

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION: BAPTISTS MINISTERING IN THE MIDST OF DISASTER

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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,

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