local leaders and others who work among the poor in these areas, **building relationships** of trust with them, **learning** about existing resources, and **walking alongside** them to find solutions. The hope is also for all of us to become more attentive to the needs of the poor in our own communities. Our goal is to work with local residents, state and regional CBF groups, churches, and other organizations to maximize local resources, empower community members, and make a difference in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:31-46).

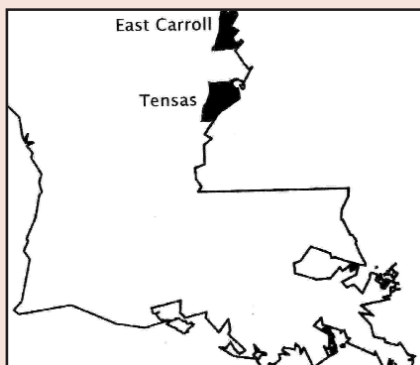
Barely three years old, the dream for Partners in Hope developed out of the CBF Global Missions commitment to most neglected peoples. It was decided to research the counties with the highest percentages of their total population living below the nationally established poverty line, based on the 1995 census. The **20 counties** that emerged from the study were **all in rural areas in five regions** (Appalachia, Black Belt, Mississippi River Delta, Rio Grande Valley, and High Plains) and seven states (Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and South Dakota). Out of that list of 20, **East Carroll Parish** in our own state ranked

as the second poorest county in the nation.

Interest began to build and by 2003, there was active service in 8 of the 20 counties; now efforts are going on in 15 of the 20 counties. More than 1200 volunteers participated during 2003 in house repair, church construction, health care, clothing, literacy, church planting, food supply, recreation, Vacation Bible Schools, economic development, and job skills training. One encouraging aspect in every county is that there are people of faith who are living out the Good News in their presence and witness. Partners in Hope may be more like a movement than a program. State and regional CBF organizations are now working with people in seven additional very poor counties that are not on the original list of 20. Just as importantly, the volunteers and others who are participating



Five Regions With 20 Target Counties



Louisiana Partners in Hope Parishes

with the people in all of these poverty-ridden counties are realizing that there is poverty in their own communities. They are taking the lessons learned from their Partners in Hope efforts back home to make a difference there, too. The story is not over, though. Partners in Hope is barely three years old....and growing!

Learn more: [fellowship.info](http://fellowship.info) or [ruralpoverty.net](http://ruralpoverty.net)

### **Partners in Hope Principles (abbreviated)**

- **Christ-centered:** focusing on reconciliation -- people to God and people to people
- **Holistic:** concerned for whole person, mindful of the feelings of local communities
- **Local Participation:** affirming unique gifts, strengths of community; collective open decision-making and citizen empowerment
- **Local Asset-Based Development:** advocating for economic and social change that will strengthen the community, its leaders and encourage all members to realize abilities, share resources and be self-sustaining
- **Learning:** listening to those from the community and applying sound, trusted methods and innovations as co-learners
- **Partnerships:** working with nonprofit groups, faith communities, schools, and government
- **Long-term:** staying until the quality of life is improved
- **Contributions & Focus:** collaboration, advocacy, prayer, education, reconciliation, volunteer mobilization, and resource development. **In all things we will seek to bear faithful witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ**

Louisiana Partner's In Hope Coordinator Bill Hoffman speaks in amazed tones at the openness to the Gospel he has experienced in prison ministry in Tensas and East Carroll. Not sure what to expect, he entered this work in hopefulness, but with modest, if not cautious expectations.

Though not an easy work, neither is it a work he has tackled alone. He points to ministry efforts already in place before Partners in Hope arrived. True to the Partners model, his efforts have been to work along side, enhance and build on existing ministry activities. Further, he has worked to do so with sensitivity to needs of inmates, building relationships also with staff, and has been purposely low key in evangelistic efforts.

This "soft sell" approach, he reports, has been blessed with eighty-five professions of faith since January! Though any minister would be thrilled with such numbers, he is quick to add it is only part of the story. The larger picture comes with understanding the foundations of the work.

Hoffman consistently refers to this aspect of Partners in Hope as a "Restorative Justice" ministry. So what is "Restorative Justice?" In 2002, the Woman's Missionary Union launched an emphasis in this area and came up with the following definition: "restorative justice involves God's people in applying biblical principles of restoration to meet the needs of victims, offenders, communities, and law enforcement and criminal justice professionals."

*Our current adversarial, retributive criminal justice system forgets the victim and sets up a contest between the lawyers for the state and the defense attorney. At best, the victim gets to sit in the courtroom and address the judge before sentencing. At worst, the victim is ignored and re-victimized by the system which calls itself "justice."* Thus states a pamphlet produced by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America (cited in italics), which has also advocated for this new paradigm.

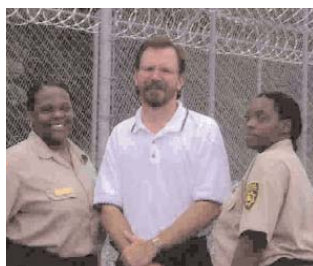
*Restorative justice provides a different model...It*

*emphasizes the harm done to the victim and places repairing that harm in the center of concern. Restorative justice views crime as a violation of the victim and the community, causing a tear in the fabric of society. It is this tear which the public experiences and wants repaired.*

This is a non-partisan issue. Faith groups across the spectrum as well as secular groups can and do support Restorative Justice. For Christians though, there are some compelling parallels to the Gospel. Reconciliation and changed lives are at the heart of Jesus' message. In biblical terms, crime disrupts "shalom" or the right relationships between individuals, the community, and God. Restorative justice works to restore shalom by holding the offender accountable to the victim for repairing the harm done by the crime. It also gives the community a role to play in responding to the needs of both the victim and the offender.

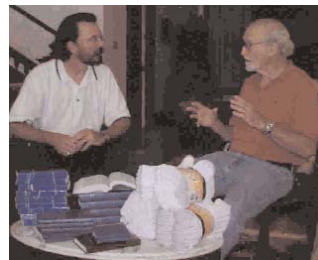
Systems and people often change slowly. Many, understandably, become overwhelmed with such need and such pain. As people of the Kingdom though, we are called to hope, confident that our efforts when given

to God become part of a much greater work. We do not have to wait until all parts of a Restorative Justice model are in place to begin participating in acts of mercy and reconciliation now.



Bill Hoffman with guards from Tensas Detention Center in Waterproof

**"In Prison and You Visited Me"**  
*The Gospel in Restorative Justice*



Volunteer Chaplain John Houge on right, with Bill, making plans for Communion Service, Bibles and socks on hand!

OLD RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE MODEL
* Crime is an act against the state
* Offender is accountable to the state
* Accountability by punishment and suffering
* Victims peripheral to process
* Offender defined only by crime
* Victim defined only by loss

NEW RESTORATIVE JUSTICE MODEL
* Crime is against person & community
* Offender accountable to victim & community (State responsible to see accountability is fair)
* Accountability by reparation and taking responsibility
* Victims and community directly involved
* Offender defined by behavior and capacity to take responsibility
* Victim defined by loss and capacity to participate in recovering loss and healing

**EXAMPLES OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE ACTIVITIES**

- \* Support and assistance are provided to victims and families of victims.
- \* Restitution is given priority over other financial obligations of offender.
- \* Victim offender mediation is available for victims who wish to participate.
- \* Community volunteers are involved in working with offenders.
- \* The community provides work opportunities so offenders can pay restitution.
- \* Offenders work in community service projects valued by the community.
- \* Treatment programs teach victim empathy and community responsibility.
- \* Businesses & organizations help with jobs and re-integration.
- \* Churches sponsor support groups for offenders trying to change life patterns.

Additional source: Minnesota Department of Corrections



## AMERICAN (continued)

reach otherwise. It doesn't matter where you turn or what you do, you cannot move one square inch without feeling the impact of this culture and this government. Do you want to drive from point A to point B? The roads that will take you there exist because the government, through our taxes, underwrites the cost of them. We could go on and on. We owe an allegiance to the realms of this world. "Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," Jesus says.

Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to say, "Give unto God the things that are God's." We owe certain things to this realm, but we also owe certain things to God.

How about that for understatement? Not only do we owe some allegiance to God; we owe first allegiance to God. God is Lord. God has a kingdom claim. God has a prior claim. How does Jesus put it? "Seek first the kingdom of God and all of these things shall be added to you." It is not a matter of passing historical interest that our faith forebears were willing to put their lives on the line to say that God was first. The original confession of the Christian community was stated in a context where to make that confession was to put one's job, one's family, and even one's life on the line. In a world where Caesar demanded that it be said, "Caesar is Lord," the early followers of Jesus Christ declared that "Jesus is Lord." Our primary allegiance is to God.

Consider this, as well. When Jesus says, "Give unto God the things that are God's," he is affirming that God is Lord not only of our nation, but of all nations. On this day when we raise the flag and send up fireworks, we do so recognizing that God is for all of humanity, not just for us. We resist the temptation to suggest that we have exclusive national rights to God's favor. We acknowledge that he's not just on our side; he's for every human being on the face of the earth. He loves us with an undying love. He loves us whether we are American or European or African or Semitic. He loves us whether we are black or white or pink or orange or purple. He loves us whatever language we speak. He loves us in every culture in which we find ourselves. He seeks us and He loves us. He is for us all.

From the calling of Abraham to the Great Commission, ours has been an international—a global—mission. Abraham heard God say, "Through you shall all peoples across the face of the earth be blessed." The followers of Jesus who met him on the mountaintop before his ascension heard him say, "Go, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing, teaching, knowing that I am with you all the way." In Acts we have a version that says, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth." When Jesus says, "Give

unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; give unto God the things that are God's," he is inviting us to declare that our first loyalty presses beyond all boundaries to make its global appeal.

We must forever fight the Christian American temptation to slip across the pale from healthy patriotism to dangerous, civil religion.

What is civil religion? Civil religion is what happens when religion and society—or to put it very specifically in our time, when church and state—use each other to gain an unholy edge. It happens in all kinds of ways, and it happens all the time. Civil religion is what you get when the secular world wraps itself up in the symbols and rituals of faith to reinforce its position, its popularity, and its power. Elected officials constantly seek to do that. They love to show up in sanctuaries on Sunday mornings and parade their faith. They love to get the endorsements of religious bodies.

tiges of power in an increasingly pluralistic society. When civil religion absorbs and takes for its own use our genuine, authentic confessions of faith, it steals the life out of them, it steals the vitality out of true confession. It removes faith's bite. It becomes a kind of soft generic substitute for the sharp witness of Jesus, who stood toe to toe with the powers that be and spoke of a higher power still. We must resist the temptation, as people of faith, to ask the government to advantage us in any way. This applies to prayer in public schools, the posting of the Ten Commandments, the use of private school vouchers, and others. All of those are simply little side issues against the central backdrop of the Great Commission of Christ to bring transformation into people's lives.

The honest truth is, free societies have always been the most effective context for the Gospel. We don't need assistance from the government to carry the day when it comes to the Gospel of Christ. We don't have to use coercion. We cannot coerce faith. We cannot coerce conscience.

We need to be careful about how we use the power of the state even to coerce behavior. Some things are immoral according to Biblical faith that aren't illegal, and to attempt to make them illegal will not change anything meaningfully. Joy Davidson, C.S. Lewis' wife and a fine writer and thinker in her own right, once wrote, "Two thousand years of failure haven't taught some reformers that you can't stop sin by declaring it illegal. Two thousand years have not taught them that you can't save a man's soul by force. You can only lose your own in the attempt."

Here's a great paradox to understand: When religion uses the power and authority of the state to get its own way, it weakens

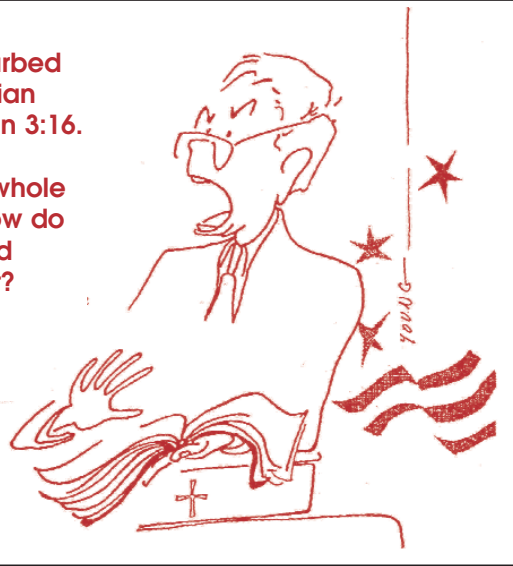
rather than strengthens its position. The failure to understand this paradox is one of the reasons the old world is indeed a post-Christian world. The state church ends up in the pocket of the state and loses its moral authority. It becomes toothless. As maddening as it may feel sometimes to live in our pluralistic culture today, we're in a good environment, in an atmosphere of freedom, to make our case. It's a case that, given the opportunity, still proves powerfully compelling.

Christ's gospel doesn't rest comfortably in anybody's pocket: not in civil authority's pocket; not in any one nation's pocket; not in any one political party's pocket; not in any one advocacy group's pocket. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. None of these other authorities are lords of the Gospel. Jesus is.

Well, Jesus poses the question, "Whose coin is this?" and in response to their question ("Taxes to Caesar or not?") he gives us plenty to think about. Folks, let's be discriminating citizens because, you see, we are citizens of two kingdoms: a kingdom of this world, and—first and foremost—the kingdom of God. May He know our loyalty first and best. And may we with that loyalty, have minds and hearts as big as the globe. ●

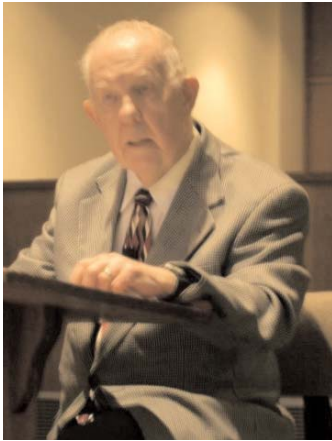
**I am frankly disturbed  
by the egalitarian  
implications of John 3:16.**

**If God loves the whole  
world equally, how do  
we know God  
loves us most?**



Just this last week we got a phone call from somebody who asked us to do voter registration during a special event, and they finally confessed that they were Republicans, looking to do church voter registration where they would more likely get Republicans registered to vote. I don't know about you, but I don't think it's our business to advantage one political party over another. I don't know about you, but I don't think you have to be a Republican to be a Christian. I don't think you have to like George Bush to be a Christian. I don't think you have to be a Democrat to believe in social justice. The fact of the matter is, not only is God not American, but he's neither Republican nor Democrat. Nor is he a Green Party partisan. When public officials use religious bodies to gain a political edge, they step across the line into dangerous civil religion.

Civil religion also occurs when religion uses the power and authority of the state to get its way. Consider, for instance, the current debate over the Pledge of Allegiance. I gladly affirm that we are one nation under God. That's the truth, whether everyone in our nation is willing to admit it or not. But what do we gain by fighting to preserve that language? It comes across as little more than a desperate effort to cling to the ves-



*In the afternoon Dr. Tolbert relented, accepted a stool, then joked near the end, "I'm feeling all of my 80 years."*

# "Christians Need Not Check Their Brains at the Door of the Church"

*Dr. Tolbert addresses CBF Biblical Forum audience encouraging healthy faith and intellect.*

Does science and faith collide in the Genesis story? Is the Old Testament God far removed from the loving face revealed in Jesus? These questions and others were addressed in the first annual CBF Stagg-Tolbert Forum for Biblical Studies held October 16 at Broadmoor Baptist Church in Baton Rouge. Dr. Malcolm Tolbert, retired Greek and New Testament professor, missionary, pastor and one of the forum's namesakes, gave the inaugural address of the series. Now 80 years old, Tolbert noted that his "pipes are rusty" and his hearing is not what it was once, but his mind remains sharp and his spirit generous. He spoke with a scholar's brain and a pastor's heart.

Christians can welcome scientific advances and marvel at the complexity of God's creation. Tolbert cited unimaginable recent advances in DNA research as chronicled in the work of Spencer Wells and others. On the Astronomy front he pointed to an article by scientist Robert Roy Britt that reports the recent photograph of a galaxy estimated to be 13 billion light years away. "When you know that in one solar year light travels approximately 5.88 trillion miles and you multiply that number by 13 billion, you get an idea of the immense distance the light has traveled. You also realize that the image photographed shows the galaxy not as it may be today but as it was 13 billion years ago."

As amazing as these discoveries are in answering some of the "how" questions of our mysterious universe, they have little impact on "why" questions. "It is when we come to deal with the ultimate meaning of life that scientists, whether they accept this or not, have no advantage over the rest of us. When it comes to ultimate meanings, all of us, geneticist and fisherman, anthropologist and illiterate, are faced with the necessity of exercising an option." The faith option is personal and is in a different realm than science. Faith is not just the theoretical, but goes to the core of your reality—where you live your life. It was the option Victor Frankl chose even in the midst of horror in the Nazi concentration camp. Tolbert stated that Frankl realized he could choose how to react to his circumstances and that his spirit could not be enslaved. Being responsible ("response able") even in the worst of situations points to the idea of what it means for humans to be in the image of God as the Genesis writer proclaims.

It is the realm of faith and meaning to which the Genesis writer speaks, not of science and other modern constructs. Tolbert continues, "Divine inspiration, whatever it may mean, does not enable the writers of scripture to rise above what was generally known about their world and their place in it." Pre-modern people including the writer of Genesis "believed the earth was flat and the heavens were above the flat earth...His concept of the size of the world was very narrow, and he was totally ignorant of the people that inhabited lands around the globe. What he did know was very limited, very provincial, and very unscientific. Although Paul's knowledge of the world, informed as it was by the Roman Empire, was greater, the same may also be said of Paul and the writer of the first gospel, as well as the authors of other books of the Bible." Just as modern scientific knowledge does not displace the realm of faith, previous "primitive" understandings of the universe cannot obscure the

Reality underneath it all. These truths transcend the historical context and knowledge of that day as well as our own.

A companion point to the understanding of the limits of scientific knowledge, Tolbert states, is the humble recognition that our "knowledge" in general (theological and otherwise) is insufficient to bring us to faith and a meaningful life. "The ability of people to find genuine meaning in their lives is not limited by their lack of knowledge...I have discovered, as you probably have, that the people who seem to know God best and are closest to God are often people whose education has been very limited. Their names come to me even as I write this—my grandmother;...Mrs. Powers...Mrs. Jones [members of churches where he was pastor]. They knew nothing beyond the King James Version of the Bible. They knew nothing of the history of the Jews, nor could they answer the critical introductory questions scholars raise...Their perspective was very similar to that of the author of Genesis...They were totally innocent of any scientific knowledge...Intellectually I knew a great deal more than they. They taught me so much, however, about faith, love and generosity."

The challenge for us as Christians, in a post modern age is to be good stewards, and to use to the fullest extent possible our God given intellectual abilities to engage a hurting world. We do that however recognizing simple faith points to the deepest realities. Tolbert concludes, "The author of Genesis was neither a scientist nor a historian. He was a person of faith who had had an experience of God and wrote about his experience in ways that were available to him. Hearing him speak through this book across thousands of years, I have the deep feeling that we are brothers in the faith. I take my stand with the author of Genesis and share the conviction that he expressed when he said, 'In the beginning God.' Give me that, and I am happy to turn the investigation of this universe over to the scientists. As they describe the emerging universe, however, I am convinced that the shape it takes is the result of the presence of God who is intimately involved in the process."

In understanding Scripture and coming to terms with the meaning of the Old Testament in particular, we are given our best direction in the life and words of Jesus. Tolbert looked at various examples of how Jesus interpreted the law and always moved to the deeper reality behind the law. He cited another writer who said "I think the love of Jesus is the plumb line by which everything is to be measured. And while laws may be more rigid, love is more demanding, for love insists on motivation and goes between, around and way beyond all laws." Tolbert affirms the New Testament witness that "God's ultimate revelation is Jesus. His life and teachings provide the best perspective for interpreting both the past and the future...Without the Old Testament and its contribution to the message God has given to us we would be sorely handicapped. It can be the word of God to us when we interpret everything it says about God in the light of the fuller understanding of God given to us by Jesus." ●



*Dr. Tolbert spoke and answered questions for three hours to an enthusiastic forum audience.*



***The Stagg-Tolbert Forum for Biblical Studies is an annual event sponsored by CBF-LA. It is dedicated to the legacy of Dr. Tolbert and the late Dr. Frank Stagg, both of whom have displayed a passion for presenting the best in biblical scholarship in a way that is accessible to the layperson. An endowment fund has been started to permanently underwrite the cost. If you would like to contribute, use the enclosed envelope and designate "Biblical Forum." If you would like a printed copy of Dr. Tolbert's lectures send your name, address and \$3 to CBF Newsletter Editor, 543 Ockley, Shreveport, LA 71106.***



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CBF-LA RECEIPTS	10/1/ to 10/31/04	Fiscal Year
Undesignated	\$4,757.64	\$35,976.60
Partners in Hope	\$2,725.00	\$25,530.21
Stagg-Tolbt Forum	\$1,076.00	\$1,076.00
Credits	0.00	\$978.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$8,558.64</b>	<b>\$63,560.81</b>

Disaster response. Numerous Baptists from across the state participated in ministries to the victims of recent hurricanes, through giving and visits to aid in cleanup and other assistance, including a team of 4 from **FBC Shreveport**. When an anonymous donor offered to match the church's contribution up to \$5,000, **Ronnie Joe Webb**, the church's minister of family life "put out a plea for some money." The amount was raised and was used to buy mattresses.

CBF Florida would like to express our deepest gratitude to everyone who helped Florida through these most challenging hurricanes. We especially want to say thanks to those who contributed to sending the bedding to Wauchula for distribution to the families in that community. Many people have been touched by Louisiana's generous spirit. Blessings, **Carolyn Anderson** Coordinator, CBF Florida

The new church start committee for CBF-LA is actively at work and asks for your prayers.

Correction: with apologies to **Chaucer**. Last issue's article on Louisiana College had the pilgrims in the Miller's Tale marching all the way to Rome, when in fact the holy site they were pursuing was Canterbury--thus the name of the stories, "The Canterbury Tales," duh!

Recent Quote: There is a good bit of spiritual pride in all of us. We delight in our sophisticated thinking and emotional experiences, and are offended when we are not appropriately recognized. How easy it is to feel like the Pharisee: "Thank you God that I'm not a fundamentalist, a Democrat, a Republican, or a charismatic." Isn't it difficult to see that whatever insight, aptitude, or talent we might have is not so that we can compare and compete, but instead for THE COMMON GOOD. - **Dr. Harry Boyd, Jr. - First Baptist Winnsboro**

**CALENDAR**

- December 12 Baptist World Alliance  
Human Rights Sunday
- February 6 Baptist World Alliance  
Sunday
- March 11-12 CBF State Assembly  
FBC Shreveport  
Dan Vestal speaker
- June 30 - July 1 CBF General Assembly  
Grapevine, Texas
- July 27-31 Baptist World Alliance  
Centennial Congress  
Birmingham, England



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**Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out! Don't you see it?**

*Isaiah 43:19 The Message*

Get involved! Be part of God's new surprises in CBF- LA!

Your gifts are needed:

Spiritual Pray to undergird Partners in Hope, mission projects, new church start, congregational supports and our national and international work. Send us your ideas, your creativity -- the places the Spirit is moving in your life.

Physical Share your time and presence. Let us know of your interests and passions and we will find the place of ministry and mission that only you can fill.

Monetary Give joyfully. Give hilariously! Use the enclosed envelope. Support this ever expanding work. If you send offerings to the national office, be sure to designate at least 25% for work in Louisiana. Make a monthly pledge!

**News and Views**

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