

THE ALABAMA BAPTIST



Feb. 16, 2012
Vol. 177, No. 7

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'Live, legislate ... wisely'

Alabama Baptists gather with, pray for elected officials

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

Alabamians love winning, Rick Marshall explained to the nearly 500 people attending the annual Legislative Prayer Luncheon in Montgomery on Feb. 8.

"We celebrate championships ... and want to be identified with winners," he said jokingly referring to the state's three back-to-back national championships in college football.

"But there's a difference in winning and being a champion," said Marshall, pastor of Eastern Hills Baptist Church, Montgomery, and featured speaker for the luncheon targeting the state's elected officials. "Winners are concerned with momentary victory. ... Champions are looking for the right time to make a difference. ... Champions are people with character."

Noting that Alabama Baptists and other people of faith want to be a source of strength and encouragement for their elected leaders, he said, "We are praying for you. We seek the best for you. We believe the best about your motives."

Leading a government and legislating for people can be hard but God is there, Marshall said.

"When you are God's person in God's place and God's time doing God's will in your life, He will guide you. ... God will keep us moving forward. You have the opportunity by the way you live, legislate and share your life to show that God is faithful."

Ephesians 5:15 points to wise living that develops champions with character, he noted.

First "our time is limited. The writer (of Ephesians) said to be careful how you live. None of us know whether we'll get to live out our term of service. We don't get a second chance to live out our character or our wisdom.

"Take advantage of the day in which you live, making the best of every opportunity," Marshall said.



Photo by Doug Rogers

WITH EVERY HEAD BOWED — Alabama Baptist leaders pray over Gov. Robert Bentley at the conclusion of the Legislative Prayer Luncheon held Feb. 8 in Montgomery. The prayer is led by the event's organizer, Joe Bob Mizzell.

Second "our trouble is management. The passage says we are to live as wise men and women," he noted. "Wise men and women go about managing well, but managing is more difficult than attaining."

"The mark of maturity is not attaining but managing well what we've attained."

Third "our task is eternal. We must be men and women of character and destiny. There are always people behind us to whom we hand the baton."

'We need not look back'

"We need not look back at faded glory of the past but live in the day to do what God has called us to do," Marshall said. "We never exceed on the outside the gifts we are given on the inside by our Creator."

"We elected you because we wanted someone we could trust," he told the legislators, judges, governor and others. "God is placing you in a position of trust that does not fade away. Pursue the highest goals and protect them with prayer."

Prior to Marshall's message, Gov. Robert Bentley shared a few personal comments.

"There is a God that loves us, and He guides our lives every day, and we should never be ashamed to say it," he said. "The decisions we need to

make, we need to pray about and ask for wisdom. The decisions we make, if He helps us, will be the right decisions."

Also on the program were Rep. Richard Laird, D-Roanoke, and Sen. Clay Scofield, R-Guntersville.

Laird read Psalm 100 and Scofield read John 14:1-14.

The luncheon is sponsored by the Alabama Baptist Convention's State Board of Missions (SBOM). Baptist pastors, directors of missions and entity leaders from across the state serve as hosts for the event. Montgomery-area faith leaders of other denominations also attend regularly.

SBOM Executive Director Rick Lance presides over the program, and state convention officers lead the prayers.

The event is organized by Joe Bob Mizzell, director of the SBOM office of Christian ethics, and his ministry assistant, Joanne Farmer.

And while he has been organizing it for more than a decade, Mizzell actually has been involved with the luncheon for about 50 years.

He first started attending as a pastor in the 1960s and then presided over it for a few years before joining the SBOM staff.

"It's been a great event over the years," he said, noting the interest



Photo by Doug Rogers

CHALLENGING WORD — Rick Marshall, pastor of Eastern Hills Baptist Church, Montgomery, reminds those elected for service to remember their calling and the trust placed in them as they serve.

among government officials continues to grow.

With his retirement date set for Aug. 15, this was his last Legislative Prayer Luncheon to organize.

To end on a personal high note, Mizzell scheduled his 15-year-old granddaughter Thomason Bryan as the special music. "To have her singing for us was very special and made my heart beat fast," he said.

COMMENT

Faith and Works Go Together

The debate going on in evangelical circles about the Church's mission would be laughable if it were not so tragic. One side declares that Christians are "justice people because they are Jesus people." The other side retorts, "They need Jesus to be justice people."

The sides argue as if there were some kind of divide between faith and works, a dichotomy that excludes one from the other. There is not. The Bible teaches that faith and works go together.

Undoubtedly the starting line is a right relationship with God through personal faith in Jesus Christ. The finish line is becoming a disciple who receives God's welcome of "well done, good and faithful servant."

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament condemn those who want to believe right without doing right. In Isaiah 58:1-10, God describes a people whose beliefs result in religious activities and discussions alone. Beginning in verse 6, He asks, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

Jesus, in Matthew 7:21, warns that "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Even some who prophesied, cast out demons or performed miracles will be cast away because they did not do the will of the Father.

All dimensions of life

Jesus illustrates that point in Matthew 25:31ff, in which those who cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner were invited into the kingdom of God and those who ignored the needs of others were cast out.

The story is not a case for earning salvation through good works. It is a story illustrating that because one is rightly related to God, one works to bring all dimensions of life under His lordship. That is exactly the point of James 2:14ff, in which the writer links faith and works together in a way that cannot be separated.

When Jesus voiced the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), He did not charge His followers to gain intellectual consent to a theological teaching. Instead Jesus announced the goal was "to make disciples," followers who not only believed in Him as



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

their Savior but also lived out the values revealed in His life. (See Comment by Bob Terry, Feb. 9).

As one writer observed, Christians are not in a holding pattern until it is time to go up and meet Jesus. We are called to serve and engage the world, stop the decay and be the light of hope. Christians are to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world."

A recent study by the Barna Group pointed to the importance of recognizing that faith and works go together. In a survey of churchgoers, Barna found that nearly half (46 percent) said their lives had not been changed at all as a result of churchgoing. Less than one-quarter of churchgoers in the Mosaics generation (18-27) or Busters generation (28-46) said attending church greatly affected their lives. And the findings were similar across congregations of all sizes.

That is a serious indictment of the way the church in America has responded to the Lord's command to "make disciples." Perhaps we have been guilty of creating a false dichotomy in the gospel and failed to emphasize that faith in Jesus Christ is supposed to change the believer's values to be Christlike.

The failure to connect faith and works is a problem for other areas of the world. Africa is one place where the number of confessing Christians has grown exponentially. In 1900, there were a reported 9 million Christians. By 2000, that number had risen to 380 million, and it is expected to reach 600 million by 2025.

"With this kind of growth, it is easy to believe that all is going well with the church in Africa," observed Emmett Dunn, director of the Baptist World Alliance's youth department. "But the lack of a Christlike lifestyle in dealing with matters of politics, ethnic tensions and social challenges" has created great challenges.

Speaking at a Bread of Life conference in Lagos, Nigeria, Dunn pointed out that 95 percent of Rwandans regard themselves as Christians. Yet Rwanda descended into genocidal chaos in 1994, when more than 800,000 people were killed in a matter of weeks. In Liberia, more than 85 percent of the population considers itself Christian. Yet the country underwent decades of civil wars that cost thousands of lives.

Being Christian does not mean that differences

on social and political issues will disappear, but it does mean that disciples are to bring Christlike values to bear on every issue.

On the anniversary of the Arab Spring in January, the International Mission Board released a story in which a representative with extensive experience in the Arab world shared, "If you were talking to many Western Christians and we asked ourselves how to pray for places like Egypt, we might pray for stable governments, government that is not corrupted, for government that is representative.

"But those are often very Western prayers. We want to pray that we will take every opportunity we can to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give that cold cup of water in Jesus' name. We must pray for the absence of fear for both believers in country and those from the West who are seeking to meet the needs of both the body and soul inside these countries."

That is discipleship. That is linking faith and works.

'The mark of Jesus'

In the current issue of *Christianity Today*, Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, and Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, pay tribute to Francis Schaeffer, whom they call "the great prophet of the 20th century." In the article, they wrote, "Drawing on Jesus' words in John 13:34-35, Schaeffer reminds us that Jesus gave the world the right to decide the genuineness of our faith by our observable love for one another.

"Schaeffer's challenge remains pertinent today," they wrote. "The mark of Jesus in us is crucial and it is compelling. None of our activities — evangelism, social ministries, missions and worldview work — will receive God's full blessing if they are not guided by the 'final apologetic' of demonstrating observable love for one another."

Again faith and works go together.

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ALABAMA BAPTIST

"If ye continue in my word, then ... ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32).

(ISSN 0738-7741; USPS 011-080)

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is published weekly except for one week in July and December by The Alabama Baptist, Inc., at 3310 Independence Drive, Birmingham, AL 35209. Phone: 205-870-4720. Statewide phone: 1-800-803-5201. Fax: 205-870-8957. Web site: www.thealabamabaptist.org. E-mail: news@thealabamabaptist.org or circulation@thealabamabaptist.org. Periodicals postage paid at Birmingham, Ala., and other locations.

NEWS SERVICES: Baptist Press (BP), Associated Baptist Press (ABP), Religion News Service (RNS), Compass Direct News (CDN), Evangelical Press (EP), Forum 18 (F18).

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Alabama Baptist, 3310 Independence Drive, Birmingham, AL 35209.

ADDRESS CHANGE: Send old and new addresses, and name of church to Circulation Department, 3310 Independence Drive, Birmingham, AL 35209. Allow two weeks.

Midwestern president resigns amid conflict

Phil Roberts, the embattled president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., resigned Feb. 10. No reason was stated and trustees gave no details about their called five-and-a-half hour meeting at a Kansas City hotel that prompted the 61-year-old to step down.

Trustees met behind closed doors in a meeting called specifically to consider Roberts' job performance, trustees said in a statement released afterward. The start of that meeting was delayed when trustees supportive of Roberts tried to save his job by voting out the trustee officers and committee chairs instead.

That vote failed, the trustees' three-sentence statement said. Roberts then submitted his resignation, effective Feb. 29.

The board's executive committee — the officers and committee chairs — reportedly had called the meeting, in part, to present a summary of a recent forensic audit that several trustees said uncovered serious financial irregularities.

His predecessor, Mark Copping, was fired in 1999 for reasons including low employee morale. Sources said the Feb. 10 meeting was the third attempt to terminate Roberts during his 11-year tenure. The most recent, in 2007, was led by the chairman of the trustees at the time.

James Freeman, a trustee who resigned in October 2011, said, "I'm glad that the trustee system finally worked."

Trustees named Robin Hadaway, associate professor of missions at Midwestern, acting president.

Despite failure of the attempt to remove the officers, board chairman Wayne Lee, of Southlake, Texas, resigned at some point in the meeting. At Lee's suggestion, trustees elected Kevin Shrum, pastor of Ingle-

wood Baptist Church, Nashville, as trustee chair until the board's next meeting.

Although some of the criticism of Roberts is similar to that from 2007, the forensic audit added a level of seriousness not seen in previous confrontations. A forensic audit is a detailed inspection of financial records by an outside consultant conducted to the standards of a court of law. Because it must meet judicial-level standards, it raised the possibility of legal ramifications for the administration and/or trustees, who both have fiduciary responsibility for the school under the law.

Before the Feb. 10 meeting, several trustees told Associated Baptist Press that Roberts misled trustees and auditors about the improper use of designated accounts, government grants and other funds at the seminary, which has struggled financially for years.

Trustee leaders said Roberts shuffled money between seminary accounts and misused designated funds in order to mislead trustees, auditors and Southern Baptist Convention officials about the school's true financial status.

Not all the problems with Roberts' leadership are financial, trustees said. The former president was described as a "micro-manager" who intimidated or fired employees who disagreed with him. The seminary has had 11 chief financial officers during Roberts' 11 years as president — three in the last 12 months.

Roberts was elected in 2001 as the fourth president of the seminary founded in 1957. He came to Midwestern after seven years at the North American Mission Board and its forerunner, the Home Mission Board, first as director of the interfaith evangelism department and later as vice president.

(ABP, Allen Palmeri contributed)



ROBERTS



Photo by Neisha Fuson

SAVING SPACE — Bill Martin (left), pastor of New Canaan Baptist Church, Jasper, and Paul Tesseneer remove the carpeted cover exposing the baptistry beneath the floor.

Unique project New Canaan member creates hydraulic baptistry

By Julie Payne
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Have you ever heard of the phrase "Jack of all trades, master of none?" asked Bill Martin, pastor of New Canaan Baptist Church, Jasper. "Well [Paul] is a jack of all trades and master of most."

The Paul he was referring to is Paul Tesseneer, a member of New Canaan Baptist.

Tesseneer retired from a career installing phone systems worldwide for Western Electric and has since put his "jack of all trades" skills to good use at the Walker Baptist Association church, managing electrical, plumbing and carpentry projects. One of his most significant projects to date also may be the most unique.

One morning about three years ago, Martin arrived at the church and immediately noticed that water from the baptistry system had leaked and the heating element was boiling the remaining water. Steam was rising as a result of the malfunction, and he knew it was time to get rid of "this dinosaur" of a baptistry.

"When you're running 750 gallons of water and running an element with ... real high wattage ... for over 24 hours to heat 750 gallons of water, it becomes fairly expensive," Martin explained.

So the baptistry was removed from the front of the sanctuary, and a series of remodeling projects ensued. After conducting research on portable baptistries and examining the limited sanctuary space, Tesseneer suggested installing a baptistry beneath the floor.

"If we put it in the middle of the stage, it was in the way," he explained. "I said, 'OK, let's put it

under the floor and raise it up on hydraulics.'"

Having never designed something of this nature before, Tesseneer relied on his experience installing phone systems in Third World countries for more than 10 years.

A bright idea

"In that system, you're always having to come up with an idea to fix something," he said. "So that's how I came up with [the idea]."

Tesseneer scrapped the initial design, but his second design, implementing a scissor lift, was a success. The project took about two months, and individuals donated most of the supplies.

The baptistry is concealed beneath the floor by a carpeted cover. Once the cover is removed, the baptistry is raised slowly by a key-operated control box in a hallway adjacent to the sanctuary. It remains low enough for the person being baptized to step in as Martin guides him or her, and then it is raised up further for the baptism to take place.

Tesseneer did not set out to make a rising baptistry for its uniqueness.

"It was something we needed [because] space is limited," he said.

In addition to saving space, the baptistry is more cost-effective. It has an internal heating system and holds about 90 gallons of water, compared to 750 gallons in the former one.

"It takes 45 minutes to fill up and it's already heat-

ed," Tesseneer explained. "So we can get ready to baptize someone in 45 minutes."

Martin knows of no other baptistries like this in the area and said it was well received by the congregation.

"They love it," he said.

Martin said its rising function has even been implemented in some of New Canaan's drama presentations.

As well as being a work close to Tesseneer's heart, the baptistry has taken on an additional special meaning for him. His two granddaughters, ages 9 and 11, were both recently baptized at the church. ☛



Photo by Neisha Fuson

COST-EFFECTIVE — The baptistry, which holds about 90 gallons of water, has an internal heating system.

Alabama Cooperative Program Gifts

Alabama Baptist Giving
Year to Date through January 31, 2012

JANUARY

CP Challenge Budget Goal	\$3,641,666
CP Challenge Budget Gifts	\$3,565,639
Under Goal for Month	\$76,027

YEAR TO DATE

CP Challenge Budget Goal	\$3,641,666
CP Challenge Budget Gifts	\$3,565,639
Under Goal for Year	\$76,027

Bible Basics

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PART 7 OF 8 ON SERIOUS BIBLE STUDY

Paul's letters: Linking theology and discipleship

By Ken Roxburgh
Special to The Alabama Baptist

The introduction of email, instant messaging, texts and Skype means that letter writing as an art form is slowly but surely disappearing. It is also little used as a method of communication. Yet the predominant literary form in the New Testament is the letter. Of the 27 documents constituting the New Testament, seven-ninths of them have the format of a letter or epistle, the majority of which were written by Paul.

In antiquity, people sometimes wrote letters personally but often dictated the content to a scribe. In the case of the letter to the Romans, we know Paul had a secretary called Tertius, who added his own greeting among those Paul was sending (Rom. 16:22). In three other letters, the apostle mentioned explicitly that he wrote the final greeting with his own hand, presumably as a guarantee of genuineness (see 2 Thessalonians 3:17).

The ancient Greco-Roman letter's form is notably different from the modern letter. At its beginning, one finds the sender's name, the recipient's name and a short greeting. The message in the body is often introduced by an appeal to the "gods" in gratitude and thanksgiving or for the recipient's welfare. At the end comes the conveyance of greetings.

Paul's letters demonstrate significant development of this form. Identification of the writer and recipients are followed by expanded descriptions of both parties in terms of their standing in relation to God through Christ. Specifically the stereotyped Greek "Greetings!" is replaced by "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul's letters generally expand the element of thanksgiving for the addressees. The body is usually divided into two parts: one primarily doctrinal in content and the other primarily hortatory, giving instructions for Christian conduct. The conclusion often contains personal news and a final greeting. This is never the ordinary Greek "farewell" but something like "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

Paul's letters are real letters, arising out of situations in his life or the lives of those to whom he wrote. They were written to deal with urgent difficulties experienced by the recipients, such as persecution, heresy and religious or moral laxity. Some are more akin to the form and style of a theological treatise (Romans), while others are very informal and personal (Philemon). Whatever their original context, though, they are also documents inspired by the Holy Spirit. Their theological instruction and moral guidelines remain as applicable to us as they were to the churches that received them initially.

Like the Gospels, the New Testament letters represent something startlingly original in the literature of their time. Never before had the world seen anything quite like these

Ken Roxburgh

is chair of the religion department and S. Louis and Ann W. Armstrong professor of religion at Samford University in Birmingham. He earned his bachelor's degree from the London School of Theology, master's degree from Aberdeen University in Scotland and doctorate from Edinburgh University in Scotland. He has written numerous articles for scholarly journals and books, as well as a book, "Thomas Gillespie and the Origins of the Relief Church in 18th-century Scotland."



rather lengthy letters. They were concerned with personal details and matters of Christian doctrine and conduct. Their ultimate purpose was to lead these young Christians into a life of discipleship. Paul's letters linked theology and discipleship together.

First Thessalonians may be the earliest of his letters. The city of Thessalonica was located in the region of Macedonia, in what we now know as Greece. Paul's second missionary journey, which took place somewhere between A.D. 48 and 51, took him through this area. His ministry in Thessalonica, where he founded a church, seems to have lasted several months, beginning in the Jewish synagogue and including the Gentiles.

Spiritual transformation

After a few months in the city, Paul and his friends had to leave because of opposition. Their continued presence would, he thought, have caused more difficulty for the young church. He spoke in the letter of the anxiety he felt for it as they traveled to Athens (3:1-2). Although he attempted to return to the city, he eventually sent Timothy (3:2-3), who brought good news that the church had remained faithful in its discipleship (3:7). By the time Timothy returned from Thessalonica, Paul was in Corinth. It was there that he wrote the letter, reminding the believers of his ministry and the message he had preached to them and addressing theological and practical aspects of their faith.

The church in Thessalonica was a source of great encouragement to Paul. His affection for it in Chapter 1 is genuine. Its faithfulness, which arose out of a spiritual transformation in believers' lives, became an inspiring example to believers everywhere in the region (1:4-10). The believers' faith in God enabled them to be consistent in their discipleship, and their love to one another led Paul to thank God "for all the joy that we feel before God because of you." Their spiritual growth developed from a genuine conversion when

they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1:9). Although Paul was a pastor of these young converts for only a few months, his heart was touched by the reality of their faith.

Paul also reminded them of the way he acted as an evangelist and a pastor during the months he was in the city. He preached courageously in the face of persecution (2:2); unlike other religious teachers of the time, he was not motivated by any "impure motives or trickery" (2:3). He spoke of being like a parent, demonstrating tenderness and gentleness as a nursing mother would care for her young child and, at other times, offering fatherly advice and encouragement (2:7, 11). The affection he felt toward this church is seen in the way he used the term "brothers and sisters" on 15 occasions in a relatively short letter. He reminds us that pastoral relationships, which are the foundation of a healthy church, should be grounded in loving concern and mutual respect. His relationship with the church became the model for its imitation of him as it shared the gospel with others.

Paul also indicated that discipleship involves cleansing and holiness. In Chapter 4, holiness is the prominent theme of his description of the Christian life. As well as the words "holy" and "make holy," he used a number of other expressions that suggest that holiness is one of the letter's key themes. So he prayed that "the Lord [may] establish your hearts blameless in holiness" (3:13).

In Chapter 4, Paul specified one particular area in the context of Thessalonica where he believed the issue of holiness was particularly vital. He spoke about sexual purity within the context of a Greco-Roman culture that had a very tolerant attitude toward sexual misconduct, particularly prior to and outside of marriage. Marriages in a city like Thessalonica were usually family arrangements. It was expected that married men would have sexual relations with other women, such as prostitutes, female slaves or mistresses from various social classes. Sexual activity was frequently part of pagan religious practices; temples often had a reputation for immorality. When Paul said the converts at Thessalonica had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God," abandoning sexual immorality was one aspect of that turning.

The Bible is quite clear that sexual love is a gift of God, full of dignity and delight. However, it can be abused. Sex is meant to strengthen marriage and belongs only in marriage. We do not live in Thessalonica, but as we come under the authority of God's Word, we begin to discover the relevance of Scripture to the sexual confusion of the 21st century. It enables us to know a sexuality that is "worthy of the gospel of Christ."

One other practical matter Paul addressed is the issue of work. In his ministry, he had not only preached the gospel but also worked with his hands, making tents to support him-

self financially (2:9). The Greek culture of Thessalonica looked down on manual labor, thinking it was only for slaves. Some believers in the church were expecting Christ's Second Coming to occur so quickly that they quit their jobs. Paul urged the church to admonish the idlers and work for a living (5:14). He was not talking about a social context in which people could not find employment but about people who were not willing to work to provide for their daily necessities.

Hope and grief combined

One theological matter causing the Thessalonians some concern was that some of their fellow believers had died and would "miss out" at Christ's Second Coming. In Chapter 4, Paul makes it clear that death is not something Christians take lightly. It causes them "grief" and pain. Yet that grief should be accompanied by hope. It seems that although Paul had addressed the issue of the Second Coming (1:10), he had not given detailed instruction during the time he was with the Thessalonians. This left them with some unanswered questions in their minds. So Paul indicated that when Jesus comes again, those who had died would actually rise first to meet the Lord in the air (4:17).

Many people still have a vague notion that at death, the "spirit" or "soul" leaves the body to go to be with God and the body is discarded in the tomb or through cremation. This is more of a Platonic concept than a biblical one. According to Plato, the body is essentially excess baggage that weighs the soul down and prevents it from ascending to its proper place. The Greeks thought of the body as a type of tomb, and thus death was the moment of release. Even today, some Christians have this idea about death. Yet Christian hope is always related to the resurrection of the body. The Apostles' Creed states that we "believe in the resurrection of the flesh," because the physical world is also God's creation and is also good. Thus the resurrection of the body brings hope in the pain and grief surrounding bereavement.

Paul's letters continue to inform as well as challenge us about what it means to be a community of faith and faithfulness, living lives of discipleship, presenting the message of God's love in the midst of a lost world. ■

Next week's topic ...

Revelation



'Insulting affront'

Obama's contraceptive 'compromise' not enough for many leaders

Following a raucous outcry that included Baptist leaders in Alabama and nationwide, President Obama announced a change in the way employees of religious organizations will receive free contraceptives that can cause abortions. But the attempted compromise fell far short of what is needed to protect religious liberty, say Baptist and other conservative religious leaders.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which took the lead in opposing the original proposal, called the compromise a good first step but reserved judgment until its leaders see more details.

The controversy began when the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in January finalized a rule requiring private insurance plans to cover all FDA-approved contraceptives, including "emergency" ones such as Plan B and "ella" that can block implantation and kill the embryo — an action that pro-life groups and many Christians view as an early abortion. The drugs would be free for employees.

The HHS rule included an exemption for most churches, but that exemption does not cover Christian colleges and schools or faith-based hospitals and social service programs. Programs such as Catholic Charities, Prison Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) GuideStone Financial Resources would be affected.

GuideStone statement

O.S. Hawkins, president of GuideStone, released a statement before Obama's news conference saying simply, "we will not provide abortifacients."

During the news conference, Obama said the burden on providing emergency contraceptives would fall on insurance companies, and that the coverage still would be free.

"If a woman's employer is a charity or



Reuters photo

WOMEN'S HEALTH — U.S. President Barack Obama talks next to Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius about contraceptive care funding in the press room of the White House in Washington on Feb. 10.

a hospital that has a religious objection to providing contraceptive services as part of their health plan, the insurance company — not the hospital, not the charity — will be required to reach out and offer the woman contraceptive care free of charge without co-pays and without hassles," Obama said. "The result will be that religious organizations won't have to pay for these services and no religious institution will have to provide these services."

Religious leaders, though, were not pleased, and said the same problems with religious liberty remained.

"It is an attempt to deal with a matter of religious conviction with an accounting gimmick," Richard Land, president of the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said.

Land and others said an insurance company's money is fungible, and a religious employer would still be providing the funding to pay for an employee's abortion-inducing drugs.

Hawkins called it an "approach that does not address the issues at hand for Southern Baptists who oppose so-called contraceptives that can and do cause an abortion." GuideStone provides health insurance cover-

age to 60,000 people, including pastors and missionaries.

"The president's statement today," said Hawkins, "is an insulting affront illustrating a basic lack of understanding that this issue will not be solved by sleight-of-hand word games. It is a fundamental matter of religious liberty that threatens the very coverage of those dedicated persons who serve our churches and affiliated organizations. GuideStone will never depart from the core convictions it has held dear for decades regarding the sanctity of life."

'Lack of awareness'

Land said, "Obama showed a total lack of awareness of self-funded insurance programs like GuideStone. ... GuideStone cannot comply with this, because GuideStone would be forced to pay for abortifacients, which we find unconscionable."

"This administration," Land added, "has shown a very disturbing trend of when religious freedoms collide with sexual rights, sexual rights trump religious convictions every time. If the insurance company is forced to provide the coverage, the insurance company is going to pass the cost on to the person paying for the insurance — us."

Planned Parenthood, the nation's largest abortion provider, applauded the Obama move.

"In the face of a misleading and outrageous assault on women's health, the Obama administration has reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring all women will have access to birth control coverage, with no costly co-pays, no additional hurdles, and no matter where they work," Planned Parenthood president Cecile Richard said. "We believe the compliance mechanism does not compromise a woman's ability to access these critical birth control benefits." (BP, RNS, TAB)

Gambling moves stealing headlines statewide

Gambling — specifically electronic bingo — is stealing headlines again as illegal gambling facilities have been discovered in two counties, officials in two areas are planning to open up new operations and the gambling corruption trial is back in full swing.

In Walker County, 55 electronic slot machines were seized from three locations — Sumiton, Nauvoo and Eldridge — on Feb. 6. The Walker County sheriff's office and district attorney's office teamed up to make the raids, and the authorities hope they sent a message countywide.

"The law is very clear: Possession of these machines is illegal," District Attorney Bill Adair said. "We are trying to keep pressure on these situations."

Adair has elected to enforce the fines associated with illegal gambling in Walker County through a civil court system rather than prosecute anyone in this situation in the hopes of resolving things more quickly.

Lucky Teague, director of missions for Walker Baptist Association, said the raids were not a shock to anyone in the community, since similar raids have happened in recent months. Though he is glad gambling has largely left the county, he worries that it will reappear since it is such a lucrative venture.

"Pretty much everybody was happy to hear that things were being exposed," Teague said.

"The people who care about those matters — the people who are against it — are pleased that people were being brought to task about this. It's a blight on our county."

In Jefferson County, sheriff's deputies and attorney general's office investigators carried out a search warrant Feb. 7 for Church Upon the Rock Bingo in Grayson Valley. They seized 58 gambling machines, *The Birmingham News* reported.

Condemned machines

A similar raid occurred two weeks prior in Lipscomb, where authorities seized 80 gambling devices from Beulah Bell Lodge Bingo #49. Authorities will file all 138 machines in court to be condemned and destroyed, Chief Deputy Randy Christian told the *News*.

While two bingo halls in Jefferson County have been effectively shut down, the Brighton City Council has paved the way for another to open. On Feb. 7, it granted a business license to an American Legion post to open a 300-machine bingo hall. According to the *News*, the goal is to open the hall Feb. 21.

Earlier this year, an official with VictoryLand announced plans to reopen the casino side of the gambling operation, saying it could be operational by the end of the year.

But VictoryLand officials are currently focused on round two of the gambling corruption trial dealing with a vote-buying scheme that centered on electronic bingo legislation. The trial began Feb. 6.

It was delayed a week following the death of one of the seven defendants, Ray Crosby. Crosby, who died of hypertensive cardiovascular disease Jan. 29, was a former analyst with the Legislative Reference Service and wrote bills on gambling legislation. He was accused of accepting bribes from VictoryLand owner Milton McGregor. U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson dismissed the charge.

By Feb. 8, the jury had been selected, and the next day, jurors heard opening statements from prosecutors and defense lawyers for McGregor, Sen. Harri Anne Smith of Slocomb, former Sens. Larry Means and Jim Preuit, lobbyist Tom Coker and former casino spokesman Jay Walker.

Testimony began Feb. 10 in the case that originally went to trial last summer but ended in a mistrial when jurors could not reach a unanimous verdict. (TAB)

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Across Alabama's Associations

ALABAMA-CRENSHAW

► Wayne Webber is the new pastor of Patsburg Church, Luverne.

BLOUNT

► Pleasant View Church, Holly Pond, will hold its third Sunday night singing Feb. 19, 6 p.m., with The Singing Ambassadors, of Fayetteville, Tenn. For information call 256-796-5986. Randy Burtram is pastor.

CAHABA

► Ocmulgee Church, Selma, will show the movie "Courageous" March 11, 6 p.m. Danny Sumerlin is pastor.

CLARKE

► Evergreen Church, Jackson, will hold revival Feb. 19-22 with Ed Howard. The Stave Creek Church, Jackson, praise band will provide music. Services will be Sunday at 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. and weeknights at 7. Howard Gaston III is pastor.

COLBERT-LAUDERDALE

► Grace Life Church of the Shoals, Muscle Shoals, will host Anchored in Truth Ministries' True Church Conference Feb. 16-19. The topic will be "Storms of reformation: The desertions, divisions and other trials of reforming a church to biblical health." The conference is primarily for pastors and church leaders. Brett Beasley, Roy Hargrave, Barry King, David Miller and Senior Pastor-Teacher Jeff Noblit will speak. To register call 1-800-565-7729 or visit www.truechurchconference.com.

CONECUH

► Bower Memorial Church, Evergreen, will hold spring revival Monday nights in March. The theme will be "How Great a Salvation," Hebrews 2:1-4. Dennis Culbreth, pastor of First Church, Jasper, will speak March 5; Wayne McMillian, pastor of Mexia Church, March 12; Ted Traylor, pastor of Olive Church, Pensacola, Fla., March 19; and Burney Enzor,

pastor of Brantley Church, March 26. Brad Jones, minister of music for Antioch East Church, Greenville, will lead the music. Jim Griffin is the pastor.

SELMA

► Summerfield Church, Valley Grande, will hold a retirement tea to honor Pastor Tommy Fancher and his wife, Harriet, for 38 years of service Feb. 26, 3-6 p.m., in the fellowship hall. There will be a special program from 4-5 p.m. in the sanctuary. Cards and acknowledgements are welcome.

OTHER

► Chris Cook is the new church business administrator for Union Hill Church, Bessemer. He previously served as public works coordinator for Jefferson County Roads and Transportation for 30 years. He also served as chief of staff for former Commissioner Bobby Humphries. Mickey Bell is pastor.

Retired Cleburne DOM Small dies at 79

Daniel Lewis Small, retired Cleburne Baptist Association director of missions (DOM), died Dec. 16. He was 79.

A Greenfield, Mo., native, Small served as DOM from 1969 until 1994.

He designed and built Camp Back 40, a Christian camp for youth in Cleburne County, and he and his wife, Billie, wrote the programs and directed the camps for many years.

He participated in many short-term missions trips, including di-

saster relief and evangelism, going to places like Venezuela, Honduras and Guatemala.

After his retirement, he and his wife spent four and a half years in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, as International Mission Board representatives.

Small was a graduate of Southwest Baptist College in Bolivar, Mo.; William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo.; Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.; and Jacksonville State University.

He served as pastor of six churches in Missouri and Alabama before becoming DOM.

He coordinated and taught in Southern Union State Community College's Heflin Center for 10 years.

In January 2002, Small helped start Heritage Baptist Church in Heflin and served as its associate pastor until his death.

He is survived by his wife of 56 years, a daughter, a son, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. (TAB)

Nominees sought for Shofar award

The University of Mobile school of Christian studies is seeking nominees for the prestigious Order of the Shofar award.

This award honors Alabama Baptist State Convention ministers for faithful service that might otherwise go unrecognized.

Anyone may nominate a minister for consideration. Nomination forms may be downloaded at www.umobile.edu/christianstudies.

The deadline for nominations is April 1.

For more information, call the school of Christian studies at 251-442-2255 or email ctaylor@umobile.edu. (UMobile)



Photo courtesy of Northport Baptist Church

NORTHPORT ORGANIST RETIRES AFTER 50 YEARS

Northport Baptist Church honors Johnie Mae Grosson Hyche for 50 years of faithful service as organist with a retirement reception Jan. 22. She served from September 1961 to October 2011. John A. Nixon is pastor.

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Child's brain tumor leads to church plant

If Liam McGibbon had been tumor-free, you might not be reading about his parents this week. They probably would have never made it to Hamilton, Ontario, and certainly not as miraculously.

For one, Jason and Kimberley McGibbon didn't really imagine themselves as church planters. At least that's what they'll tell you. And two, they weren't looking to leave their life in Milton, a suburb of Toronto where Jason served as worship leader at The Sanctuary Church Milton, and move to the other side of Lake Ontario.

Doctor visit

Their story began three years ago in a pediatrician's office. Little 8-year-old Liam was complaining of headaches. Migraines run in the family, and so they assumed the best. When Kimberley heard it was much more serious, a parent's worst nightmare materialized before her eyes.

"I remember when I found out about Liam, and I thought, 'I can't breathe,' and the room got very cold," Kimberley said.

A tumor was growing in the middle of Liam's brain.

The next week Jason, Kimberley and Liam were in Hamilton meeting with neurosurgeons at MacKids, the pediatric division of McMaster University Hospital.

This couldn't be happening. But it was.

Two surgeries and several weeks passed. As Liam, now 11, recovered — regaining his faculties and vital signs improving — God opened Jason and Kimberley's eyes to the needs of those around them and shifted their hearts.

Looking around the waiting room, the couple could see a desperate loneliness across other parents' faces.

"As we waited, we saw people sitting there by themselves in the hardest times of their lives, we wondered how they made it through," Jason said.

"We heard so many stories from other parents whose lives were rocked by illness. They had no real hope outside of medicine and science."

In the end, Jason and Kimberley couldn't get away from the idea of true community, which they had experienced with church members praying for them, visiting with them, practically camping out at the hospital with them.

And then there were these parents in Hamilton who had no Christian presence, no church family to walk with them during their own difficult journey.

To leave the area without a gospel presence seemed out of the question.

"I'd been to Hamilton before. I'd pass through it when I was at graduate school," Jason said. "But I'd never really thought much about it."

Anchored there for weeks, the McGibbons learned of a city full of beauty, diversity, creativity but with no true spiritual direction. Ask people who cared nothing for church to drive 30 minutes for church? Not an option.

Hamilton is a Toronto-area city on the west side of Lake Ontario. More than 500,000 people live there. More than 100,000 are immigrants.

A heart for Hamilton

Only 3 percent of the Greater Toronto Area population is evangelical.

The McGibbons chose to live in a section of Hamilton frequented by artists and musicians, just the type of people Ja-



NAMB photo

'GOD HAS CALLED US' — Jason McGibbon (right); his wife, Kimberley (center); and Mike Harvey sing, play and share the gospel in Hamilton, Ontario, an urban/arts community near Toronto.

son, a musician, wants to reach.

So they moved. But first they prayed.

"Hudson Taylor once wrote, 'If you should enter that province, you must go forward on your knees,'" Jason said. "Once we found our neighborhood and found every street in that neighborhood, we signed people up from our church to prayer walk every street in our neighborhood."

Jason and Kimberley are planting The Hamilton Fellowships, a plant of The Sanctuary Church Milton, which is a church plant of The Sanctuary Church Oakville.

In the early days, planting in Hamilton has centered on building relationships with neighbors and

with people on the street, inviting people over for meals and Bible study.

The McGibbons launched their first house fellowship in September 2011. Their vision is to start several fellowships throughout Hamilton.

God's work

"When I sit down and think about it, I can become very intimidated," Jason said. "I'm a pretty normal, average guy and to be quite honest when I see some of the church planter kind of stuff, I don't see myself as fitting that mold all that often. But one of the things we know is that God has called us to do this. We just know God is there and God works. Even when you seem like you're up against the biggest, thickest, brick wall, it's then that you see God work."

Jason and Kimberley McGibbon are one of five missionaries featured during the Week of Prayer for North American Missions, March 4-11, and Annie Armstrong Easter Offering emphasis. The offering helps support McGibbon and other missionaries like him who are serving on behalf of Southern Baptists in North America. With a goal of \$70 million, this year's offering theme is "Whatever It Takes." (NAMB)

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Cardiac Nurse's Open Heart Surgery Experience Inspires New Support Group at Princeton Baptist

Dianne Phillips, a cardiac rehabilitation nurse at Princeton Baptist Medical Center never imagined that one day she would be in the same situation as her patients — recovering from heart surgery.

But that is exactly what happened on December 27, 2010 when an arteriogram showed she had severe blockage in her arteries and needed to have open heart surgery immediately. "I thought the most I would need was a stent," said Phillips. "I was not expecting to hear I needed five bypasses."

After a 12-week recovery and rehabilitation period, Phillips was back at work in the Princeton Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation Department with a new purpose and passion. "I wanted to help other women who

had been through or who were facing what I had experienced," said Phillips. Claudia Wilkey, Princeton's director of cardiac rehabilitation, had recommended that several women, including Phillips, go to a training course through WomenHeart. WomenHeart is a patient advocacy organization that provides support for women who are living with or who are at risk for heart disease.

After attending a WomenHeart symposium held at the Mayo Clinic last year, Phillips took the lead on starting the first WomenHeart support group in Central Alabama. "The WomenHeart



The WomenHeart Support Group meets the third Wednesday of each month at Princeton Baptist in the Cancer Center Conference Room from 11 a.m. until 12:30 p.m. The next meeting is March 21. Meetings will feature guest speakers including cardiologists, and will provide information on diet and exercise, medication management, dealing with depression and anxiety, and more.

organization teaches its volunteers how to be the 'boots on the ground' in the community," said Phillips. "I am excited to be a part of this new resource to support and educate women living with heart disease."

For more information contact Diane Phillips at 205-648-3844 or e-mail her at DPhillips3844@bellsouth.net. For more information about cardiac services available at Princeton Baptist, visit www.bhsala.com.

Just Ask Raymond Gaines ... Heart Screening Can Save Lives

Raymond Gaines is convinced a heart screening at Princeton Baptist helped save his life.

The Pleasant Grove resident was only 58 years old when he went through Baptist Health System's HeartAware program. Though he did not have any specific problems at the time, Gaines

had battled high cholesterol for two decades, and his family has a history of heart issues.

His screening results indicated his cholesterol levels were elevated and he needed further testing — and possibly treatment.

During the screening at Princeton

Baptist, Gaines also learned to recognize the symptoms that could lead to a heart attack. So when he began feeling some slight pressure in his chest just a few weeks later, he immediately called his doctor, who discovered that Gaines had a clogged artery.

"That pretty much saved my life," Gaines said. "I didn't suffer a heart attack because they found the problem before I had one. The cardiac surgeon told me if that artery had closed completely up, it was all over." Instead, a stent was put in. Now, Gaines' cholesterol is down and his doctor said his heart is in good condition. "A heart screening like HeartAware is easy to go through," Gaines says, "It's quick, painless — and definitely worth it!"

at www.beheartaware.com. It's quick, simple and free of charge. The answers you provide are scored immediately to indicate your overall risk of developing heart disease.

If the results determine you may be at risk for heart disease, a Baptist Health System representative will contact you to schedule a free follow-up evaluation and consultation with a cardiac nurse at one of the BHS hospitals.

This 30-minute appointment will include a free cholesterol screening, as well as a blood pressure check and other heart-health checks. The results of these screenings can indicate if there is a need for early intervention — even if you have not experienced any symptoms.

What's your heart risk?

Baptist Health System's HeartAware program can help you determine if you are "at risk." The first step is to take the online HeartAware risk assessment

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Disaster relief leads Grace Chapel to SBC

By Leigh Pritchett
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

When the April 27 tornadoes ravaged DeKalb County, the 99-year-old building of Grace Chapel Baptist Church at Town Creek in Rainsville was destroyed.

It was one of two churches within about 100 yards of each other to be obliterated that day, deacon Larry Bouldin said.

A representative of the Cherokee County chapter of Carpenters for Christ met with Bouldin to see what could be done to help the independent Baptist church, which was without a pastor.

The church had \$98,700 in insurance, but that was not enough to rebuild the structure, he said.

Nonetheless, prior to June 4, when construction was to begin on a new building, a series of events took place:

► The bid on construction materials was \$23,000, far below the \$50,000 figure that was anticipated.

► A company donated trusses, which would have cost around \$8,000.

► Within one hour, two donations that amounted to \$3,500 were

given, exactly what was needed to purchase a steeple — something the original structure did not have.

Bouldin still grows emotional in recounting all the miracles that occurred.

“We had three baby grand pianos offered to us. We had four organs (offered),” he continued. And that gave him the opportunity to tell the givers about other churches that might need them.

Building the church

“I could talk about it for an hour,” Bouldin said of all the blessings of the experience.

When construction started, there were 100-plus volunteers from Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Indiana and Kentucky busy at work.

By the next Saturday, the inside walls were up and the baptistry was in. By the following Monday, the church had a roof. That Wednesday, a service was held there.

“We had one light, a PA system and a whole lot of church fans,” Bouldin said.

By the end of the project, volunteers from Baldwin, Etowah and East Liberty Baptist associations had given their time to construct the

church building. Ken Clement, director of missions for DeKalb Baptist Association, helped coordinate the effort.

“These people who built our church back ... they would come up to you and thank you for letting them build your church back,” Bouldin recalled.

He said he would try to express his gratitude but they instead thanked Grace Chapel Baptist members for allowing them to help.

“I just never met a group of people so dedicated,” Bouldin said.

And thanks to those volunteers, “we have a beautiful church now, new pews,” he said. “And through the blessings of the Lord, it’s paid for.”

The new building even looks a lot like the old one and has a baptistry, which the previous church did not have, Bouldin said.

On Dec. 4, the church was dedicated.

In October, Grace Chapel should have something else to celebrate: full membership in DeKalb Association.

Because the church members felt as if God had blessed them so much through Carpenters for Christ and

the Southern Baptist associations, they also wanted to participate in missions, Bouldin said.

So, in late summer, he met with Clement to ask how the church could become part of DeKalb Association.

Then, in September, “God sent us a pastor,” Bouldin said.

This pastor, Jeremy Wilson, is strong in Southern Baptist work, Bouldin said.

In October, the association gave Grace Chapel watch-care status for a year, and it is expected to grant the church full membership into the association this October, Clement said. When that happens, DeKalb Association will be 70 churches strong, he said.

Growing attendance

At the time the tornado destroyed the church, Grace Chapel had a Sunday worship attendance of about 30. Since Wilson became pastor, attendance has grown to about 50, Bouldin reported.

“God can take disaster and turn it into a blessing,” he said. “It has been a great experience. It has been absolutely life-changing.”

Want to know God?

By Pastor John Stone
First Baptist Church, McIntosh

It has been said if you have one really good friend, then you are truly a blessed person. I want to introduce to you my very best friend. His name is Jesus. He is spoken of throughout the Bible, and in Proverbs 18:24, it says, “There is a friend (a lover) who sticks closer than a brother.” F.G. Collier in The Biblical Illustrator says, “(Jesus) Christ alone has those elements of character which can make Him the clinging friend.”

May I suggest some reasons I think you’d enjoy having Jesus as your friend? First He can do so much for you such as enabling you to find purpose for your life that you can never know outside of Him. He also offers you spiritual gifts for use in His body, the church. Jesus offers you victory over the spiritual and even physical giants that trouble you. He warns you of danger and assists you in overcoming it. In short, there is nothing too hard for Him to do, for He is the Creator and Sustainer of everything that exists (see Colossians 1:16-17).

Another reason I’d like you to know Him is because the Bible says your greatest need is to be forgiven and cleansed of guilt because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and Jesus was “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 11:19). The Bible says, “But God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The Bible also says, “He (God) made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Forgiveness and cleansing become ours as God’s gift that we receive by faith.

The Bible also says those who reject Jesus abide under God’s condemnation. John 3:18 says, “Anyone who believes in Him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.”

Receive the forgiveness Jesus offers you simply by being willing to turn from your sin and trust Him to forgive and cleanse you of all your sins. He can be depended on to keep His promise to do it.

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PART-TIME OR BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR: Prayerfully searching for part-time or bivocational pastor at Hopewell Baptist Church. Send resumé to: rhester@regarrison.com or HBC, 416 Hopewell Road, Danville, AL 35619. “We Go Where The Spirit Leads.”

MINISTER OF MUSIC: East Side Baptist Church in Mountain Home, Ark., is seeking a full-time minister of music. Qualifications include the ability to primarily lead a blended worship service but will also include leading a traditional service and working with a choir. Prior experience is preferred. Please email your resumé to: stephanie@esb-cmh.com or mail to: East Side Baptist Church, 718 East 9th Street, Mountain Home, AR 72653.

WORSHIP ARTS TEAM: Paramount Baptist Church in Amarillo, Texas, is seeking to fill leadership positions on its worship arts team. Candidates should have the creative skills to lead both contemporary and traditional styles of worship. Please send resumé to: dave@paramount.org or Paramount Baptist Church, 3801 S. Western St., Amarillo, TX 79109.

BIVOCATIONAL MINISTER OF MUSIC: Seeking bivocational minister of music to work with choir and small congregation that desires to grow. Clayridge Baptist Church, Clay, Ala. Contact Ron Hudgens, ronhudgens@JCDH.org, 205-913-9480.

PART-TIME MINISTER OF WORSHIP: Clearview Baptist Church in Clay/Pinson, Ala., is seeking a part-time minister of worship. Candidate needs to have experience in leading a choir, worship team and band. Please send resumé to: Clearview Baptist Church, Music Search Committee, 5271 Old Springville Road, Pinson, AL 35126 or connie@clearviewbaptist.com.

BIVOCATIONAL MINISTER OF MUSIC: Evergreen Baptist Church, Vance, Ala., is seeking a bivocational minister of music to lead worship during all services and oversee all aspects of the music ministry. Evergreen averages 300+ during morning worship services with a contemporary blend of worship. Please email resumé to: saltshaker02@aol.com.

FULL-TIME STUDENT MINISTER: Hepzibah Baptist Church is seeking someone for our youth, middle school and children’s ministry department. Please send resumé to: Hepzibah Baptist Church, 20512 Hepzibah Church Road, McCalla, AL 35111 or larrysumrall@bellsouth.net.

PART-TIME MINISTER OF YOUTH: Nazareth Baptist Church of Rainsville, Ala., is seeking a part-time minister of youth. Please mail resumé to: Search Committee, Nazareth Baptist Church, P.O. Box 541, Rainsville, AL 35896.

PART-TIME STUDENT MINISTER: Grades 7-12. Five Points Baptist Church, 267 Odens Mill Road, Sylacauga, AL 35150. Contact Pastor Tommy Strickland. fpbcpastor@bellsouth.net, www.fpbcsylacauga.org.

PART-TIME STUDENT PASTOR: Grace Baptist Church is seeking a part-time student pastor. Send resumé and references to the attention of W. Stacey Boutwell. Email: stacey@graceoxford.com. Mail: 2018 Hinton Drive, Oxford, AL 36203. Email is preferred.

PART-TIME CHILDREN’S MINISTER: Northridge Baptist Church in Northport

is currently accepting resumé for a part-time children’s minister. Mail resumé and letter of interest to: Northridge Baptist Church, Children’s Minister Search Committee, 4115 Watermelon Road, Northport, AL 35473.

OTHER POSITIONS

PIANIST: Cahaba View Baptist Church, Leeds, is seeking a pianist to accompany congregation and choir. Please send resumé to: nbruce88@att.net or call the church office at 205-956-9114.

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By Jim Williams
Special to The Alabama Baptist

Each year, the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama surveys Alabamians' opinions on the important issues of the day. There is a lot of continuity in the results from year to year, particularly in questions about education and state versus local control of public decisions.

We always ask people to name the most important issue facing the state. Logically enough, jobs and the economy have been No. 1 for the past three years. Before that, it was education. And education has remained in second place throughout the recession.

So the people of Alabama value education, even when their most immediate concern is for jobs and economic improvement. What education issues do they see?

School performance

A majority of the people we interviewed this year told us they are satisfied with the quality of the public schools in their community. However, their opinions are evenly divided on the quality of schools statewide.

When we asked what would improve school performance, a majority of those with opinions chose more operating freedom rather than more state supervision. A majority also favored allowing the creation of charter schools.

We asked about proposals for creating jobs that have been mentioned in the news. The

people in our survey favored expanding job training programs in Alabama's community colleges more than tax incentives to attract businesses.

Finally, by an overwhelming margin, our survey respondents wanted to keep education dollars separate in the state budget rather than combine them with funds used for other purposes.

The majority clearly favored local control of schools. It was the same with general government; the preference was nearly 2-to-1 for giving counties more authority rather than leaving them under the control of the state Legislature as they are now.

These opinions were not unanimous; for example, African-Americans and people who live in metropolitan areas tended to favor more state supervision of public schools. Such exceptions point to the fact that some schools and county governments clearly need state oversight. Yet majorities in our survey suggested that the state is not responsive to public opinion and that its budget can be cut without affecting services.

Maybe the survey's clearest message is that the state should live up to its responsibilities and earn the public's confidence.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Jim Williams is executive director for the nonprofit, nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama. Jim may be contacted at jwillia@samford.edu.

WMU takes missions education to Africa

Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) leaders from six countries met in West Africa to begin or strengthen missions education and involvement in area churches. The regional training took place in Burkina Faso where WMU work was launched in January 2010.

Beatrice Zoma, president of Burkina Faso WMU (translated as Union of Baptist Co-Laborers with Christ), invited leaders from Nigeria, Liberia, Togo, Benin, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso with the goal of starting age-level missions organizations in Burkina Faso patterned after Nigeria WMU, where they have Sunbeams for chil-

dren through third grade and Girls in Action (GA) for young girls.

Kathy Shafto, International Mission Board representative in Burkina Faso, said the conference was a great opportunity for women in the area to hear from other African leaders as well as Debby Akerman, president of national WMU.

"While there is a regional WMU conference in West Africa every two years, this was the first training in missions education for women in Burkina Faso," Shafto explained.

"This is so new and exciting because most village churches don't even have Sunday School, so for us to start with missions will be new

and different for [those in] Burkina Faso to think about."

According to Shafto, WMU programs are well-established in Liberia, Nigeria and Ghana with missions action projects and organized Bible studies on national and church levels. Children's missions programs are growing in Ghana, and Liberia WMU leaders are focused on strengthening their GA programs specifically. Several West African countries also have Lydias, which is similar to Acteens with a slightly different age group; consistent with how African culture views women, Lydias includes young women from age 16 until they are married. (BP)

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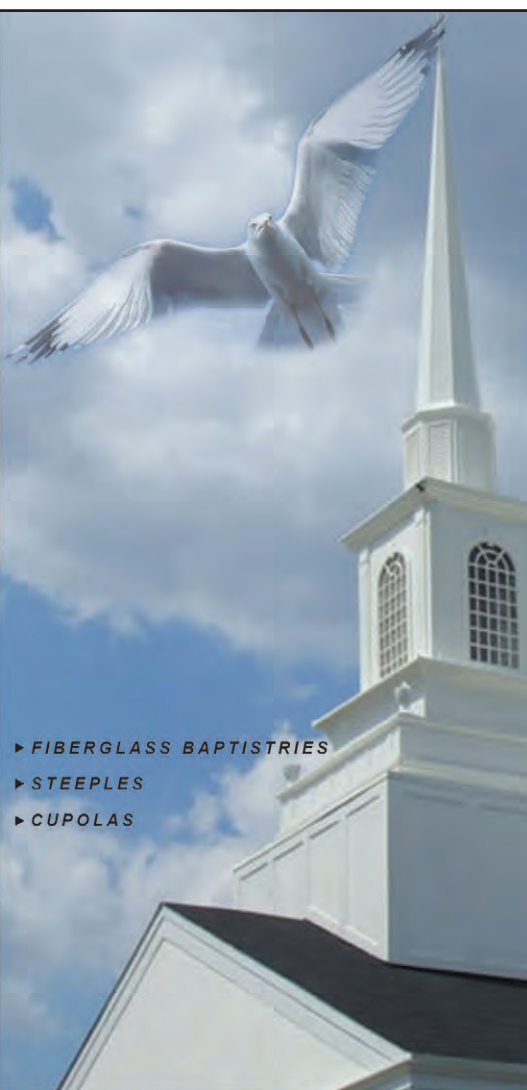
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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For February 19

Explore the Bible

By Dale Younce

Professor of Christian Studies, School of Christian Studies, University of Mobile

BE REPENTANT
Deuteronomy 30:1–4, 6–8, 15–20

No one is perfect. While it's certainly true that no one lives a sin-free life, a greater problem is refusing to admit one's wrongdoings. Some adults try to put the blame for their wrongdoings on their upbringing or "the system." Other adults simply try to ignore the legitimacy of biblical mandates concerning right and wrong behavior. To some of these adults, life means never having to say you're sorry. Because God is merciful and desires to restore people to a right relationship and godly behavior, He forgives those who repent of their sins. Thus God expects His people to repent when they falter in their faithfulness to Him. This week's lesson finds Moses urging the Israelites to choose faithfulness and return to God when they fall into disobedience.

Repentance Is Possible (1–4)

On the plains of Moab, before entering the promised land, Moses called the Israelites to a renewal of the covenant God had made with them 40 years previously. Moses foresaw a time in the future when they would abandon the covenant, be driven from the promised land and scattered throughout the nations of the earth. But this would also be a time for returning to the Lord and being restored to a right relationship with Him. No matter how widely and thoroughly dispersed among the nations the Israelites might be, by means of their repenting and returning to the Lord, He would, with tender compassion, restore them and regather them to the promised land.

To some degree, a regathering occurred after the Babylonian Captivity, when a believing remnant returned to the land and rebuilt the Temple. The complete fulfillment of this promise, however, will not take place until the end times (Isa. 43:5–7; Matt. 24:29–31). Today the people of Israel are scattered throughout the earth with only about 6 million in the state of Israel.

The biblical principle is that no matter what we have done or how far away from God we think we are, He graciously extends to us the promise that if we genuinely repent of our

sins, then we can return to a restored relationship with Him.

God Works in Repentant Hearts (6–8)

God produces this restoration to right relationship with Himself under the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; 32:36–41) and by means of a spiritual "operation," the circumcision of the heart. This work of God in the innermost being of the individual is the genuine salvation that gives a new will to love and obey Him wholeheartedly, replacing the former spiritual insensitivity and stubbornness. This new heart is an essential feature of the new covenant (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26) and the evidence of genuine faith (Rom. 2:28–29).

Moses explained that when future Israelites repented of abandoning the covenant, the Lord would then work in their hearts to ensure wholehearted faithfulness. The biblical principle is true today. When we genuinely repent of our sins, we open ourselves to God so that He can change our attitudes and lifestyles in ways that are necessary.

Life Comes Down to a Choice (15–20)

Moses clearly marked out the choice facing the Israelites: Love and obey God, which results in life, or reject God, which is death. Making this decision was not difficult; the choice was between life and death, and who would deliberately choose death? In Israel's case, the choice was between trusting God and enjoying His blessings and refusing to love and obey Him and being severely punished.

For us, the choice is between eternal life and eternal death, between salvation by grace through faith in Jesus and condemnation by God's righteousness. Moses laid out before the Israelites a choice they must make: Love the Lord and live, or abandon Him and perish from the land. For us, because God has made eternal life possible through repentance and faith in Jesus, the only sensible decision is to choose life. "He who believes the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36).

Bible Studies for Life

By Joseph F. Scrivner

Assistant Professor of Religion, Department of Religion, Samford University

CENTER OF MY BELIEF
Colossians 2:8–23

The Bible repeatedly points out religious people's tendency to lose their focus and drift away from the most important aspects of faith. In the Old Testament, the prophets consistently call on their fellow Israelites to return to a faith that combines right belief with right practice (Isa. 1:1–31; Jer. 7:1–15; Amos 5:18–27; Micah 6:6–8). In the New Testament, we see a similar pattern. Paul is frustrated when believers in Galatia are tempted by teachings that turn the focus away from Christ (Gal. 1:6–10). Though the specific issues differ, Paul's main point is essentially the same in his letters to the Romans and the Corinthians (Rom. 12–15; 1 Cor. 13). We see this point again in his Epistle to the Colossians.

Choose Fullness Over Emptiness (8–15)

The core issue for Paul is that Christ is the source of all things, from creation to salvation. Thus he rightly resists any teaching that diminished Christ's position. Specifically, when someone claims that there are certain additional steps one must follow for a fuller Christian life, this inevitably implies that something is lacking in what Christ provides for salvation and sanctification.

Paul refers to such teaching as "empty deceit," based on "human tradition" and "elemental forces" (8). The corrective for this false teaching is that in Christ, "the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily, and you have been filled by Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority" (9–10). Thus, if one has faith in Christ, then one has all the spiritual resources needed for full maturity. In Christ, the believer is spiritually circumcised, resurrected, forgiven and delivered from every spiritual power (11–15).

Choose Substance Over Shadow (16–19)

If the believer is complete in Christ, then there is no need to fight off spiritual forces with additional rituals and rules. Consequently he or she should not be judged "in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festi-

val or a new moon or a Sabbath day." These things may have their place in God's economy of salvation and Christian worship, but their ultimate purpose is to point to Christ. They are the shadow; He is the substance. In addition, the believer should not be swayed by those who claim to have unique spiritual access through visions or other spiritual gifts.

Of course, this still happens in many Christian churches. The obvious examples are Christians who spotlight spiritual gifts, particularly Pentecostal and charismatic believers. Yet this also occurs in Baptist churches, especially where a minister presents himself as the unquestionable, authoritative interpreter of God's Word without due attention to the priesthood of all believers. The Preamble to the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message says it this way: "Baptists emphasize the soul's competency before God, freedom in religion and the priesthood of the believer. However, this emphasis should not be interpreted to mean that there is an absence of certain definite doctrines that Baptists believe, cherish and with which they have been and are now closely identified."

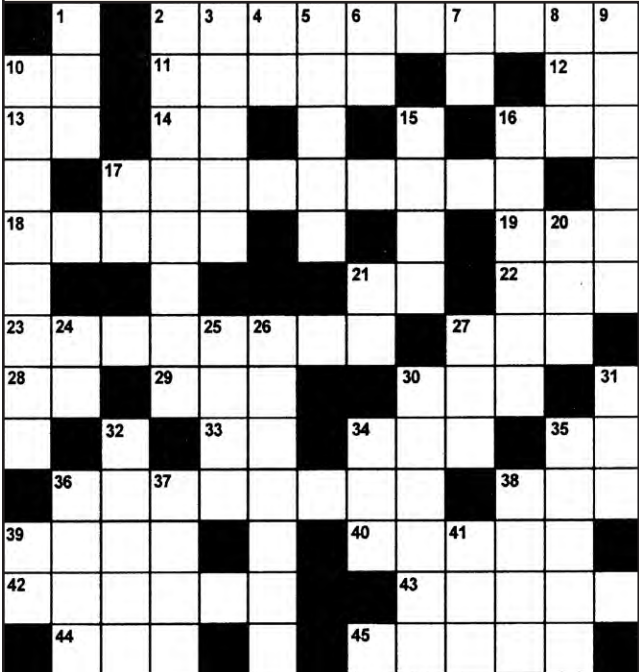
Choose Relationship Over Rules (20–23)

Paul emphasizes that the believer misunderstands his or her standing in Christ when he or she falls prey to those emphasizing regulations. Submitting oneself to such teaching would be similar to a college graduate returning to first-year introductory courses. That time has passed. Move on to maturity.

Moreover an emphasis on such "elemental" things does not deliver what is promised. They do not help with sanctification. As Paul says, "Although these have a reputation of wisdom by promoting ascetic practices, humility and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value against fleshly indulgence." As he will go on to say in Colossians, the most important thing is how one relates to others, from immediate family members to fellow believers to one's neighbors in society (Col. 3:1–4:6). "Above all, put on love — the perfect bond of unity" (Col. 3:14).

Christian Crossword

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- Across**
2. He calleth together his friends and _____. (Luke 15:6)
10. His kingdom was lifted up ____ high. (1 Chron. 14:2)
11. Loosen, free from bonds.
12. North America. (abbr.)
13. Vermont. (abbr.)
14. Doctor. (abbr.)
16. Buddy, friend, ____.
17. Your ____ is come abroad. (Rom. 16:19)
18. The state of wearing a robe.
19. A type of grain. (singular)
21. Expression of pain.
22. Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a ____.
23. Cain brought ... an ____ unto the Lord. (Gen. 4:3)
27. Ye have put off the ____ man. (Col. 3:9)
28. 2,000 in Roman numerals.
29. Disk Operating System. (abbr.)
30. Prefix meaning "before."
33. Either/____.

34. They ... weave the spider's _____. (Isa. 59:5)
35. ____-ta. ("good-bye" in baby talk)
36. Who am also a ____ of the glory. (1 Pet. 5:1)
38. Mice that ____ the land. (1 Sam. 6:5)
39. Prefix meaning very small.
40. An island in eastern Indonesia.
42. In the ____ of one Tyrannus. (Acts 19:9)
43. Ye shall be ____ from your enemies. (Num. 10:9)
44. A brand of sneakers. (singular)
45. Whose ____ I am not worthy to bear. (Matt. 3:11)
- Down**
1. Go to the ____, thou sluggard. (Prov. 6:6)
2. For he was ____ with us. (Acts 1:17)
3. When forty days ... were ____ he hungered. (Luke 4:2)
4. This is the way, walk ye in _____. (Isa. 30:21)
5. "Get in." (colloquial)
6. Whose son is ____? (Matt. 22:42)
7. Eat straw like the _____. (Isa. 11:7)
8. Ribonucleic acid. (abbr.)
9. ____ them that have the rule over you. (Heb. 13:24)
10. I have ____ the world. (John 16:33)
15. He ____ who should betray him. (John 13:11)
16. A ____ prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:17)
17. Obstetrical. (abbr.)
20. ____ed him in the killing of his brethren. (Judg. 9:24)
21. ____ the King of Bashan. (Num. 21:33)
24. Frequency Modulation. (abbr.)
25. Because they had no ____ they withered away. (Matt. 13:6)
26. Belonging to God's chosen nation.
27. Globe.
30. Lord, save us: we _____. (Matt. 8:25)
31. Though ____ should rise

- against me. (Ps. 27:3)
32. A hidden supply of stores.
34. They are ____ with the showers of the mountains. (Job 24:8)
35. The ____ of the field. (Matt. 13:36)
36. The ravens of the valley shall ____ it out. (Prov. 30:17)
37. Medieval churches had a ____ screen at the entrance of the chancel.
38. To take from one place to another.
39. Postscript. (abbr.)
41. Former Chinese leader.



RESOURCES:

Your Guide to Today's New Music and Literature



Sound Bites By Rick Sharp

VICTORY WORLD MUSIC

Shake Heaven

Victory World Music

Victory World Music, the praise-and-worship team for Victory World Church, is led by artist Montell Jordan, well known in the rhythm and blues world for his secular work with Def Jam Recordings.



"Shake Heaven" is a diverse, multicultural effort that's difficult to pigeonhole. Certainly, strong R&B roots are present, but then artist Beckah Shae shows up to lend a thoroughly modern pop feel to the opening song "Yes You Are (Yeshua)." From there it just never stops: a diverse collection of genres from an ensemble cast of talented musicians.

"These Hands" is a beautifully crafted worshipful masterpiece, strong and deliberate in pace, stark in its simplicity, yet powerfully moving, both in its message and in its delivery. An unusual spoken word piece, "When I See You," is a compelling vehicle of praise, and is probably a forerunner of prayerful

praise set to music that we'll hear a lot more of in the future. "The One" combines hip-hop, R&B and even a bit of rap into a danceable, singable track that should get us all moving. Twenty- and 30-some-things, here's your new anthem.

Time will tell whether Victory World Church and its praise team, Victory World Music, are able to maintain and build the momentum they have now, but one thing is reasonably certain: These musicians will be shaping the sound of modern Christian music for a long time to come.

TIDEWATER

The Beautiful Life

ROXR Records/Inpop Records

Tidewater has just released its third CD, a three-song EP on ROXR records, produced by Kevin Gales (Fiona Apple, Kid Rock and Sarah McLachlan).



Tidewater is a one-man band, Brett Allen, who plays guitars, mandolin and banjo. He got a little help on this EP from

well-respected drummer Kenny Aronoff. Previous collaboration

between Allen and Gales has produced considerable success in several indie music charts, including a three-week stay in the top-40 of iTunes singer/songwriter chart. This record should be no different.

The record's single, "Not Just Any Love," is a touching ballad heralding the love of our heavenly Father. The title cut highlights a life of faith through several vignettes. "Desire," the last track, touches on our destructive needs and wants. All songs are well-written, artfully recorded pieces, and this EP should further Tidewater's exposure in the Christian music world.

TERRY WARREN

Amazing Love

Lamon Records

Some may remember Terry Warren as an All-American linebacker with Florida State University who signed to play with the Dallas Cowboys only to have a training camp incident that resulted in a broken back end his football career.

Others may remember his first musical effort, "Lifted Up by Angels," a well-received independently released first album.

Either way, most think of Warren as a man who excels at what

ever he does. His sophomore album, "Amazing Love" on Lamon Records, continues that history of success, producing his fourth No.



1 song on the NCM (New Christian Music) Euro Chart.

Recorded in Nashville with a stellar group of studio musicians, "Amazing Love" combines upbeat, rock-inflected

pop on songs such as "God You're Beautiful" with impressive reinterpretations of some classic hymns. There really is something here for everybody. The album ends with a prayer, "Bring Him Home," Warren's rendition from his on-Broadway role of Jean Valjean in "Les Miserables."

While not as edgy or rock oriented as much of contemporary Christian music these days, Warren has produced a solid album that will bring a lot of pleasure to a wide-ranging audience.

Christian Marketplace Top Ten Best Sellers

Fiction

1. **Longing, Bailey Flanigan Series #3**, Karen Kingsbury (Zondervan)
2. **Courageous**, Randy Alcorn, Alex Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick (Tyndale)
3. **Leaving, Bailey Flanigan Series #1**, Karen Kingsbury (Zondervan)
4. **The Tehran Initiative**, Joel C. Rosenberg (Tyndale)
5. **Redeeming Love**, Francine Rivers (Waterbrook/Multnomah)
6. **Learning, Bailey Flanigan Series #2**, Karen Kingsbury (Zondervan)
7. **A Lineage of Grace**, Francine Rivers (Tyndale)
8. **Her Daughter's Dream, Marta's Legacy Series #2**, Francine Rivers (Tyndale)
9. **Her Mother's Hope, Marta's Legacy Series #1**, Francine Rivers (Tyndale)
10. **The Mercy, Rose Trilogy Series #3**, Beverly Lewis (Baker)

Nonfiction

1. **Jesus Calling**, Sarah Young (Thomas Nelson)
2. **Heaven Is for Real**, Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent (Thomas Nelson)
3. **One Thousand Gifts**, Ann Voskamp (Zondervan)
4. **Nearing Home**, Billy Graham (Thomas Nelson)
5. **Throw It Down**, Jud Wilhite (Zondervan)
6. **Forgotten God**, Francis Chan (David C Cook)
7. **Through My Eyes**, Tim Tebow (Zondervan)
8. **Jesus Calling, Deluxe Edition**, Sarah Young (Thomas Nelson)
9. **Heaven Is for Real for Kids**, Todd Burpo (Thomas Nelson)
10. **Jesus Calling, Large-Print Deluxe Edition**, Sarah Young (Thomas Nelson)

Book Reviews

By Martine Bates Sharp, Ed.D.

H2O, the Novel (The Eternal Elements)

Austin Boyd and Brannon Hollingsworth. *Chattanooga: Living Ink Books*, 2011. 400 pp. (Paperback).

What if exposure to water brought on terrifying visions and blackouts? What if those visions slowly crystallized into something hauntingly familiar, but unwelcome — while requiring less and less water as a trigger?

For successful career woman Kate Pepper, the visions are disrupting and life-changing, causing her to go to great lengths to avoid even dampness; chained to her apartment, she feels her sanity and her health slipping away along with career and relationships. Increasingly desperate, Kate begins searching for answers and finds them in unexpected places.

Dubbed "speculative fiction," "H2O" is edgy and modern in its characters and setting, while dealing with the ancient topics of sin and redemption. Don't let the "speculative" and "edgy" labels deter you — this is a book well worth reading

for the gripping story as well as the eternal truth it reveals.

Both co-authors are from north Alabama. Austin Boyd, author of several books, including the award-winning "The Proof," is from Huntsville. Boyd attends First Baptist Church, Huntsville, while Brannon Hollingsworth, from Hartselle, attends West Hartselle Baptist Church.

Working in God's Diamond: An Every Member a Minister Church

Jere Patterson. *Bloomington, Ind.: Crossbooks*, 2011. 172 pp. (Paperback).

"Working in God's Diamond" is the first book for Jere Patterson, church consultant and former director of missions for Morgan Baptist Association. As Patterson points out in the introduction, a congregational church is one in which every member is considered a minister, responsible for "using his or her divinely given spiritual gifts under the direction of the Holy Spirit of God." In this context, says Patterson, the church is expected to

move "together in a unified body."

The problem is that unity is often hard to maintain, which brings on what Patterson described as "flashes" that require the exercise of leadership and authority.

Patterson asserts that the diamond, as the graphical representation of the church's hierarchical structure, is a more useful explanatory structure than the traditional triangle.

The book is well-written, but the format of a protracted three-way conversation among a retired seminary professor, a pastor of a large church and a pastor of a small church sometimes gets in the way. I often found myself impatient with the descriptions of lunches, letters and days at the lake, wishing the book would simply get to the point.

Even so, the book is a worthwhile read, full of valuable and practical information about lines of authority and lay and pastoral leadership in the congregational church. The theory and practical advice would benefit both lay leaders and professional church staff.



RNS photo

MINORITY — Mina Bous (left) worships with other Coptic Christians at St. George Coptic Orthodox Church in Philadelphia. Bous is seeking to bring family members in Cairo, Egypt, to the United States.

Dark outlook for Christians

Middle Eastern believers keep wary eye on Arab Spring

From her home, Samia Ramsis holds a key chain bearing the face of the Virgin Mary as visitors outside come to look upon the spot where Egypt's Coptic Christians believe Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus found refuge after fleeing Bethlehem.

Once crowded with Christians, Cairo's Coptic quarter where she lives with her husband, Mounir, and two children is now home to fewer than 50 Christian families.

"We know many Christians have left," said Mounir Ramsis, speaking not only about this quarter but about all of Egypt. "But we love this country and will stay until death."

The Arab Spring uprisings that toppled secular dictatorships have unleashed long-suppressed freedoms that have allowed Islamic parties to gain a share of political power they have been denied for decades. Their rise is creating near-panic among ancient Christian communities that dot the Muslim world and predate Islam by centuries.

In Tunisia, where the regime of President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali was ousted last year after 32 years in power, the dominant political party, Ennahda, has worried Catholics by vowing to tilt the country's yet-to-be-written constitution toward Shariah, or Islamic law.

No building permits

In Libya, Christians are uneasy as the powerful head of the Tripoli Military Council, Abdul Hakim Belhaj, who once led an Islamic militia with links to al-Qaida, has said he plans to run for office in elections scheduled for April.

In Afghanistan, no new building permits have been issued for churches, and the last church open to the public was demolished over the summer. In Iraq, the Christian community has decreased by two-thirds since 2003 amid bombings

of churches and assassinations of priests.

And Christians in Syria, where Muslims have risen up against President Bashar al-Assad, have been subjected to murder, rape and kidnappings in Damascus and rebellious towns, according to Christian rights groups, including Open Doors, which helps Christians facing persecution.

Many had hoped for better in an Arab movement that proponents said was about replacing tyrannies with democracies.

"The outlook is grim," said John Eibner, CEO of the California-based human rights group Christian Solidarity International.

"If the current trajectory continues, it's reasonable to think that within a generation these (Christian) communities will not look like functioning communities," Eibner said. "They'll look more like the once-flourishing Jewish communities" across the Arab world that are all but gone.

Nowhere is the irony more profound than in Egypt, where an estimated 8 million Christians live with more than 70 million Muslims.

Christians demonstrated alongside Muslims early last year to oust Hosni Mubarak. Before Mubarak's overthrow, Christians had suffered from years of church burnings and murders at the hands of radical Muslims who want an Islamic state free of religious minorities. After the ouster, the military regime that has been running the country has refused to make any arrests in attacks on Christians.

Mina Bous, 25, a Copt who fled to Philadelphia, recalls cowering with his mother in 1997 as a mob stoned the family home and chanted anti-Christian slogans. But the difference then was that Mubarak ordered the military to protect Christian communities

and jailed extremists, Bous said.

In October, Copts organized a protest in downtown Cairo over the authorities' failure to investigate attacks, including the bombing of a church in Alexandria on New Year's Day 2011 that killed 20 people, 17 of them Christians, according to Human Rights Watch.

Bous wants to bring his family to the United States because he said he is petrified by the new society forming in Egypt. The first free elections in decades held in the past two months handed power not to moderates but to members of the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Salafi candidates, who combined took nearly 70 percent of seats.

Quranic law

The Muslim Brotherhood, a political movement that seeks a nation run according to Quranic law, has said Egypt would respect the rights of religious minorities. The Salafis, Muslim fundamentalists who want a complete application of Shariah law that generally denies equal rights to women and religious minorities, also say Copts are safe in Egypt.

Christians account for 4 percent of the people of the Middle East and North Africa. Despite being the birthplace of Christianity, the region now has the fewest number of Christians (13 million) of any other major geographic region, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

The future of minorities in the emerging democracies of the Middle East "is a huge issue most vividly seen in Egypt and the Copts," said California Rep. Howard Berman, ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "It's on our agenda as we figure out how to help these countries," and their treatment of Christians and other minorities is a "red line" that will affect future aid. (RNS)

PERSECUTED CHURCH

Compiled from Wire Services



Baptist missionary couple slain in Mexico

EL CERCADO, Mexico — A married couple who had served for 28 years as Baptist missionaries in Mexico were murdered Jan. 31 at their home near Monterrey in El Cercado, Santiago, Nuevo Leon. John Casias, 76, and Wanda Casias, 67, were strangled with electrical cords when intruders broke into their house and stole a safe, televisions and ministry vehicles, along with other items.

The area has suffered heavily from attacks by drug cartels in recent weeks, including the murder of the mayor of El Cercado, leading to the tentative conclusion that the crime was committed by people serving narcotics traffickers.

Drug traffickers in Mexico oppose the message of Christ because it turns people away from their business, and thus Christians have been among the targets of the criminals. Christians noted that the assailants would not have needed to kill the missionary couple in order to rob them.

In Puebla, intervention by state authorities after Protestants came under threats of expulsion and death led Catholics in San Rafael Tlanalapan to agree to allow evangelicals to construct a worship place in the town far from the Catholic church building. Last fall, Catholics threatened to crucify the Protestants if they didn't leave town immediately. Parishioners later revealed that a local priest incited them to make this threat, and after this became public, Catholic authorities transferred the priest to another town. Catholics (not "traditionalist Catholics" who mix Catholicism with indigenous practices, as previously reported) in San Rafael Tlanalapan, near San Martín Texmelucan, about 60 miles from Mexico City, had reportedly threatened to burn down or otherwise destroy the homes of about 70 Christians.

Islamic rebel militia behead Somali convert

MOGADISHU, Somalia — Islamic extremists from the rebel al-Shabaab militia in Somalia beheaded a Christian on the outskirts of Mogadishu in January, sources said.

The militants fighting the transitional government in Mogadishu murdered Zakaria Hussein Omar, 26, on Jan. 2 in Cee-carfiid village, about nine miles outside of the Somali capital, they said. Omar had worked for a Christian humanitarian organization that al-Shabaab banned last year.

His body was left lying for 20 hours before nomads found it and carried it into Mogadishu, a close friend said. "Last year, he mentioned to me that his life was in danger when the [nongovernmental organization] he worked for was banned by the al-Shabaab," the friend said. "One of the persons who saw him said, 'This is the young man who stayed in Ethiopia, and people have been saying that he left Islam and joined Christianity.'"

Omar converted to Christianity seven years ago while in Ethiopia, where he lived with relatives. He returned to Somalia in 2008 and completed his university education in 2009 with a degree in accounting. Omar had married in the latter part of 2010; he is survived by his wife, his parents (originally from central Somalia), a brother and four sisters.

Police question publishing religious materials

DASHOGUZ, Turkmenistan — After Protestant Begjan Shirmedov tried to print copies of a small book of his religious poetry Feb. 3, a local religious affairs official waiting for him at the printing shop took him to the Police 6th Department, responsible for counterterrorism and organized crime work.

There the 77-year-old poet was questioned for six hours, forced to write a statement and banned from traveling outside his home region of Dashoguz in northern Turkmenistan while his case is investigated, Protestants said. Separately other local Protestants in Dashoguz have been questioned over printing religious materials. It remains unclear if any will face charges. Turkmenistan imposes strict censorship on religious literature.

VOICE YOUR OPINION

SPEAK UP on issues in the Baptist world by writing a letter to the editor of *The Alabama Baptist*.

Remember to:

- Include your name and address
- Focus on issues, not people
- Be as concise as possible