

Take time to study

Sunday School Lesson

Devotional Reading: Psalm 74:1-12.
Lesson Scripture: 2 Kings 24, 25.

Although prophets such as Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel had been warning their audiences repeatedly that the destruction of Jerusalem was imminent, these men did not rejoice to see the city fall. Theirs was not an "I told you so" attitude, as they watched Jerusalem's residents leaving their homes in tears.

No type of discipline, whether coming from parents, judges, church elders, or prophets is easy to administer. But in a fallen world, such discipline is necessary to maintain order in a home, a church, and a society. Those who fail to heed the clear warnings they have been given should expect no other treatment except that of punishment.

Perhaps we should pause at this point to consider how unparalleled the message of the cross continues to be. The Son of God, who did nothing to deserve punishment, took upon Himself the treatment that we had coming to us. In mercy God has provided a way for sinful man to be saved. A way was also provided for the people of Judah. They simply refused to accept it.

Zedekiah was the native king whom Nebuchadnezzar had left to rule Judah after the ten thousand captives had been removed in 597 BC. He was an uncle of the king (Jehoiachin) who had been taken to Babylon (v.15).

Zedekiah had been made to swear allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 36:13), but now he rebelled. Perhaps it distressed him to pay the heavy tribute to Babylon year after year. He may have thought Nebuchadnezzar and his army were busy with troubles elsewhere in the empire. He may have hoped for an alliance with other small kingdoms, which would be strong enough to break off the yoke of Babylon. It is also possible that he thought that Egypt would come to help him, especially since a new, more aggressive pharaoh had recently assumed power in Egypt. Whatever his reasons were, and in spite of the warnings of Jeremiah, Zedekiah broke his oath and rebelled.

The ninth year of his reign refers to Zedekiah, thus placing the beginning of the siege around 588 BC. All his host means that Nebuchadnezzar's entire army was involved in this campaign. Of course he had other troops in other parts of his empire. We are not told how many soldiers came against Jerusalem, but surely the number was so overwhelming that the men of Judah would not dare to meet them in open battle. The people of Judah could only take refuge behind the strong walls of Jerusalem.

The Babylonians surrounded the city and pitched their camp on every side, so that no one could sneak in with food for the hungry defenders or escape from the besieged city. They also built forts against it round about. The Hebrew word rendered forts is the same word translated fort in Ezekiel 4:2, which was a part of last week's lesson text. There Ezekiel visualized the coming siege of Jerusalem; here his prophecy came to fulfillment. The word denotes the assault towers manned by archers by which a besieged city was attacked. These towers were sometimes as much as twenty stories high.

Americans religious quest mimics shopping spree

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WINSTON-SALEM — Americans today are likely to approach religion much as they would a trip to the supermarket, religion experts at Wake Forest University say.

They pick from a variety of activities and experiences. They view weekly trips as voluntary, going when they want. They're not as wedded to brand names as they used to be.

"Congregations have to act intentionally about their identity, and with integrity," said Bill J. Leonard, dean of the divinity school at Wake Forest.

He helped lead Tuesday's daylong session on changes in American religion along with Nancy T. Ammerman, a professor of the sociology of religion at Hartford Seminary, and Charles A. Kimball, the chairman of Wake Forest's department of religion and an

expert on Islam.

Leonard said that because many people no longer respond to such brand names as Baptist or Presbyterian, some congregations have dropped the denominational affiliation from their names.

Others intentionally market themselves to a specific audience, offering specialized programs that give people a reason to travel on Sunday mornings.

"Congregations are an essen-

tial part of the social well-being of communities," Ammerman said. They teach civic skills, give people an identity, build trust and deliver social services.

Ammerman said Christians need to apply the same self-examination they experience during Lent to make changes. And sometimes after that journey toward change, she said, there's a resurrection at the end.

"Angry" churches call for march

By Robert Tanner
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBIA — Leaders of predominately black churches burned in South Carolina hope to call a national march here next year to combat racism, church and civil rights leaders announced Friday.

"Let's deal with the belly of the beast in the belly, and call the nation to come here," said the Rev. Terrance Mackey, whose Greeleyville church was burned June 20, 1995.

Plans for the march were made public at a three-day conference on racism, where the talk ranged from people's first brush with bigotry to the Confederate battle flag.

South Carolina delegates signed a letter to Gov. David Beasley, asking him to persuade legislators to lower the flag from atop the capitol dome. South Carolina is the last to fly the banner from its statehouse.

Beasley, who earlier in the day called the burnings a tragedy that could still help people come together, had not seen the letter, but his commission on race relations has been studying the flag concerns, spokeswoman Ginny Wolfe said.

The conference, sponsored in part by the National Council of Churches, has brought together church and civil rights workers from around the nation to work toward solutions.

"We're trying to find ways of helping," said Barbara Campbell, a volunteer working with rural churches in Georgia.

Some workshops looked at the pervasive nature of racism in housing and employment, while others urged discussions on individual experiences with bigotry. Church leaders from around the country talked about ways to work together.

But many local leaders wanted to see the three days of discussion fuel participation in a march, to be held sometime in the spring.

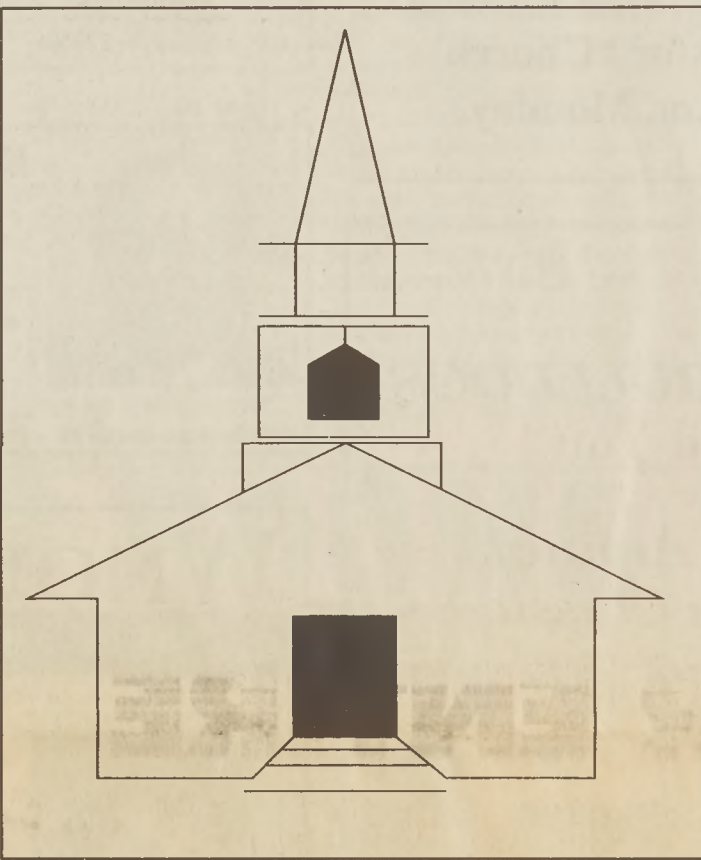
"It needs to be done," said the Rev. Joseph Darby, who heads a local coalition of predominately black churches. "It is one of the few positive byproducts to come from the burnings."

Kevin Gray, conference organizer and a former president of the South Carolina branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the problems surrounding race are deeper than burned churches.

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New fellowship roars through nation

Charlotte minister to head Full Gospel Fellowship conference



By Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Full Gospel Baptist Church roars into Charlotte Sunday — at least that is what the Rev. Norman Kerry hopes will happen.

Kerry, pastor of Chappell Memorial Baptist Church, was recently appointed overseer of the western conference of the fledgling fellowship that formed two years ago in New Orleans.

"From this day forward I have got to go out and canvas the area and community and let them know about us," he said.

The group to which he refers has definitely made a name for itself nationally by attracting young people anxious to find a church committed to community development. The first Fellowship Convention drew

over 30,000 people.

The fellowship has garnered headlines by drawing some of the nation's strongest and largest churches including the Greater St. Stephens of New Orleans, which boasts 18,000 members, and Charlotte native Bishop Eddie Long's Atlanta powerhouse, New Birth Missionary Baptist Church.

"It really appeals to young people in its organization," Kerry said. "When we have our annual session, we have our instructional time-but we also cater to music."

Many Generation X gospel artists, including Kirk Franklin, BeBe Winans and Fred Hammond, have embraced the group and performed at its annual conventions. T.D. Jakes and Carlton Pearson have also bought into the conference.

Since joining, Kerry has seen

an increase in Chappell's membership. The church averages 25 new members monthly, he said.

The fellowship was formed in 1994 by Bishop Paul S. Morton of New Orleans' Greater St. Stephens Baptist Church. Morton wanted to develop a church to meet the needs of the African American religious community, both spiritually and physically. The idea was to enhance existing fellowships rather than create a new one.

"We wanted to give Baptists a choice," said the Rev. Ed Dillon of the fellowship's home office in New Orleans. "Basically we grew out of the need of a number of Baptists who wanted to practice charismatic, Pentecostal beliefs."

The church, which embraces speaking in tongues, faith healing has grown by leaps and bounds. In less than three years, the Fellowship has grown to encompass more than 2,200 churches nationwide and has a membership of more than 500,000.

"The Gospel Conference is one that embraces the ministry of the whole spirit," Kerry said. "It is one that is viewed as not being as political. We're seeking to bring about change and give back to the community."

The group does not consider itself a denomination, but an additional fellowship for member churches. Member churches remain members of their denominations and keep their names.

Aside from an annual convention that drew 50,000 in July, the group also advocates an aggressive agenda for member churches, who can join the fellowship no matter what the denomination.

"This organization is very progressive and aggressive in its thinking," said Kerry. "That is another important part of our denomination. We are open and ecumenical."

The church uses the term

Baptist only because it was founded in the Baptist church.

There are a lot of myths about the church, Kerry said. Part of his job as overseer is to dispel myths about the group.

"We don't consider ourselves to be a denomination," he said. "We are a conference — a fellowship. Chappell Memorial will fellowship with our local association, state association, and the National Baptist Convention. It is not something that causes us to be separate, but to unite."



Kerry

The terms the church uses occasionally have caused confusion. The group uses new testament terminology for titles thus minister are often called bishops.

"We tend to think of bishops as part of the Episcopalian structure of churches," he said. "One might think that a bishop has the right to make decisions regarding another church. For us, that is not true. Each church is still autonomous. The title bishops simply means a pastor of pastors."

The group boasts a strong church development agenda that provides aid to churches in trouble, financially or spiritually.

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Zionites rededicate 'Negro Skyscraper'

By Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Bells rang last week for the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church celebrated the official grand opening of the James Varick Christian Bookstore and rededication of the the AME Zion Publishing House, a Charlotte landmark for more than 100 years. Several downtown churches rang their bells at noon last Friday to mark the occasion.

"It's one of the oldest businesses in downtown Charlotte," Star of Zion editor Morgan Tann says. "It is definitely one of the oldest black businesses."

The Star of Zion, one of the nation's oldest African American periodicals, is just one of several church publications created in the building. The inauspicious building at the corner of Second and Brevard is a piece of history.

Built in 1911 by black contractor, W.W. Smith, it was the first publishing house in the nation to be built by African Americans and came to be known as the "Negro Skyscraper."

The dedication Friday, marks the opening of the James Varick Christian Bookstore, a 2,000 square-foot sales space named for the AME Zion founder, rededication of the building and the addition of the Women's home and foreign missions offices to the building.

"We've remodeled," Tann says. "We have updated equipment and added the Women's Home and Overseas Mission office to the building. The Star of Zion will be produced in its entirety from this office."

The ceremony was well attended by Zionites and featured remarks by several AME Zion bishops.

The bookstore officially opened to the public on Friday.



Bishop George Walker speaks the dedication of the Publishing House. He is surrounded from left by the Rev. David Miller, Bishops Marshall Strickland, Schuka Ekeman, George Battle, Clinton Haggard, Warren Brown, Milton Williams, and Dr. Morgan Tann.

PHOTO/PAUL WILLIAMS III