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Baptist leaders examine ministry in 'new marriage culture'

Baptist leaders focused on the legal, political, biblical and practical issues related to the country's changing definition of marriage during the recent "Ministering in the New Marriage Culture" conference at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

The one-day event, hosted by the seminary on its Northern California campus in Mill Valley, drew more than 300 seminary students, graduates, pastors and other church leaders from across the country. While conference speakers held firm to the Bible's perspective against same-sex "marriage," they challenged ministry leaders to react toward others in a compassionate and loving manner when presented with opposing views.

"With humility, accept messiness as a part of future ministry decisions," said Jeff Iorg, president of Golden Gate Seminary. "And with courage and maturity, make your best decisions and accept the consequences as you move forward."

Other speakers included Brad Da-

cus, founder and president of the Pacific Justice Institute; Russell D. Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC); and Rick Melick, distinguished professor of New Testament studies and director of the academic graduate studies program at Golden Gate.

Tackling questions

During the Oct. 3, 2013, conference speakers tackled a variety of questions: What are the ministry implications while the political and legal fight plays out? What are a church's legal rights? How does this issue impact religious liberty? How does a church leader guide his congregation? How does a Christian demonstrate passionate convictions without showing anger or compromise?

Weeks before the conference, Iorg sounded the alarm that "the battle for gay 'marriage' is over."

"Events of this past summer mandate a response to the most significant change in American society since abortion on demand

was legalized in 1973," Iorg said during the seminary's fall convocation in August 2013. "The United States Supreme Court effectively legalized gay 'marriage.' Nothing can be legally proper or politically correct when it is morally and biblically wrong, but now it's time to accept the reality of the legality of same-sex 'marriage' and move on to discussing how to minister in this new milieu."

Dacus said a loving but firm encounter, not confrontation or hateful rejection, is the best approach believers can take in handling society's evolving views on marriage and other social issues.

"We need to see negative outcomes as true opportunities for ministry and witness," he said during the conference. "To address this issue, churches must pre-think their strategies and protect themselves in a legal manner. Churches have the right and responsibility to set the parameters for church membership, volunteer participation and specific church events. Churches have the

(See 'Maintain,' page 4)

Responding the way Christ would respond

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

It's not a comfortable topic for church congregations to discuss. More and more families have relatives living an open homosexual lifestyle, and many Alabama Baptists have friends, co-workers, neighbors and/or acquaintances who are gay or lesbian.

When there's a real person attached to the label, it changes the discussion. It causes those involved to think on it at different levels.

And while churches cooperating with the Alabama Baptist State Convention would easily agree that following a homosexual lifestyle goes against the biblical standards for a believer's life, they still must face the reality that practicing homosexuals sit in their sanctuaries each Sunday.

This fact is elevated as more and more states are allowing same-sex couples to "marry." What is a church family to do when a same-sex couple shows up at church and wants to be involved?

Opportunity for ministry

Baptist leaders across the nation (see story, this page) are encouraging church leaders and congregations to talk about this topic now and be prepared rather than waiting until the couple walks in one Sunday.

The leaders, as well as pastors across the state, emphasize the importance of the approach and the attitude. It is vital that followers of Christ respond the way He would respond, they explained.

"We as Southern Baptists need to be very careful, not (See 'Do like Jesus,' page 5)

Coming next week...

Heroes of the Faith Famous Christians from previous centuries

COMMENT

Talk About a Delicate Topic

May I talk to you about something most people consider a delicate topic, an important end-of-life issue?

No, I do not want to talk with you about estate planning even though that is important. Ninety percent of one's net worth is usually transferred through one's estate. Using the inevitable event of passing assets to the next generation is an important part of Christian stewardship. That is why *The Alabama Baptist* partnered with The Baptist Foundation of Alabama in 2011 to do an in-depth presentation of the steps involved in estate planning. That booklet, "A Practical Guide to Estate Planning From a Christian Perspective," can still be ordered from us for a nominal fee (www.thealabamabaptist.org/alabama-baptist-shopping-cart.php).

The topic I want to talk with you about relates to end-of-life medical decisions sometimes called advanced health care directives. In the 24-page estate planning booklet, it received only six brief paragraphs. It deserves much more attention than that because in these directives you outline your choices related to medical care in case you become too sick or hurt to talk or make decisions.

Suddenly and unexpectedly

"That won't happen to me," most people believe. I used to think that too. But after my late wife Eleanor went into a coma following an automobile accident in Durban, South Africa, where we were doing a missions project, I know differently. Accidents can happen to anyone. Disease, illness, injury — they do not announce themselves before striking. They come suddenly and unexpectedly just like Jesus will one day come in glory and power.

The midst of a crisis is not the time to make momentous decisions. If you are too sick or injured to talk or make decisions then questions about your health care will have to be made by a loved one. Do you want to add that burden to the shock and sorrow already felt by what has happened to you?

Eleanor and I had talked about our wishes in case the worse happened. We had met with an attorney who had drafted a living will for each of us including a health care power of attorney designation. We had talked with our children individually and as a family. When the neuro-



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

surgeon at UAB Hospital asked if we had such documents we could answer yes. We could all tell him the same thing and both children knew where the documents were kept.

Decisions made during a time when we were all healthy, when the idea of ever needing them was improbable, helped us get through the most difficult experience of life — watching a loved one die. Eleanor could not speak for herself during those terrible days. I never got to talk with her after the accident except for a few moments in the emergency room of St. Elizabeth Hospital when we regained consciousness at the same time. But because we had advanced health care directives in place, I knew and the children knew what decisions she wanted made, and that is what we did. Fifteen minutes after removing her from a ventilator Eleanor officially died.

As a pastor I have seen a family come to blows in a hospital arguing over how to care for a loved one. I know couples who have been ripped apart because parents could not agree on treatment for their child. Blame, mixed with grief, was their undoing. I have worked with families who permanently splintered because siblings could not agree on how to care for an aged parent.

Such events only compound the tragedy

of serious illness, injury and loss. They can be prevented with advanced health care directives.

In Alabama it is not necessary to have an attorney draft these documents. Anyone 19 years of age or older can make one, and sample copies of the documents are available from the Alabama Hospital Association website. Frequently the documents involve two parts. The first is called a living will. Here you outline in broad terms what is to be done in case of terminal illness or injury. Do you want "heroic" efforts to sustain physical life, or do you want medicines and treatments that ease pain and keep you comfortable, for example. Often times a living will designates a medical proxy. This is a person you designate to make medical decisions for you if you are unable to speak for yourself. A proxy is sometimes named instead of having a health care power of attorney as we did.

Advanced health care directives can be revoked or replaced at any time, and they do not go into effect until you are unable to speak for yourself.

Preparing these documents does not force a course of action on you. You choose what you want. There are no right and wrong decisions. A November 2013 study by Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life found great diversity in responses of Americans regarding end-of-life decisions and equal diversity among religious groups. The majority of some groups wanted to do everything possible to save life. Others opted not to prolong the dying process.

The important issue is that it is your decision and your wishes that are being carried out and that can only be done by preparing advanced health care directives. Talk with your doctor about the decisions. Talk with your family members so they know and understand your wishes. You may want to talk to your attorney. Make sure your medical proxy or the one with health care power of attorney knows what you want.

Remember drafting these documents does not mean you are working against the will of God for your life. It simply means that your wishes will be listened to, your desires will be respected and you will be treated as the unique person that you are if the situation ever happens that you are too sick or hurt to speak for yourself.

I hope I never need such documents, but I have them if I do. Let me encourage you to have them too.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

GREAT INSIGHT

Bob Terry's editorial in the Dec. 12 issue of *The Alabama Baptist* ("Reputation Is Everything") was outstanding.

We often are so ready to think of "honor killings" as belonging to faiths in eastern

countries and religions. Thank you, Bob, for showing us the realities within our own faith and then applying it to Mary. What an insight.

Richard Alford
Wetumpka, Ala. 📧





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

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Restricting religious rights

8 countries on UN Human Rights Council restrict religious freedom

Eight of the 47 countries that hold seats on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) imprisoned people in 2013 under laws that restrict religious freedom, according to a new report from Human Rights Without Frontiers International, a nonprofit advocacy organization based in Belgium.

The eight UNHRC member states on the group's second annual World Freedom of Religion or Belief Prisoners List, released Dec. 30, 2013, are Morocco, China and Saudi Arabia (whose new three-year terms began Jan. 1) and current members India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Libya and South Korea.

Hundreds of believers and atheists were imprisoned in these and 16 other countries for exercising religious freedom or freedom of expression rights related to religious issues,

according to the report. These rights include the freedom to change religions, share beliefs, object to military service on conscientious grounds, worship, assemble and associate freely. Violations related to religious defamation and blasphemy also are included in the report.

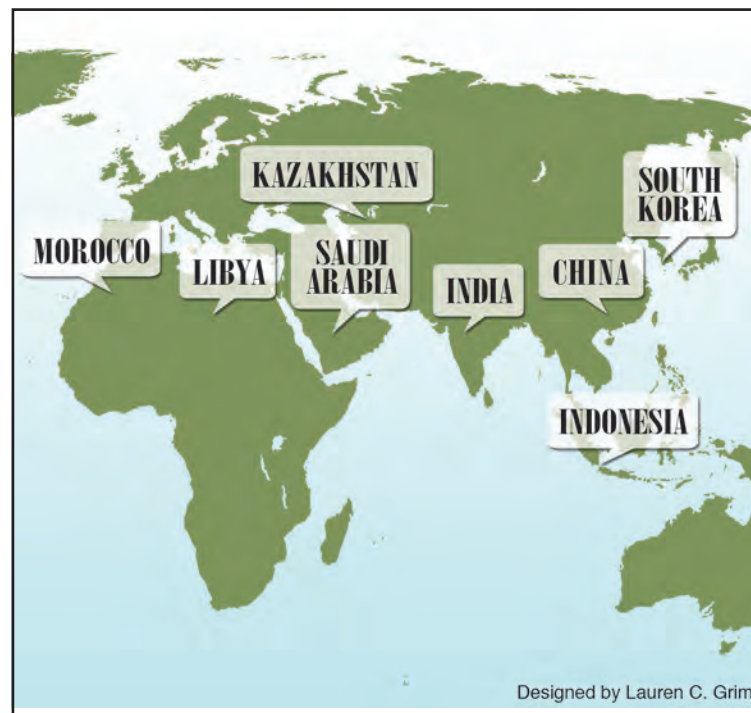
Detailed reports

According to the report's findings from 2013:

- ▶ In China, Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Muslims and Falun Gong adherents were arrested for proselytizing, holding illegal gatherings, providing religious education classes and publicizing their persecution.
- ▶ In Morocco, a convert to Christianity was arrested and fined for "shaking the faith of a Muslim" by sharing his newfound beliefs.
- ▶ In Saudi Arabia, 52 Ethiopian Christians

were arrested for participating in a private religious service.

- ▶ In India, Protestants were arrested for holding private prayer meetings.
- ▶ In Indonesia, a Pentecostal pastor was arrested for holding religious services without a valid permit and an atheist was sentenced to 30 months in prison for starting an atheist Facebook page where he posted the words "God does not exist."
- ▶ In Kazakhstan, an atheist was arrested for allegedly inciting religious hatred in his writings.
- ▶ In Libya, foreign missionaries, dozens of Coptic Christians and a Protestant were arrested and allegedly tortured for proselytizing.
- ▶ In South Korea, nearly 600 Jehovah's Witnesses were serving prison sentences for (See 'Resolution,' page 7)



Designed by Lauren C. Grim

Alabama minister Shahan arrested, charged with wife's murder

After more than five months of near silence, investigators in the Karen Shahan murder case made a bold move Jan. 1 when they arrested her husband, Richard Shahan, at the Nashville International Airport.

Richard Shahan, former children and families pastor of First Baptist Church, Birmingham, was attempting to board a flight to Frankfurt, Germany, reportedly on his way to work with Bible Mission International (BMI) for three years.

The Alabama Baptist and other news sources had previously reported Richard Shahan's plans for departing the country to develop teaching materials and discipleship resources through BMI to be distributed throughout former Soviet countries.

But on Dec. 31, 2013, the Jefferson County District Attorney's Office had enough recent developments in the case to obtain a murder warrant for Richard Shahan's arrest, according to myfoxal.com. Homeland Security ICE agents then arrested Richard Shahan the next day before he boarded his flight, fearing that he may try to avoid murder charges by fleeing to Russia from Germany. Officials

did not say why they believed he would flee Germany but they did note that there is no formal extradition treaty between the United States and Russia.

Charles T. Carter, interim pastor of First, Birmingham, said Richard Shahan "was not 'fleeing' the country. His plans had been known and publicized ever since early November ... to provide leadership to BMI's children's ministry in Kazakhstan (where he had served on two previous missions trips while at FBC)."

On Dec. 29, 2013, Carter said the church held a public commissioning and prayer time for Richard Shahan at the conclusion of the morning worship service.

'He was not fleeing'

"At my suggestion early on he received a written statement from his legal counsel that in their opinion he was free to leave/return to the USA," Carter said. "He was not fleeing; he was en route to assume a new position as a missionary."

But Homewood Police Chief Jim Roberson said he is confident that the police have obtained the warrant for the person responsible for the murder.

Details as to why Richard Sha-

han was arrested at this point in the investigation are limited but Roberson did confirm in a press conference Jan. 2 that investigators had established a motive and have physical evidence.

"It will become readily apparent as we move into the trial process," Roberson said in the conference. "There are very few new details of which we can go into great elaboration because it is an ongoing investigation."

Richard Shahan's attorneys Wendell Sheffield and John Lentine said statements about Richard Shahan's fleeing the country were misleading.

"Some of the inferences that were put out there in the news conference made it sound like Richard was trying to leave the country and never come back," Lentine said, according to al.com.

"The chief is saying, 'We've got our man,' then saying it's an ongoing investigation. ... The reality is they've always looked at Richard, and they didn't bother to look any further than that," Lentine said.

Karen Shahan's body was dis-

covered July 23, around 11:15 a.m., inside her home in Homewood. Police still have not confirmed exactly how she was killed although some reports state she was stabbed to death.

Richard Shahan was jailed for investigative purposes Aug. 7, 2013, and was released Aug. 9 without being charged.

First, Birmingham, released a statement Jan. 2 that read in part, "All of us are saddened by the unexpected news that

Richard Shahan was arrested."

He is currently being held without bond at Davidson County Sheriff's Office in Tennessee, and at press time a Jan. 7 extradition hearing was scheduled in Nashville.

Roberson said he does not have a timeline for Richard Shahan's return to Alabama but estimates within a week to 10 days. He also emphasized the purpose of the press conference was to reassure Homewood citizens that their neighborhood is "a safe place to live and work" and to bring some closure to the family of Karen Shahan. (Neisha Fuson)



SHAHAN



BP photo

Brad Dacus (left), founder and president of the Pacific Justice Institute, speaks with attendees at the 'Ministering in the New Marriage Culture' conference Oct. 3, 2013.

Maintain & proclaim

Christians urged to stand firm, boldly proclaim gospel

(continued from page 1)

right to ask a disruptive person to leave their premises."

Dacus concluded by pointing out the example of Paul claiming his legal rights under the law (Acts 22:25). "Churches must claim that right for themselves, remember their commitment to God and not forget to reach out to people for Jesus' sake."

Moore, ERLC's president, preached from 1 Timothy 2:22-26 and addressed how the church must handle the issues of human sexuality.

Specifically referring to the issue of gender reassignment surgery, but including all forms of sexuality, Moore reminded his listeners that the issue was not an individual's situation but that all people are worthy recipients of the gospel. "The message is the main focus, not their 'sin' or situation," he said. "The person who sins does so because he or she is a sinner. That is the bottom line."

Moore described the two temptations evangelical Christians face on the marriage issue. The first is the "majoritarian temptation," the broadly held idea among evangelicals that most Americans hold the same basic values as they do. "We tend to believe that those who do not hold a biblically based value system are in the minority and only belong to a special, small interest group. Unfortunately this is not the case," he said.

'Libertarian temptation'

The second temptation Moore described is the "libertarian temptation." He said this is "the temptation to rebel against a legalism that sees marriage as merely a public good engaged in the preservation of humanity. While this is of utmost importance for the order of society, this attitude ignores the fact that marriage is also a moral and spiritual value established by God from the very beginning."

Neither of these temptations adequately

explained the basis for ministering in this new culture, Moore explained. "The best way to engage a society and culture whose values are farther and farther from our own is to speak to issues and concerns with a 'convictional kindness' that is not quarrelsome, unkind or angry," he said, noting the goal is to speak with the mind and mission of Christ.

"We must stand firm for the truth of religious liberty and freedom of conscience,"

Moore said. "We must hold this belief not just for us and those who agree with us, but for everyone, even those with views we believe are wrong or offensive. Everyone has a right to hold and express their beliefs. And the church must hold firm to its right to proclaim boldly the gospel and a gospel-driven vision of marriage."

That vision of marriage means that the church must first maintain and proclaim a high view of sin and grace, he explained.

"We should not be mean, scared or angry, but be shaped by a love-conviction, and by an open, bright and life-changing focus," he said.

Melick, a professor and director of the academic graduate studies program at Golden Gate, lectured on "Roman Corinth: A Case Study."

Using Paul's letter to the early Corinthian church, Melick delineated principles and practices for believers in today's new marriage culture.

Corinth was a Roman colonial city strategically situated at an international crossroads that can best be described as "central, cosmopolitan, cultural and corrupt." Melick

explained that the apostle Paul dealt with the immorality that had seeped into the Corinthian church from its surrounding society. Paul taught Christian principles that could be applied to those problems.

Melick presented two foundational principles from this study. "The first is that the Christian worldview best meets society's needs, and second, a properly functioning church satisfies the longings of the heart."

"The church must hold firm to its right to proclaim boldly the gospel and a gospel-driven vision of marriage."

**Russell D. Moore
president, Ethics & Religious
Liberty Commission**

Melick explained that from those two principles and an understanding of Scripture, four theological guidelines emerged that Christians can implement today:

▶ Remember God's love is expressed through grace.

▶ Affirm a biblical worldview (especially as to the role of marriage and sexuality in marriage).

▶ Exalt the biblical view of mercy (in dealing with those who have fallen into sin).

▶ Appreciate the power of the church (especially as it exercises forgiveness,

comfort and love in its desire to restore a fallen brother).

Melick's conclusion summarized Paul's admonition to both the Corinthian Christians and to us all: "The church is called on to minister to all people in whatever their life situation."

Iorg, Golden Gate's president, presented the final lecture titled, "Touchstones for Ministry in the New Marriage Culture."

The first touchstone Iorg listed is to have a sound doctrine of the church. It is important, Iorg said, "to have a biblically centered theology and practically applied theology of

the church." This applied theology involves the church being a local autonomous congregation with clearly defined membership qualifications.

"Church members must be regenerated, baptized and covenanted," he said. "This implies that the church has control over its membership and the actions of those members who have agreed to abide by their covenant of membership."

Defining membership

Iorg also included three benefits given to a church with defined membership. First it allows a church to welcome everyone to participate in the church's public life, but it limits leadership and decision-making to members. Second it frees the church to welcome all people to hear the gospel, but it limits membership only to those changed by the gospel. Third it gives the church the freedom to welcome all people to study God's Word and have the opportunity to be changed by it.

The second touchstone for ministry is that the church must remember the power of the gospel to create new beings in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The implication from this statement is that "the gospel must be in the center of the life of the church."

"No issue such as same-sex 'marriage' should occupy the center of the church's focus, only the gospel," Iorg said. "To do that the church must reassert its evangelism strategies to reach all people with the gospel."

The third ministry touchstone is that Christian leaders need to reaffirm and remember their security as leaders in Christ. "This truth springs from the doctrine of the priesthood of believers," Iorg said.

"A secure leader is best equipped to reach out and lead in the new marriage culture. Leaders need to be secure in Jesus Christ to be able to stand in the face of the challenges to Christian values and morals that inevitably will come." (BP)

Theological guidelines Christians can implement immediately

- REMEMBER God's love is expressed through grace.
- AFFIRM a biblical worldview (especially as to the role of marriage and sexuality in marriage).
- EXALT the biblical view of mercy (in dealing with those who have fallen into sin).
- APPRECIATE the power of the church (especially as it exercises forgiveness, comfort and love in its desire to restore a fallen brother).

"The church is called on to minister to all people in whatever their life situation."

Rick Melick
distinguished professor of New Testament studies
Golden Gate Seminary

'Do like Jesus'

Scripture, support groups key to helping people who struggle with homosexuality

(continued from page 1)

only in our actions but also with our attitudes," said Edwin Jenkins, pastor of First Baptist Church, Athens. "We need to have the same kind of love that our Lord had when He said, 'Go and sin no more.' That must be our attitude.

"We need to be very careful about pointing fingers at the sin of someone else when we have sin in our own lives that needs to be dealt with.

"Our arms are open to all, and we will love everyone with the love of our Lord as He has loved us while not condoning things such as gay behavior," Jenkins said of First, Athens. "It is important to keep pointing people to the Scriptures and to the Word of God.

"All have sinned, and disobedience to parents is in the same group," he noted. "We have to be very cautious about differentiating there. The holiness of God becomes the key. ... When we start putting categories on sin, then we need to go back and look at Romans 1. It puts all of us in the same category in terms of violation of the holiness of God."

Addiction recovery groups and counseling sessions are two ways to work with individuals dealing with any

sinful behavior, Jenkins said.

"Whatever a person's difficulty, Christ is gracious to all of us. No sin is OK. We are all sinners and are on level ground at the foot of the Cross," he said. "One of the best things we can do is counsel our people on an individual basis and listen to them."

Steve Scoggins, pastor of First Baptist Church, Opelika, agreed that support groups are key to help people who are struggling with a sin such as homosexuality. Support groups also are helpful for parents who have children living a homosexual lifestyle, he said.

How to respond

Scoggins, who preached a sermon on "How Christians should respond to the issue of gay 'marriage'" (see outline, this page) in April 2013, said, "We are trying to set up some standards for our folks, not only about what is the truth but how to express the truth in love.

"The main reason we must speak with humility is that we should realize our own lives are far from what God expects them to be," Scoggins preached in the sermon. "Homosexuality and gay 'marriage' are not the main problems of our day. People don't

need 'right' opinions on these issues as much as they need a right relationship with God."

Bill Wilks, pastor of NorthPark Baptist Church, Trussville, said it all comes down to balance.

"We have to be careful that we don't treat homosexuality and lesbianism different than we would other sins," he said. "We have to love people who are sinners but preach repentance. ... Homosexuals and lesbians are no different than any other person needing to be led to Christ. Are they welcome here (at NorthPark)? Yes, just like any other person genuinely wanting to worship."

Bobby Hopper, director of missions for Bethel Baptist Association, added that many times "we get so tied up in the battle and conflict that we forget there are casualties all around us."

"There are hidden victims of our congregation," he said. "You are beligerent in your sermon (against homosexuality) while there is a couple sitting in the congregation with their heart breaking because of their child.

"We must realize there are these bystanders that are part of the process," he said. "We have to do like Jesus did and have compassion." ❧

How Christians should respond to the issue of gay 'marriage'

Proverbs 3:5-8 • Sermon outline by Steve Scoggins

I. Too often we Christians are known more for what we are against than who we are for. We are for people.

1. God loves every person (John 3:16).
2. Every person is a sinner (Rom. 3:23, 5:8).
3. Since God loves fallen sinners, we must love fallen sinners (John 13:34).
4. God's ways are the best ways to live (Ps. 19:7-8).

II. The Bible does not teach gay "marriage."

1. The Bible is the most verified ancient book.
2. The number one reason we believe in the Bible? Our Lord Jesus believed in the Bible and trusted its truthfulness (Matt. 12:40, 5:17-20).
3. I trust what Jesus said about the Bible because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. That verifies that what He says is authoritative.

Here are a few things to consider about the resurrection.

- a) The resurrection is the only logical explanation for the empty tomb.
- b) More than 500 eyewitnesses saw Jesus risen from the dead (1 Cor. 15:6).
- c) The changed lives after the resurrection point to the fact that it occurred.

III. We must have the same attitude toward moral issues that Jesus had.

1. Jesus said He agreed with the moral standards of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:19).
2. Jesus never lowered any moral standards of the Old Testament. He always raised them (Matt. 5).
3. Jesus endorsed heterosexual marriage (Matt. 19:4-6).

Conclusion

1. Ultimately it is God's responsibility through the Holy Spirit to convince people of God's truth (John 16:7-8, 13).
2. We Christians must concentrate on dealing with the real problems instead of just the "fruit" problems of a lost culture.
3. We Christians must speak with great humility when we deal with this subject.

To read the full text of this sermon by Steve Scoggins, pastor of First Baptist Church, Opelika, on April 21, 2013, visit www.thealabamabaptist.org and type "How Christians should respond" in the search bar.

Addressing churches' legal concerns

As church leaders deal with the question of how best to minister to same-sex couples who come to their churches (see stories, pages 1, 4-5), another question may come up: If churches are pressed to accommodate those couples in a way that violates their convictions, what legal rights do they have to say no?

Church membership

A church should never feel it is legally forced to accept by membership someone who is living a homosexual lifestyle, according to legal counsel.

"The First Amendment to the Constitution prohibits Congress — or the states — from enacting laws that interfere with the free exercise of religion," said Dennis R. Bailey, a Montgomery attorney who is an expert on First Amendment law. "Religions set their own canons and beliefs. No law could be passed under the First Amendment requiring churches to baptize anyone."

No jurisdiction

Jim Guenther, a Southern Baptist Convention attorney, agreed. If someone sued a church over membership, "the case would be dismissed because no court has jurisdiction over such matters," Guenther said. "Civil rights laws include, at the federal and state and sometimes local level, prohibitions against discrimination in 'public accommodations.' Those laws typically make clear, in one way or another, that the law does not apply to churches."

If the law did not make it clear, a court would, he said.

Performing or recognizing same-sex "marriages"

Right now, same-sex "marriage" is not permitted in Alabama, and an amendment to the state constitution prevents Alabama from legally recognizing such "marriages" from other states. It will stay this way for the foreseeable future, said Eric Johnston, a Birmingham attorney and president of the Southeast Law Institute.

But Johnston predicts the U.S. Supreme Court will eventually declare laws like Alabama's unconstitutional.

If that happens, might Alabama churches have to worry about being forced to perform a same-sex "marriage" ceremony? Guenther said no.

Churches, he said, "will continue to have their First Amendment right to freely exercise their religion."

Though that First Amendment right is sufficient legally, Guenther said, some churches are choosing to put wording in their governing documents to state clearly that performing a same-sex "marriage" ceremony goes against their church's historical religious beliefs.

Potential marriage statement

For more information about making such an addition to church bylaws, visit www.thealabamabaptist.org and type "potential marriage statement" in quotes into the search bar to read the article "Two Alabama churches address same-sex marriage-like ceremonies." A possible wording offered by the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions is available at www.alsbom.org/resources/a-potential-marriage-statement-for-churches.

Use of facilities

Something else to consider including in a bylaw addition is how your church facilities are to be used, Johnston said. He suggested considering stating whether or not facilities will be able to be used for ceremonies, baby showers, clubs or community groups that by their nature endorse same-sex "marriage."

At this point, there is no legal need for a church to do so, but it "may give churches peace of mind" and allow them an opportunity to affirm their stance, he said.

Teaching in the church

A statement of beliefs in bylaw form also could allow church leaders to make a written stance about the doctrine taught in the church, Johnston said.

"They could include that the preaching of the church will conform to those beliefs," he said, noting that this may become especially important if, say, a same-sex couple begins to attend the church and a small-group leader becomes increasingly accepting in his or her biblical view of their situation. (TAB)

Across ALABAMA'S Associations

To submit news items, email news@thealabamabaptist.org or call 205-870-4720, ext. 112, at least three weeks prior to the event.

CLARKE

► **Scott Manns Sr.** is the new pastor of **Midway Church, Thomasville.** He holds a master of arts in Christian leadership from Liberty Seminary in Lynchburg, Va. He previously served as pastor within Baldwin Association and also has served as a pastor in North Carolina. He and his wife, Marcia, have six children.

BIRMINGHAM

► **Joel Farrow** has resigned as pastor of **First Church, Chalkville, in Birmingham.** He will work with Narrow Gate Foundation in Tennessee. His last Sunday at First, Chalkville, was Dec.

29, 2013. ► Adults and children are welcome to stop by **Shades Crest Church, Hoover,** on Jan. 11 and visit with Andrew Mann and his dog, Proof, who are NAMB missionaries with Graffiti 2 Community Ministries in New York. This is a come-and-go event from 9–11 a.m. For information call 205-408-5501. Brian A. Lee is pastor.

MARSHALL

► **Bel Air Missionary Church, Boaz,** will celebrate its 50th anniversary Jan. 19. There will be a luncheon and fellowship time (food and beverages will be provided by the church) at 1 p.m. and an anniversary celebration at

2 p.m. A historical program will be presented along with recognition of former pastors and charter members. Nick Mitchell is pastor.

EAST CULLMAN

► **East Side Church, Cullman,** will host Squire Parsons in concert Jan. 18, 7 p.m. For information call 256-734-6144. Ken Allen is pastor.

MONTGOMERY

► **Trinity Memorial Church, Montgomery,** will host The Dove Brothers in concert Jan. 17, 7 p.m. For information call Tom Snowden at 334-285-5112. Stan Holt is pastor.

UMobile leadership banquet to feature North

The University of Mobile (UMobile) will bring Lt. Col. Oliver North, USMC (Ret.) to Mobile for the ninth annual University of Mobile Leadership Banquet on March 27.

The gala event will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Arthur R. Outlaw Convention Center in downtown Mobile.

North is a combat-decorated U.S. Marine, a No. 1 best-selling author, founder of a small business, an inventor with three U.S. patents, a syndicated columnist and the host of "War



NORTH

Stories" on the Fox News Channel.

He has been awarded the Silver Star, the Bronze Star for valor and two Purple Hearts for wounds in action. He has authored 13 books, all of them *New York Times* best sellers. His latest book is "American Heroes on the Homefront."

Assigned to the National Security Council staff in the Reagan administration, North was the U.S. government's counter-terrorism coordinator from 1983 to 1986. He was involved in planning the rescue of

804 medical students on the island of Grenada and played a major role in the capture of the terrorists who hijacked the cruise ship *Achille Lauro*.

After helping plan the U.S. raid on Muammar Gaddafi's terror bases in Libya, North was targeted for assassination by Abu Nidal, the infamous terrorist killed in Baghdad in August 2002. President Ronald Reagan described North as "an American hero."

The annual leadership banquet raises financial support for the UMobile Fund.

For information, visit www.umobile.edu/banquet2014 or call 251-442-2222. (UMobile)

State Baptist schools listed as 'best Christian colleges'

Samford University in Birmingham, Judson College in Marion and the University of Mobile each have been named as one of "America's Best Christian Colleges" for the 17th consecutive year.

They are among 95 colleges and universities nationwide to receive the 2013–2014 designation.

The results of the 23rd Annual National College Survey, conducted by Institutional Research & Evaluation, Inc. (IR&E), shows that 384 Christian institutions of higher education were selected for evaluation.

IR&E chooses the colleges and universities based on the highest quality education in a Christian environment, according to Lewis T. Lindsey Jr., president of IR&E.

To be considered for the designation "America's Best Christian Colleges," an institution must be an accredited, four-year college or university offering bachelor

degrees and residential facilities including residence halls and dining services.

It must have had an entering freshman class in the fall of 2012 with a high school GPA or SAT/ACT score equal to or above the national average for all freshmen entering Christian institutions of higher education.

Christian principles

It must be affiliated with a recognized Christian denomination or interdenominational institution that incorporates Christian principles and beliefs into its curriculum or environment.

IR&E is an independent research and consulting organization specializing in the recruiting and retention of students for institutions of higher education. The annual survey was conducted between April 1 and July 31, 2013.

(UMobile, TAB)

Alabama updates

People, churches making news across the state

Two Baptists in Warrior receive medal for saving lives

Two deputies who attend Smoke Rise Baptist Church, Warrior, in North Jefferson Baptist Association received medals in October 2013 for their lifesaving measures during a medical crisis.

Jefferson County Sheriff Mike Hale awarded the Sheriff's Life Saving Medal to deputies Jeff Mulkin and Jason Orr.

In July 2013, the two deputies were traveling along Interstate 65 in the jurisdiction of Fulondale, when they came upon a traffic jam resulting from an accident. Though the two men were off duty, they were in Orr's assigned vehicle on their way to an appointment.

As they sat in the halted traffic, a motorist approached them from behind and said there was a problem in another vehicle.

When Orr and Mulkin got to that vehicle, they found the driver unconscious and without a discernable heartbeat. The man's wife was administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The deputies removed the driver from his vehicle and Mulkin recalls praying as he administered chest compressions on the man. Orr cleared a path for the ambulance. He also tended to the family, with the help of a minister who was stuck in traffic as well.

When the ambulance arrived, the 53-year-old Tennessee man, who had suffered a heart attack, had a pulse and was breathing on his own again, Orr said. Because traffic still was not moving, Orr and Mulkin escorted the ambulance to the nearest exit, the deputies said.

"The Good Lord put us there for a reason," Mulkin observed.

Orr added, "It was a chain of events that led up to it."

The men explained that the decision to take Orr's assigned vehicle meant they were visible in traffic, causing a private citizen to approach them and alert them to the medical emergency. Also the traffic jam kept the vehicle of the ailing motorist from being in motion at the time of the man's heart attack, thus avoiding an accident. In other words, the halt in traffic likely spared the man, his family and people in other vehicles.

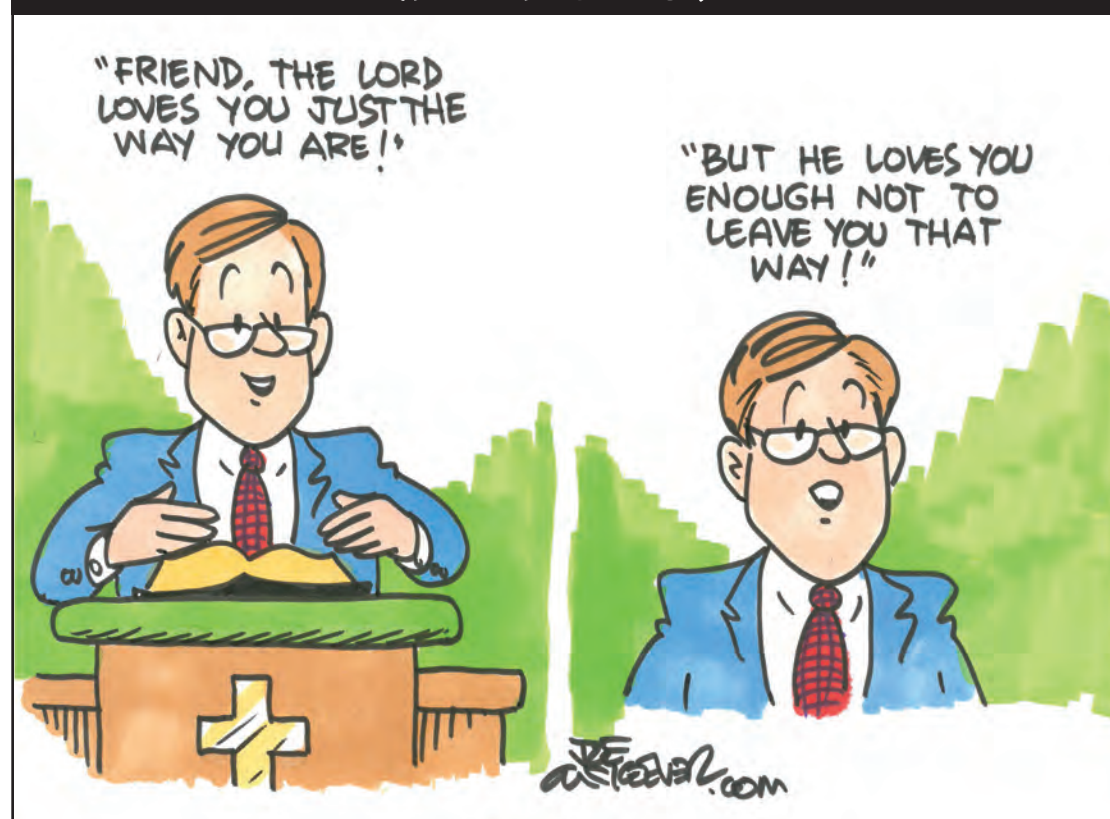
"That traffic jam happened for a reason," Orr said.

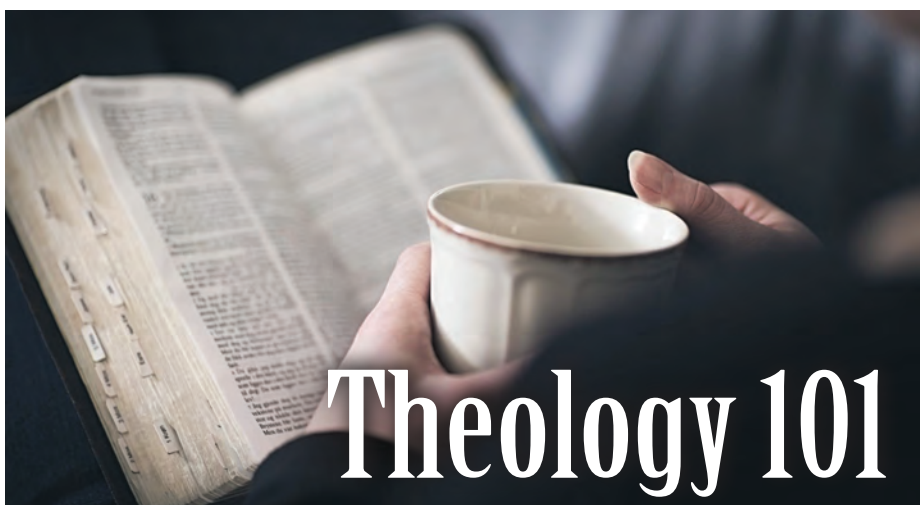
Mulkin is the son of the late Virgil Mulkin, a pastor for about 40 years. According to Jeff Mulkin, the last church where Virgil Mulkin served was Eastern Valley Baptist Church, Bessemer, in Bessemer Baptist Association. (Leigh Pritchett)

Want to see your news in *The Alabama Baptist*?

Email your information to news@thealabamabaptist.org. Church announcements should arrive three weeks prior to the event.

REFLECTIONS





Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Doctrine of Christ

The Living Word

By Jerry Batson
Special to The Alabama Baptist

The Word of God is a common phrase used and heard by church-going people. Most of us probably recognize that the phrase is capable of twin meanings. Sometimes we refer to the Bible as the Word of God. When we do, we have in mind the written revelation that God inspired holy men of old to write.

At other times we refer to Christ as the Word of God. When we do, we have in mind the living revelation that God gave through the person and work of Christ. "Word" suggests communicating, revealing or manifesting as opposed to silence, indifference or aloofness.

What is a word? If an idea or image comes to mind that we want to describe to someone, probably our best choice is to encode the idea or image into words. Of course, we have other less sophisticated ways of communicating — gestures, facial expressions, body language, drawings, etc. Most often, we choose words, either written or spoken. If our words are carefully and accurately chosen, they become the vehicles that can carry our thought or image to the listener or reader.

Clear communication

When our encoded ideas are put into words and those words are heard or read, the receiver must then undergo the reverse process of decoding our words in order to extract from them the idea or image our words were intended to convey. So both the word of speaking and the word of hearing are important. Both must be accurate, else the communication is unclear or misunderstood.

Our encoded mental images might be simple. Take, for example, the possibility that you want to tell your friend about the fresh shipment of delicious apples that you found at the local grocery store. In order to capture or encode your find, you might use words like red, fresh, shiny, round, large, juicy, price, etc. You would eliminate such word possibilities as blue, square, wormy, etc. Upon hearing your verbal description, your friend must decode

your words into images that match the image you wanted to paint with your words.

Might we not say that God, who loves us supremely and wants us to know and love Him in return, wanted to communicate this message to humans? What options did He have? He could have written us about His great love. In fact, He could have taken a whole book, employing numerous writers, to tell us about His multifaceted love. In fact, we have just such a book. We call it the Bible.

Example of love

Back to the desire to describe a delicious apple to a friend. What would be better than a letter or phone call? Would it not be to take one of the apples to your friend? Not satisfied to give us a written word of His love, God chose to send us a perfect example of His love — His beloved Son. Jesus was God's thought expressed in a way humans can understand.

So now we have two wonderful channels by which to know that God loves us with all-encompassing, sin-forgiving, life-bestowing love. We have both the written Word and the Living Word. The Living Word once declared, "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

In Theology 101, we will rely on the written Word to encode for us an accurate understanding of Christ. Since "theology" is studying, learning and thinking about God, we want the very best understanding of God that has ever been encoded. Christian faith understands that the Living Word is that best means of knowing God. ❏

Jerry Batson, retired associate dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University and professor at several schools of religion, is pastor of First Baptist Church, McCalla.



A. Earl Potts

Former state convention exec. dies

Alabama Baptists lost a giant Dec. 25 when A. Earl Potts, former executive director of the Alabama Baptist Convention State Board of Missions (SBOM), passed away. He was 93.

"I join the family of Alabama Baptists in mourning the passing of one of God's great ambassadors," said Rick Lance, current executive director of the SBOM. "His life was rich in relationships and he left an indelible impression upon us as Alabama Baptists with his legacy of leadership."



POTTS

A Randolph County native, Potts was a graduate of Samford University in Birmingham and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He was pastor of McElwain Baptist Church, Birmingham, before joining the ABSC as director of church ministries. Potts served as ABSC executive director from 1984 until his retirement in 1990.

Potts "brought wisdom and grace" to the position, Lance said.

"His wise leadership and his graceful servant heart were evident during those years as executive director," Lance said. "Earl Potts was a salt and light type influence on people, pouring himself into the ministry of others in an intentional way."

Troy L. Morrison, former SBOM executive director, agreed.

"He was one of the finest Christian gentlemen I've ever known. He represented graciousness, integrity and kindness in every aspect of his life," Morrison said. "Even though his tenure (as state convention head) was short, he will be remembered as one

of the greatest ever to fill that position."

Over the course of his ministry, Potts served in various roles, including director of ministerial placement at Samford and an adjunct faculty member of Samford's Beeson Divinity School.

He served in recent years on the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission.

He also wrote a book, "By the Grace of God: Memoirs and Recollections of an Alabama Baptist," in 1997. A state convention academic scholarship also was named in his honor.

Potts is preceded in death by his wife, Louise, who died in 1984.

He is survived by a son, David, who is president of Judson College in Marion; and a daughter, Libby, who is married to Dale Peterson, minister of music at First Baptist Church, Auburn. (TAB)

Johnny Warren

Opp's Westview missions pastor dies

Members of Westview Baptist Church, MOpp, are still trying to recover from the sudden loss after missions and discipleship pastor Johnny Warren, 30, was killed in a skiing accident Jan. 1 while on vacation in West Virginia.

"Johnny had a heart for God," Westview Pastor Gary Miller said. "He had a heart for this community and our church here."

Miller said Warren had been part of Westview's ministerial team for four years.

"Johnny had served as a missionary in Vietnam several years ago. He and his wife, Amy, were ... planning on going to Haiti in February. They were going to ... continue their relationship with us from down there," Miller said. (www.AndalusiaStarNews.com)



WARREN

Resolution establishing revamped UNHRC is not happening, Fautre says

(continued from page 3)
conscientious objection to mandatory military service.

The report designates China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea and South Korea as countries of particular concern for the highest number of religious freedom prisoners. The U.S. State Department's latest International Religious Freedom Report includes Saudi Arabia on its list of worst offenders.

Religious freedom

"Human Rights Without Frontiers is alarmed by the evolution of the UN Human Rights Council which accepts as members an increasing number of countries perpetrating egregious violations of human rights and, in particular, of religious freedom," the group said in a statement.

The UNHRC replaced the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 2006, in part "to redress (the Commission's) shortcoming," which included granting membership to countries with poor human rights records.

The resolution establishing the revamped UNHRC declares that member states "shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights."

But that is not happening, said Willy Fautre, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

"Our best wish for the New Year is that these and the other member states of the Human Rights Council may give the good example to other nations of the world by releasing such prisoners of conscience and not depriving any other believer or atheist of their freedom in 2014," he said in a statement.

The U.N. General Assembly has the power to suspend the rights of UNHRC members that commit serious human rights violations. Libya became the first and only country to be suspended from the council in 2011 amid the Gaddafi regime's brutal suppression of protesters. Libya was readmitted to the council eight months later under new leadership. (RNS)

PERSECUTED CHURCH

Compiled from Wire Services



Pastor in Indonesia struggles with church closures

WEST JAVA, Indonesia — Two days before Christmas, Titus, a pastor in Cimahi, West Java, Indonesia, who goes by a single name, was initially too upset to discuss the events that led to the closure of his church.

Isa Almasih Church said he had become suspicious of all people, including the reporter who came from Jakarta to meet him.

The Cimahi municipal government sealed the church building, located in a housing subdivision, Dec. 13, 2013, with a sign hanging on the gateway stating, "This building is for a residence and may not be used for worship services or similar activities."

Church officials had long ago applied for a permit, with the application delayed in bureaucracy without explanation, as commonly happens to Christian attempts in Indonesia.

Titus said opposition did not begin until Dec. 1, 2013. A mob of 200 Muslims gathered and demanded that use of a residence for worship cease. On Dec. 8, 2013, a crowd of about 500 Muslims arrived, asserting that only a church building could be used as a place of worship. Before the week was over, the local government had sealed the property.

The congregation of more than 200 has spread into several cell groups, and Titus has refused to sign a statement promising to refrain from using the building as a place of worship. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Indonesian Constitution, he said.

Only death sentence for insulting Muhammad in Pakistan

LAHORE, Pakistan — In Pakistan, compliance with an order that only the death sentence can be given to those convicted of insulting Islam's prophet will further endanger Christians and increase the powers of the Islamic court that issued it, critics said.

While Christians fear that government compliance with the Federal Shariat Court's (FSC) Dec. 4, 2013, order to remove life imprisonment as a punishment for insulting Muhammad could usher in a new era of persecution, some critics said the greater concern is that it could broaden the powers of the controversial court.

While the ruling could further encourage extremists to attack those they believe are insulting Muhammad, the FSC order may have little specific legal impact since judges have tended to issue death penalty sentences for such convictions anyway, according to Yasser Latif Hamdani, who practices law in superior courts.

"The problem is that the order has symbolic significance," Hamdani said. "It opens the door for the FSC to exercise greater influence on the legal system."

Lee joins national WMU adult team

Clella Lee joined the national Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) staff in Birmingham as leadership consultant on the adult resource team Jan. 6.

She will create strategic plans for developing women in the area of leadership including an online leadership train-



LEE

ing program to further expand WMU's Christian Women's Leadership Center (CWLC).

A partnership between WMU and Samford University in Birmingham, CWLC will assist women in furthering their leadership capabilities.

"Clella brings a great depth of knowledge and

practical experience to WMU," said Carol Causey, director of national WMU's missions resource center.

Lee earned a master of divinity with a concentration in Christian education and doctor of ministry from Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C.

She and her husband, Brian, who serves as pastor of Shades Crest Baptist Church, Bluff Park, reside in Birmingham. (WMU)

Office of Evangelism

SALT

Strategic Answers to Life's Thoughts

JAN 18th & 19th 2014

Richard Howe

Paul Copan

Jay Watts

Bob Stewart

Alex McFarland

For more information, please contact Ministry Assistant Amy Nelson at 1-800-264-1225, ext. 258, or (334) 613-2258, anelson@alsbom.org.

tacticalfaith.com/salt-2014/

FIRST BAPTIST MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

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A Certain Trumpet

Sermons by Alabama Baptists

The Ten Commandments — First in a series

'You shall have no other god before or beside Me'

The Ten Commandments given by Yahweh God to His people Israel are recorded by Moses in Exodus 20:3–17 and in Deuteronomy 5:7–21. Although specific to God's covenant with Israel, these laws have a universal application for all mankind.

My purpose in this message is to present and attempt to apply the first of these commandments to your life and mine. God engraved on tablets of stone these loving and liberating words: "You shall have no other gods before or beside Me" (Ex. 20:3).

► **Consider the Context** — The people of Israel have complained all the way to the foot of Mount Sinai.

God had met with Moses and had instructed him to speak to Israel. In Exodus 19 we find the details of God's message — a reminder of His covenant with Israel and of His past blessings based upon that covenant (vv. 3–4), His promise to continue His blessings and to use Israel for His glory if they keep His covenant (vv. 5–6) and some practical instructions concerning His descent upon Mount Sinai to speak to them in three days (vv. 9–15).

When that day arrived, God did exactly what He said He would do. What a blessing that we have a God who is true to His word. We can depend on His precepts and on His promises.

The people were standing in the valley as the Lord descended upon the top of the mountain. Lightning was flashing. Thunder was rolling. Billows of smoke rose from the mountain, and an earthquake shook the whole area. The people were trembling with fear. Then God spoke to Moses loud enough for the people to hear. What He said, we know as the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. Make no mistake. This is divine revelation, clear, concise, inerrant.

► **Consider the Intent** — The response of the people is recorded in 20:18–21. They retreated from the mountain as far as possible. They feared for their lives and asked Moses to have God speak to and through him, but not to speak any more directly to them.

What an insight this is into the spiritual condition of these people. They had spent so much of their time concentrating on themselves, their perceived needs — which were more often wants instead of dire necessities — that egocentrism

By Jimmy E. Jackson

Jimmy Jackson is senior pastor of Whitesburg Baptist Church, Huntsville, and a former Alabama Baptist State Convention president. He also served for many years as a parliamentarian for the SBC.



blinded them to the loving and liberating nature of God.

Moses attempted to calm the people by explaining that God's presence and His commandments were for His glory and their good. That is still true of His dealing with people today.

God was testing the faith and loyalty of His people by allowing them to get a glimpse of His holiness and power (cf. Ex. 20:20). His presence and laws were not intended to limit but liberate His people. They missed the point and paid an awful price.

'Nonreligious'

The most rapidly growing category of people in America with reference to belief in God is called "nonreligious." Perhaps people are bolder in their denial of faith, or maybe we are more efficient in gathering viable statistics, but this is a disturbing matter, although it is not new.

When I was born, neither my parents nor my grandparents were Christians. God, church, religion, etc., were not a part of our life. Sunday was like any other day of the week. We were not necessarily mad about or at God. We were just getting along pretty well without Him. So we thought.

As I grew up, I could have been the poster child for Isaiah 53:6a: "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned each to our own way." I was born with a determination to have my own way. I detested restrictions and rules.

I was rebellious, but I was not ignorant. When I did things in defiance of my parents or my grandparents and got caught, I did not sit in time out. In fact, I was hurting too much to sit anywhere.

I learned to be obedient publicly but disobedient secretly. Although unsaved, my parents were respectable people. There was no cursing, drinking, stealing or immoral

conduct around our house. However, by the time I was 8 years of age, I had a bad habit of lying, cursing, stealing and anger. The older I became, the more diversified and habitual my sins. I was one person around my family and an entirely different person around my friends.

In my twisted thinking, rules were my enemies. This attitude controlled most of my actions and my relationships until I was saved in 1968. The first thing God revealed to me once I opened my heart to Jesus was that He loved me. I began to see how blind and misguided I had been. God's authority over me, whether direct or delegated, was not negative but positive, because He wanted the best for me. The roots of my rebellion were deep and had poisoned my thinking. Some restrictions continued to trigger instant rebellion and anger in my heart.

I talked to a trusted pastor friend who reminded me that God's limitations are really His liberations. He reminded me that the rails around the perimeter of a cruise ship were to keep passengers from falling overboard. Sure they do restrict the people to the safety of the deck just like God's laws restrict us to the safety of His will. His laws are to set us free to worship, honor, love and serve Him with the joy of a clean conscience.

► **Consider the Content** — This gracious commandment is both personal and practical. The pronoun "you" is singular. While God's covenant is with all of His people, the keeping of that covenant rests upon each believer. Each person is both important and responsible.

It is practical. God adds, "No other gods before or beside Me." Since God is the only God, He is saving us a lot of trouble. The only proper position for God is No. 1. He has no equal. He is in a category all His own. To love and give our heart to anyone or anything other than Him is pure foolishness and is disastrous.

► **In Conclusion** — Also note that the first commandment has its position logically. It is the principal and foundational commandment. Get this one right and the others will fall in line. Fail here and lose the divine resources to succeed in all of the others.

Is it any wonder Jesus said: "The first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind"? His love for us puts us first; our response is a love that puts Him first. 🙏

Americans say 'yes' to naming children Messiah, Christ

Three out of four (74 percent) Americans say parents should be able to give their child religious names — including Messiah — according to a survey from Nashville-based LifeWay Research. A similar number (75 percent) say a judge should not be allowed to change a child's name for religious reasons.

The name "Messiah" made headlines in 2013 after East Tennessee judge Lu Ann Ballew ordered Jaleesa Martin to change her son's name from "Messiah" to "Martin."

Martin and the baby's father had been in court because they disagreed about the child's last name.

"Messiah is a title and it's a title that has only been earned by one person and that one person is Jesus Christ," Ballew said at the time.

Ballew's ruling was later overturned. She now faces a possible citation for her ruling, and according to published reports, has until Jan. 6 to respond to a complaint filed with a state judicial board.

It turns out that "Messiah" is a surprisingly common name.

"Messiah" was the 387th most popular boys name in the United States for 2012, just after "Scott" and right before "Jay," according to the Social Security Administration.

Parents' rights

When asked if parents should be able to name their child "Messiah" or "Christ," 53 percent of Americans strongly agree and another 21 percent somewhat agree.

Only one in five (21 percent) disagree, with 10 percent strongly disagreeing, and 11 percent somewhat disagreeing.

Researchers also asked Americans to respond to this statement: "Judges should be allowed to change the name parents give their children if there are religious implications to those names that some people might find offensive."

Sixty-one percent strongly disagreed, while another 15 percent somewhat agreed.

Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research, said, "Despite the fact that the majority of Americans consider themselves Christians and that the judge voiced an orthodox Christian position of there being only one person who earned the title Messiah, three out of four Americans put a parent's right to name their child above considerations about religious offense or the beliefs of their own religion." (LifeWay)

Baby names & parental rights



"And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?" 1 Cor. 14:8



STEELE

'There's no place for me to quit'

Gaylesville pianist Steele taught herself to play after going blind

By Anna Keller
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

For a church pianist to lose her vision and continue playing the piano each week for the congregation would be quite a notable scenario. But Faye Steele's story is even more impressive. It wasn't until after losing her sight in her late 20s that she learned to play the piano and has been playing for her church for the past 35 years.

In 1976, Steele experienced a negative reaction to a medication that put her into a coma, and when she awoke she found she'd lost her sight. Her two children were young at that time, and her third child was born four years after Steele went blind. When it came to her children, Steele made it a point to have them all take piano lessons — something she'd never had herself despite a love for music.

"So all three of the kids got music lessons and I listened closely," she recalled. "The teachers came to the house and I paid attention to the lessons and started playing by ear."

Now more than three decades since learning to play, she knows most hymns by their hymnal page numbers alone. The choir will call out the hymn number, then someone will sing the first few words of the song, and they go from there.

'God-given' abilities

"Everyone in the church considers her to be a marvel and blessed," said Rob Steele, Faye's husband and pastor of Unity Baptist Church, Gaylesville, in Lookout Mountain Baptist Association. "Everyone agrees that the abilities she has are God-given. She's an inspiration to everyone who's in the church."

One of Faye Steele's favorite things about playing the piano for church services is when her son, Danny, accompanies her on his guitar — something that happens regularly. Danny and his wife, Erica, also attend Unity Baptist.

As far as musical styles go, she prefers hymns and classic gospel music rather than more contemporary tunes.

In addition to playing piano for the church,

Faye Steele keeps busy teaching Sunday School as well as helping her husband with bookkeeping and other office-related tasks.

"She's an individual with determination," Rob Steele said. "A lot of people would have sat down and given up, but she had the determination to keep pushing forward. And she'll always have my admiration."

Erica Steele described her mother-in-law as a remarkably independent person (she cooks, cleans, quilts and reads in braille) and someone who is always looking for ways to help others. "Anytime anyone needs help she does everything she can to help them," Erica Steele said. "She really puts their needs before hers."

As for Faye Steele, she said her independence comes from her knowing that she just had to keep living and keep doing the things she loved to help her family and others.

"When I woke up (from the coma in 1976) and couldn't see, I was in a different world," she said. "But there's no place for me to quit. God's done too much for me. Sometimes it's been hard, but He's always been with me." ❧

Want to know God?

By Pastor Brad Doss
Grace Baptist Church, Fayette

I can't imagine what he must have been through. From the time he was born, he had been blind. He had never known what a spring day looked like, nor had he seen his mother and father's face. It was OK with him; he had grown up normal other than his blindness. He played and later found a job doing little things. He was growing up but still had questions on why he was born blind. Many blamed the parents, some even blamed him, but nevertheless he was blind and chose to simply live his life.

Well one day all that changed. Jesus saw him and stopped. Along with Him were many of His disciples who were talking about the man's blindness. As they all stopped, Jesus knelt down and made some mud with His spit and rubbed it on the blind man's eyes. After He was through He told him to go and wash his eyes. We are told that the man received his sight. He could see. For the first time he saw his parents, his friends as well as a bright spring day. Oh the joy, he could see.

Leaders and others in authority came to him several times asking him, "What happened for you to receive your sight?" "Who did this?" You see all he knew is that once he was blind, but now he sees.

Let me ask you — "Are you today ready to see?" Jesus is right in front of you and for the most part you can't see Him. We are too busy doing things that really just don't matter too much. He is right in front of you — can you see Him? Are you ready to see Jesus?

If you are, pray this prayer:

"I see clearly that you are the Son of God. I believe that you died for my sin and rose from the grave. I want you to be Lord of my life. Heal me. Change me. Make new brand new, so that I can live for you."

If you prayed that prayer find a Baptist church and tell the pastor you just saved.

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CHURCH POSITIONS

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Foley, Ala., is seeking a full-time minister of music and senior adults. Worship style is blended. We are looking for a leader who is gifted in music and building a dynamic worship ministry. Minister also will oversee our senior adult ministries. Email resumés to: scollins@fbcfoley.com. Please include a video of you leading worship. Resumés will be accepted until Jan. 15.

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FULL-TIME YOUTH PASTOR: Whorton Bend Baptist Church is searching for youth pastor/leader. Please send resumés to: Joey Jones, pastor, joeyjones@bellsouth.net or call 256-312-6455.

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Someone You Should Know

By Leigh Pritchett, Correspondent, *The Alabama Baptist*

Mary Ann McGaha



McGAHA

*Wears Chapel Baptist Church, Huntsville
Madison Baptist Association*

FAVORITE HYMN: "What Will I Leave Behind"

HOBBY: Meeting with friends each morning at Hardee's

FAMILY STATUS: Widowed after 15 years of marriage to James; one son, Bill Turner; one grandson; one great-grandson

Mary Ann McGaha, 75, has been church clerk at Wears Chapel Baptist Church, Huntsville, for 38 years. In that role she has updated membership records, researched the church's history and helped to compile the history into a book. In the past, McGaha served as assistant song director and Vacation Bible School director and sang in a church trio. She continues to sing in the choir and perform the humorous roles in the church's Christmas programs. Currently she serves on the executive board committee of Madison Association. McGaha retired in 1997 from 39 years as a banker.

Q: What influences in your life pointed you to Christ at the beginning of your faith journey?

A: My father because he was a minister. I was 14 when I became a Christian.

Q: What does your ministry work demand?

A: Taking care of the minutes at the business meeting, keeping the membership roll book up to date, singing in the choir.

Q: What do you get from your ministry work?

A: Enjoyment.

Q: How do family members support you?

A: My son supported me quite a bit. If we have a Christmas program at church, they're always there.

They (the church) never give me a serious part in the Christmas program. They always give me a humorous part.

Q: How do you see yourself involved in this work in the future?

A: I hope to do this a little bit longer. We have an assistant now [who] I'm training. As long as I'm able, I want to continue doing what I can.

Q: What difference will this ministry work make for you in the future?

A: As long as I'm able to do it, I'll be happy.

Q: What difference has Jesus Christ made in your life?

A: Altogether different. I'm happier and enjoy doing stuff in church. ☞

If you know of a person who should be featured as "Someone You Should Know," send his or her name, a contact number and the reason you think he or she should be featured to: Someone You Should Know, c/o The Alabama Baptist, 3310 Independence Drive, Birmingham, AL 35209 or news@thealabamabaptist.org.



He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'

Psalm 91:1-2



Being prepared

Alabama Baptists encouraged to be prepared, equipped for disasters

By Gary Hardin
Correspondent, *The Alabama Baptist*

During the month of February all Alabama Baptists are being encouraged to schedule a special disaster relief emphasis in their churches.

The Disaster Preparedness Month emphasis features a church preparedness plan, a family preparedness plan and a special disaster relief offering.

"Disasters will occur in our communities," said Mel Johnson, Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (SBOM) disaster relief strategist. "When crises occur, our churches need to be prepared and equipped for them so they can respond and minister to people."

Churches must plan how they will respond to disasters so the love of Jesus is shown to disaster survivors. A church might offer the use of its facilities as a feeding center. The church building can serve as a distribution center for clothing, food and household supplies. A congregation might make their church facilities available for disaster relief volunteers to use as a staging area, a child-care center or a communication center.

A church would do well to elect a disaster relief coordinator and to establish a disaster relief committee to give direction to the church in its ministry response to a local disaster. This step, Johnson explained, would better prepare a church to work with its community in disaster relief for a more effective response.

Disasters are unwelcome and painful, Johnson admitted, but they do present huge evangelistic opportunities to reach communities.

"People in areas hit by a disaster want to know why we respond as we do," he said. "These inquiries open doors for us to share the gospel."

Disaster Preparedness Month also is a time for families to think about and prepare for survival techniques after a disaster occurs. Today more people live in disaster-prone areas. Depending on the severity of the damage, hours or days might pass before emergency help becomes available in certain areas impacted by a disaster.

Rick Lance, SBOM executive director, championed the need for family preparedness.

"We take weather seriously in our state. Alabama has always been known as part of 'tornado alley,'" he said. "We are also a coastal state. Hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico are annual concerns for us."

A family prepares well for a disaster by assembling a family disaster supply kit. Items in a kit would in-

clude water, nonperishable foods, personal hygiene items, blankets, flashlights, medicines, hand tools and more. A list for suggested items to be included in a disaster supply kit can be found at www.alsbom.org/beprepared.

At the heart of Disaster Preparedness Month is the annual special offering for Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief. The 2014 goal is \$200,000 and can be achieved by a giving challenge of \$1 per member.

Johnson explained that the money given allows Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers to make immediate ministry responses such as chain saw

teams; distribution of water, diapers and personal hygiene items; and hot meals served to victims.

The money also provides for purchases and upgrades of needed disaster relief equipment. Needed equipment used in disasters includes shower units, small feeding units, roof repair units and volunteer housing units.

"My hope for the special disaster relief offering is that churches across our state will view the February emphasis as an opportunity to pray for and support some of Alabama's finest missionar-

ies with the tools and resources essential for ministry to families in crisis. Alabama's 7,000 disaster relief volunteers make a global impact for Christ. Support from our churches has made Alabama a pace-setting state in SBC (Southern Baptist Convention) life. Each dollar given provides hope, help and healing to those in need," Johnson said.

Lance pointed out, "Alabama Baptists have been generous in the past during the weather-related disasters which come our way. The disaster relief offering is a way for us to stay prepared for such events."

Promotional items available

Doug Rogers, director of the SBOM office of communications and technology services, expressed his excitement about the disaster relief offering promotional video.

"Churches can use this video either on the day they receive the offering or anytime in February," he said. "This video explains where disaster relief offering dollars go and also shows how lives are changed through disaster relief ministry."

Posters, bulletin inserts, offering envelopes and additional videos are available to help churches carry out Disaster Preparedness Month. These can be ordered at www.alsbom.org/beprepared or by calling 1-800-264-1225, ext. 273. ☞

February is ALABAMA DISASTER PREPAREDNESS MONTH.

For promotional resources, visit www.alsbom.org/beprepared.



From Children to Families

Elise Vincent, Social Worker, LGSW | Jonathan Goode, Community Relations

One of the amazing things about working for the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries is that we get to see and hear of miracles happening in our ministry on a daily basis, many times in the most unexpected ways. Below is a testimony from Elise Vincent, one of our social workers in the Birmingham area, who recently saw God restore a family through their children being in foster care:

We have had three brothers in our care for almost a year, and this is their second time to be in our foster care program. I recently had the privilege of being at court with them to see their family reunite with each other and truly be restored.

The mom and dad of these precious boys became believers while the boys were in our foster care program. They saw how much their children loved church and all the knowledge they gained about the Bible. They became convicted of how their own spiritual lives looked. They began attending church together and reconciled many personal issues they had with each other. The father said to me at court, "I realized the second time my children had to come into foster care because of me, how broken of a man I really was and I realized I needed more strength than I had. I needed God." The dad has been under the mentorship of his pastor and he said to me, "I am going to marry the boys' mother so that we can have a family the way God designed and I am going to step up and fulfill my biblical roles as a father and husband."

When I was supervising visits with the parents I was able to watch as they read the Bible together and prayed with each other. The family wanted me to express to all of you a part of this ministry how grateful they are for everything we provided to the boys (Christmas, Back-To-School clothes, etc.), but most importantly for providing a safe home where they could learn about the Lord and become a united family again.

I can't think of a better picture of our purpose here at the Children's Homes to protect, nurture, and restore! God didn't just use Elise working one-on-one with these children to reach their parents—He heard your prayers, used your gifts, and worked through the foster parents. God used every piece of the puzzle beautifully to show the power of our Mighty Savior and how much he cares for each of us.

“ I realized the second time my children had to come into foster care because of me, how broken of a man I really was and I realized I needed more strength than I had. I needed God. ”

Want to be a part of fostering hope to children and families in our care? Here are three ways:

1 Become a foster parent or respite care provider

We will be starting training in January across the state. Call 1-888-720-8805 or go to alabamachild.org/foster-parenting to see if there is a training class near you.

2 GivePray2014

If you're not called to be a foster parent, you can be involved in equipping these families to live out the calling God has placed on their lives. Consider being a part of GivePray2014, where you give \$20 and pray 14 things for the children and families we serve throughout the month of January. Go to alabamachild.org/2014 to learn more.

3 Engage your church

Share the amazing testimonies of God working in the lives of the children and families we serve by signing up for our 2014 Annual Children's Homes Offering. Included are bulletin inserts and a promotional DVD with short videos to promote the offering. Contact Kay Taylor at 1-888-720-8805 or ktaylor@abchome.org by March 10 to order your free materials.





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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

Trail Life USA starts own scouting group Jan. 1, opposes Boy Scouts policy on gay membership

An organization billing itself as a Christian alternative to the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) said it had close to 500 troops — including several from Alabama such as First Baptist Church, Pelham — preparing for its Jan. 1 launch.

The new group, Trail Life USA, was created by OnMyHonor.net, which opposed the BSA's policy change May 2013 that permitted gay Boy Scouts — but not gay adult leaders — effective on Jan. 1.

"We have a very excited group of churches and Christian organizations that are joining us," said

Mark Hancock, Trail Life USA's chief operating officer.

He said the organization has "hundreds of volunteers all over the country" and would have a staff of six Jan. 1 in virtual rather than brick-and-mortar offices. Hancock said many participants are evangelical Christian, but a number of Catholic troops are starting as well.

"Our focus is not really on numbers but it's on providing a quality program for families to help the boys become men," he said.

Trail Life USA's values statement includes a section on purity

that reads, in part: "We are to reserve sexual activity for the sanctity of marriage, a lifelong commitment before God between a man and a woman."

Religious groups sponsor about 70 percent of the BSA's 100,000 troops; after the policy change was announced, most of the major sponsors — Mormons, Catholics and United Methodists — agreed to remain with the BSA despite unease in some corners about lifting the gay ban.

Deron Smith, spokesman for the BSA, said "it would be inappropriate for us to discuss other organizations," but added "what we're hearing ... is that only a handful of chartered organizations have decided not to renew. ... We are thankful that the overwhelming majority ... remain committed to the Scouting program."

For more information about Trail Life USA, visit www.trail-lifeusa.com. (RNS)

Lawsuit over VictoryLand raid dismissed

U.S. District Judge W. Keith Watkins dismissed a lawsuit Dec. 23, 2013, that alleged a raid of the VictoryLand casino in Macon County had violated the voting rights of Macon County residents.

The lawsuit said state officials' actions against VictoryLand undermined a 2003 vote allowing charity bingo in Macon County, according to a report in *The Montgomery Advertiser*.

In his 50-page decision, Watkins wrote that the lawsuit had no legal merit and was "frivolous," The Associated Press (AP) reported.

"The complaint has nothing to do with the infringement of voting rights," Watkins wrote, according to the AP report. "The complaint attempts to revive a private business offering electronic bingo that has been deemed illegal by the highest court in Alabama, the highest law enforcement official in Alabama and the chief executive officer of Alabama, its governor."

Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange commended the recent ruling.

Strange's office and the Alabama Department of Public Safety raided Milton McGregor's VictoryLand casino Feb. 19, 2013. The raid resulted in the seizure of more than 1,600 electronic gambling machines and more than \$223,000 in cash. (TAB)

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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For January 12

Explore the Bible By Dale Younce, Th.D. Professor of Christian Ministries, University of Mobile

HONOR JESUS John 17:1-8, 20-26

What does it mean to “glorify God” or to “glorify Jesus”? Perhaps many Christians have not carefully considered this question. Other Christians may have come to understand that their ultimate reason for existence — and for their salvation — is to honor Jesus. Today’s study can help adults learn why they are to honor Jesus.

Honor Jesus for Completing God’s Work (1-5)

This lesson brings us to what is known as “The High Priestly Prayer” of Jesus. It is one of the two prayers He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. In this prayer, He intercedes for His own; it is a glimpse of His present ministry in heaven where He prays for His people (Heb. 7:25).

Jesus marked out five spiritual truths. (1) His supreme desire was to glorify and to honor God the Father. The hour when He would pay for our sin had arrived and He was looking ahead to His death on the cross and beyond that to His resurrection. All creation would see the love of God displayed as Jesus died a vicarious, substitutionary, redemptive death for us. (2) Jesus exercises supreme authority in the universe in order to give eternal life to those who trust Him. It brings great glory to God when ungodly people trust Christ and then demonstrate the character of Christ in their daily lives. (3) Jesus defined eternal life as knowing God personally, not just facts about Him but living in personal relationship with Him through faith in Jesus. (4) He had accomplished all the work God the Father had given Him to do. He had glorified the Father by His sinless life, by His miracles and teaching, by His death and resurrection. He had finished the work of salvation the Father had given Him. (5) Jesus requested a return to the pre-incarnate glory of His Deity. During His earthly life, the glory of His Deity was veiled. People saw only a man; angels saw Deity veiled by human flesh. Jesus requested the vis-

ible evidence of His glory in heaven be restored.

Honor Jesus Through Obedience (6-8)

Jesus focused His attention upon the disciples. He described them as men belonging to the Father and given to Him by God. They had lived by what Jesus taught and had come to understand clearly that God the Father had sent Jesus. This meant Jesus affirmed the genuine faith of His men. We honor Jesus as we accept and obey what He taught as the divine instruction that it is.

Honor Jesus Through Unity (20-23)

Jesus’ interest extended beyond the 12; He prayed for the whole Church throughout all the ages. The prayer was for unity among believers. In one sense this prayer has already been answered. The Church is an organic unity, making all believers one in Christ since the Church is one Body (1 Cor. 12:12-13). The moment a sinner trusts Christ, that sinner is immediately placed into the Body of Christ. Believers also are united in the common eternal life shared by all who trust Christ. The unity for which Jesus prayed was not some cookie-cutter uniformity of thought and action but a spiritual unity based on the person and work of Jesus. The unity that exists between the Father and the Son is the unity that is to exist between the Lord and the believer. Such a oneness of spirit looks beyond the elements of our first birth — race, color, abilities, national origin, etc. — and builds our fellowship on the essentials of our new birth.

Honor Jesus Now and Forever (24-26)

Jesus expressed to the Father His desire that all believers will one day be with Him in heaven and will experience the everlasting love that characterizes the Triune God. As believers, we can be sure that we are able to honor Jesus not only now but also when we go to be with Him forever in heaven.

Bible Studies for Life By Thomas L. Fuller, Ph.D. Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

A LIFE YOU CAN'T LIVE ON YOUR OWN Romans 8:8-17, 26-27

God does not call us to live a life that is outside the realm of possibility. Neither, however, can we live the Christian life without God’s help. That help comes to us not just as good advice and godly examples but in the real presence and power of God in our lives. God is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit, apart from whom “true Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, indeed impossible” (John Stott).

(8-13)

In vv. 5-7, Paul establishes the antithesis of life lived “according to the flesh” and “according to the Spirit.” Christians who “set their minds on the things of the flesh” (v. 5), who are “in the flesh” (v. 8), living to please themselves and to satisfy their own desires and ambitions, cannot obey God’s law and do God’s will. “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Paul’s use of “if” here and in verses 10-11 is a rhetorical device and not intended to call into question the Spirit’s presence in a believer’s life. To know and profess Jesus Christ as Lord is to possess the Holy Spirit.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit has two implications. First, though we are dead, the Spirit makes us alive (vv. 10-11). Because of sin, we are mortal decaying, dead, without hope. Because of Christ’s righteousness, we are alive, strengthened, made able to live in a manner pleasing to God. God’s Spirit accomplishes this miracle in us by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Second, because the Spirit gives us life, we are free to say no to the flesh and yes to God’s commands. The Spirit empowers us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23).

(14-17)

We were once slaves to the flesh (our own wills), to sin and death, but now we have been set free. Better still, we have been adopted: We are God’s children and called to live in accord with that new reality. God’s Spirit helps us to do that. He leads us to “put to death the deeds of the body,” that is, to serve God rather than ourselves. He reminds us of our new identity — that we are free and children of the King, no longer slaves who live in fear and despair. He prompts us to regard our heavenly Father with the same audacious intimacy as Jesus did, addressing Him as “Abba” (Daddy). He affirms in our hearts the amazing, transformative truth that as God’s children, we are nothing less than fellow heirs with Christ, with the hope of glory and the assurance of eternity in God’s presence.

(26-27)

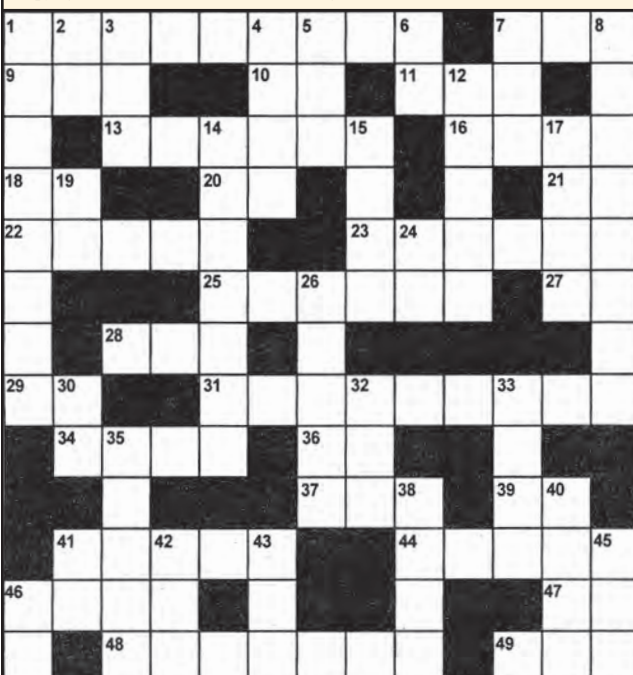
Finally we cannot live the Christian life apart from prayer. Prayer is impossible apart from the Holy Spirit. As John Stott points out, “We can approach the Father only through the Son and only by the Spirit.” The Spirit “helps us in our weakness” in the same way that hope sustains us in times of suffering (18-25). Just as we are living in that in-between state of being fully justified children of God but awaiting the future consummation and glorification at Christ’s return, we also have full access to God in prayer but oftentimes do not know how or what to pray. For example, with specific reference to “the sufferings of this present time” (v. 18), should one pray for deliverance from the suffering or for the grace to endure it? We can never be sure, for there is so much we do not know. But the Spirit knows, and He intercedes for us. Even when we don’t know how or what to pray, we can be sure that our heart’s cry is heard before the throne of God and in accordance with His will.



The Alabama Baptist newspaper.

Christian Crossword

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Across

- Johoiada was leader of the _____. (1 Chron. 12:27)
- A serviceman who did not return from war may be one of these.
- To forbid.
- Learn to ____ well. (Isa. 1:17)
- Abraham would be called this today.
- Remember what ____ did. (Deut. 25:17)
- A wise guy.
- Speak unto ... Israel, that they ____ forward. (Ex. 14:15)
- He will ____ a wild man. (Gen. 16:12)
- Familiar form of you in German.
- ____ the son of Ner. (2 Sam. 3:25)
- Parts of a play.
- Sons of Zeruah, Joab, Abishai and _____. (2 Sam. 2:18)
- Saint. (abbr.)

- Extol him ... by his name _____. (Ps. 68:4)
- Compass direction.
- All the ____ and strangers. (Acts 17:21)
- Judah and _____. (Jer. 9:26)
- For example. (abbr.)
- Thou shalt not ... _____. (Lev. 19:13)
- Elevation. (abbr.)
- The name thereof is called _____. (Ezek. 20:29)
- ____ and Caiaphas being high priests. (Luke 3:2)
- Captains over _____. (Deut. 1:15)
- 1,001 in Roman numerals.
- Carried them captive to _____. (2 Kings 15:29)
- From ____ to Beer-sheba. (Judg. 20:1)

Down

- Belonging to Nabal’s wife. (1 Sam. 25:3)
- Anti-aircraft. (abbr.)

- Ribonucleic acid. (abbr.)
- Not working.
- Upon the great ____ of their right foot. (Ex. 29:20)
- South America. (abbr.)
- The sound a kitten makes.
- A decree from Caesar _____. (Luke 2:1)
- The beginning of his kingdom was _____. (Gen. 10:10)
- Sarah died ... and ____ came to mourn. (Gen. 23:2)
- King Saul’s father. (1 Sam. 10:21)
- Fruit drinks.
- Obstetrician. (abbr.)
- Chemical Engineer. (abbr.)
- And Leah ... called his name _____. (Gen. 30:13)
- ____ are laborers together with God. (1 Cor. 3:9)
- ____, id, superego.

- The young men of _____. (Ezek. 30:17)
- Made silver shrines for _____. (Acts 19:24)
- Passing through the valley of _____. (Ps. 84:6)
- An Eastern monk.
- To ____ or not to be.
- Manuscripts. (abbr.)
- The ____ is withered away. (Isa. 15:6)
- Which taketh away the ____ of the world. (John 1:29)
- Their cry came up ____ God. (Ex. 2:23)



MUSIC



Photo courtesy of Merge PR

Strength, stability

Josh Wilson sings about life experiences

By Leann Callaway
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

With his latest album, “Carry Me,” singer/songwriter Josh Wilson shares personal stories and life lessons about relying on God for strength, stability and security.

While writing songs for this project, Wilson began experiencing severe chest and shoulder pain as well as difficulty breathing. These symptoms were so intense that Wilson believed he was having a heart attack.

He was relieved when the test results came back negative. However, after several recurring episodes, Wilson discovered he was actually having severe anxiety and panic attacks.

Despite the health issues, Wilson has maintained a busy schedule performing concerts around the country. In spring 2013, he joined the Grammy Award-winning band Third Day and American Idol finalist Colton Dixon on The Miracle Tour. In the fall he was on the Need You Now Tour with recording artists PLUMB and Mikeschair.

Soul-stirring lyrics

Recognized for his unique ability to take ordinary life experiences and turn them into soul-stirring lyrics, his songs often take listeners on a musical journey of reflection and God’s redemption.

“I try to write songs based on life experiences, either situations that I’ve experienced personally or circumstances that I’ve watched my friends go through,” Wilson said. “I want to encourage people with the promises that we’ve been given in Scripture.

“I hope the songs encourage Christians to dig deeper and to live out the gospel that has

changed all of us. ... For those who don’t know Christ, I hope that these songs are a good introduction to His love, grace and the truth of the gospel.”

Before Wilson received his first guitar, he made a promise to his father that he would use the instrument for God. Wilson honored that commitment and began leading worship for his youth group. After high school, he attended Belmont University in Nashville where he won the Christian Music Showcase during his junior year.

Following graduation from Belmont in 2006, Wilson signed with Sparrow Records and released his major label debut, “Trying to Fit the Ocean in a Cup,” in 2008. The album was met with critical acclaim and hailed as the “future of Christian pop.”

During concerts, Wilson reflects on his recent struggles and encourages audiences to rest in God’s Word during times of uncertainty.

“I think God is reminding me to trust Him in a way that I never have before, especially with the anxiety attacks,” he said. “One of my favorite verses lately is Exodus 14:14, ‘The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.’ I’ve always said that Jesus is all that I need, but when He really is all that you have, it becomes clear how much you need to depend on Him daily.

“If people are still searching for the truth when they come to a concert, my prayer is that the songs will point people closer to Jesus. It’s my desire through these songs for people to realize that Jesus is the answer to what they are searching for, and He is the only one who can fill the void in their life and mend all the broken pieces.”

Gordon Mote

All Things New
New Haven Records LLC

Sometimes when reviewing a new CD I have to pay close attention to the mix, the individual instrumental performances, the writing, the continuity of production values, all kinds of disconnected bits and pieces that go into making a good musical product.

And, rarely, I just let the music and the lyrics take over and base my review on pure emotion. Gordon Mote’s new project “All Things New” is one of those.



When I realized I had tears streaming down my face while listening to “Faith Like That” I knew this was one of those records. “All Things New” is what I like to call “Nashville” music, the kind of thing we used to call country before country got so slick. I’ll admit to not being a huge fan of country music, but music of any type, when the lyrics tug at your heart and the melodies and arrangements pull you in, is good music. This is good music. Mote has put God at the center of this record and made one of the best records I’ve had the privilege to review in a long time.

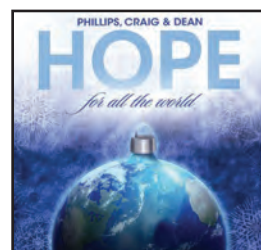
As a musician, I would love to work on a record like this. Fun to play, outstanding writing, catchy hooks, beautiful recording — not to mention the touching Christ-centered lyrics — that should appeal to a broad audience. Mote has created a tour de force of lyric and melody here. Country? Maybe. Maybe not.

If you like country music, buy it. If you don’t, buy it. But buy it. Trust me.

Phillips, Craig & Dean

Hope For All the World
Fair Trade Services LLC

Senior pastor. The very term conjures up visions of sharkskin suits, perfectly coifed hair and lots of Christian-speak. Then, there are Phillips, Craig & Dean. Senior pastors in their respective churches, certainly



not to be mistaken as head-bangers, and yet, their new Christmas CD “Hope For All the World” brings an edginess, an energy and a contemporary sound that I certainly didn’t expect from a Christmas record.

After more than 20 years of excellent music, it seems these guys still feel the pulse of their Christian audience.

They all mention the need to listen to the needs of their younger church members when planning worship and writing songs, and while there is good traditional Christmas music here, the meat of the record comes from the new songs — “For All the World,” “God Bless Us” and the rocking “Sudden-

ly.” Maybe there’s not another “Revelation Song” in this bunch, but this is good, relevant music and Dove-award winning producer Nathan Nockels does an excellent job of extracting one of the better records of this season, Christmas record or not.

Phillips, Craig & Dean are one of the most loved Christian bands around, and “Hope For All the World” will only further their appeal. Forget that it’s a Christmas record. Buy it for the new songs. And enjoy.

Steven Curtis Chapman

The Glorious Unfolding
Provident Label Group LLC

Steven Curtis Chapman’s first original record since his 2009 release “Beauty Will Rise,” “The Glorious Unfolding” follows almost a year after his wonderful 2012 Christmas release, “Joy.” During that dry spell, we’ve gotten by on recom-



pilations, such as “#1’s” (Volumes 1 and 2) and “Greatest Hits.” We got a few new Chapman tunes with his 2012 release “Re:Creation,” but even there most were re-recordings of many of his greatest hits. His 2012 Christmas release “Joy,” while largely traditional, seemed to signal Chapman’s

return from a very, very dark period.

The title song “The Glorious Unfolding” immediately sets the project’s tone. Chapman sings, “Take a rest from the fight, don’t try to figure it out. It feels like the end is closing in on you, but it’s just not true.

There’s so much of the story that’s still yet to unfold. And this is going to be a glorious unfolding.” The song then launches into a joyous, hand-clapping, downright danceable killer of a song, and you know — the Chapman we’ve loved for so long, and missed so much — is back.

But “The Glorious Unfolding” doesn’t feel like classic Chapman. In spite of its infectious rhythms and joyful arrangements, it’s more introspective, older and there’s a maturity that wasn’t there before. Fans (and record sales) will be the ultimate gauge of how we perceive the “new” Chapman, but I, for one, see “The Glorious Unfolding” as some of Chapman’s best music ever.

Meet the reviewer

Rick Sharp writes music reviews for The Alabama Baptist. He is a writer and musician and a member of Central Baptist Church, Decatur, where he plays guitar in the praise band.



'Game changer'

Faith sustains Smokies' center fielder Szczur

By Bill Sorrell
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Matt Szczur, a 2013 Southern League All-Star baseball player and the center fielder for the Tennessee Smokies (the Chicago Cubs' AA affiliate in the Southern League) has given away a unique gift — bone marrow.

Days after Szczur (pronounced Caesar) led Villanova University in Philadelphia, Pa., to the 2009 Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) national title, he underwent a four-hour procedure to help save the life of a 15-month-old girl with leukemia.

The baby, who he did not know, had a one-in-80,000 chance of finding a match.

He was aware of the risks of giving his peripheral blood cells. The medicine he had to take before and after the January 2010 operation treated the body as if it had mononucleosis. He missed 10 games of Villanova's 2010 baseball season.

"It was awesome," said Szczur, 24, despite the missed playing time. "It was great to be a part of something like that."

Via Skype, Szczur met the girl, from Ukraine, who received his bone marrow.

It didn't faze Szczur knowing the medications could affect his play. In the championship win over Montana, Szczur gained 270 yards, including a career-high 159 yards rushing, and scored two touchdowns.

"Extraordinary" can describe his two-sport college career and professional baseball career. In 2009, he was selected as one of the top 10 Most Electrifying FCS Offensive Players.

That season, he caught 51 passes for 610 yards and four touchdowns. At running back, he gained 813 yards and scored 10 touchdowns. He also quarterbacked.

"They used me as a versatile guy," Szczur said. "I played everywhere."

Career-wise he is tied for fifth in school history with 30 career touchdowns.

He played baseball two seasons at Villanova and was first team All-Big East Conference. He ranks fifth all-time with a .392 career batting average and is third in triples with nine. He had 142 hits, scored 85

runs and had 62 RBI. He was the Wildcats' first .400 hitter since 1997, batting .443. His fielding percentage was .976.

The Cubs drafted Szczur in the fifth round (160th overall) of the 2010 Major League Baseball (MLB) First-Year Player Draft.

He has been an all-star in three leagues: with Peoria, Ill., in the Midwest League in 2011; with Daytona in the Florida State League in 2012; and with the Southern League in July 2013. At press time, he was leading the Southern League with 512 at-bats and 144 hits. He was third in runs scored with 78 and seventh in batting average, coming in at a mark of .281. He also played for Team USA in the MLB All-Star Futures Game in 2011.

His best baseball experience came in 2011 when Daytona won the league championship. Before being promoted to Tennessee in 2012 he led the Florida State League with 68 runs and 38 stolen bases.

Szczur is rated the Cubs' No. 14 prospect by Baseball America and is on the Cubs' 40-man roster.

"Everything that everybody says is true," said former teammate Dustin Harrington. "He is a great baseball player. Matt is a great athlete, a great football player in college. I know he could have probably played in the NFL."

Matt Cerda, a former teammate who is now a third baseman with the Memphis Redbirds, called Szczur a "game-changer. He comes out and works hard and

makes anything happen."

Center field is Szczur's prayer closet. He goes there to pray before every game and he prays every night. Faith sustains him.

"I instill that, and God takes over and helps me through the day," he said.

Faith also helps him deal with baseball's humbling nature.

"You can go 0 for 5 or 5 for 5," Szczur said. "The next day you have to come out here and battle. You have to overcome obstacles every day."

The 140-game season is a grind, and there is competition at every turn.

Inspiration comes through his goal to succeed. "I am here to make it to the big leagues," he said. Szczur strives for something else as well.

"I want to be happy," he said. "If I am happy, no matter what I am doing, I'll be fine." ☞



Photo by Matthew Shalbrack/Tennessee Smokies

Matt Szczur

Szczur is a "game-changer. He comes out and works hard and makes anything happen."

Matt Cerda
third baseman, Memphis Redbirds

RELIGION

in America

Compiled from Wire Services



Baptist universities, nuns defeat contraception mandate

WASHINGTON — A U.S. Supreme Court justice granted an order of Roman Catholic nuns a last-minute reprieve from the Obama administration's contraception mandate.

The order followed a Dec. 27, 2013, victory against the mandate in a Houston federal court for two Baptist universities: East Texas Baptist University in Marshall, Texas, and Houston Baptist University.

Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor issued a temporary injunction Dec. 31, 2013, to the Little Sisters of the Poor in Denver, Colo., and other Catholic organizations. The injunction prevents the federal government from enforcing the controversial mandate for the time being. Sotomayor gave the Obama administration until Jan. 3 to respond to her order.

The injunction, issued the day before the mandate was to go into effect for Catholic organizations, brought the number of injunctions granted to nonprofit groups that have challenged the mandate in court to 19, according to the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

Becket Fund lawyer Eric Rassbach, deputy general counsel for the Becket Fund and representative for the Little Sisters and the Texas universities, said, "The government has enforced the health care reform law very unevenly, handing out exemptions to those it sees as its allies. Perhaps the worst part of the government's approach is that it seems to have decided that religious institutions are the only ones not to get an exemption."

Respect for clergy drops; pollsters attribute to sex abuse

WASHINGTON — Clergy used to rank near the top in polls asking Americans to rate the honesty and ethics of people in various professions. In 2013, for the first time since Gallup began asking the question in 1977, fewer than half of those polled said clergy have "high" or "very high" moral standards.

Overall 47 percent of respondents to the survey gave clergy "high" or "very high" ratings, a sharp drop in confidence from the 67 percent of Americans who viewed them this way in 1985.

In 2013, clergy took a back seat to nurses, pharmacists, schoolteachers, medical doctors, military and police officers.

The overall trend for clergy has sloped downward since 2001, with Gallup pollsters attributing the slide to sexual abuse scandals.

Though clergy seem to be dropping in the nation's esteem, they are far from the bottom of the list. Reading from the bottom up, the poll ranks lobbyists, members of Congress, car sales people, state office holders and advertising practitioners as the least ethical.

Methodist pastor defrocked for officiating gay wedding

LEBANON, Pa. — Frank Schaefer was defrocked by United Methodist officials in Pennsylvania on Dec. 19, 2013, after he refused to conform to denominational rules that prohibit ministers from officiating at same-sex weddings.

Schaefer, who serves as pastor of a church in Lebanon, Pa., said he plans to appeal the decision.

The Eastern Pennsylvania Conference Board of Ordained Ministry had no choice, Bishop Peggy A. Johnson said in a statement. A two-day church trial in November 2013 found Schaefer guilty of violating church law by performing the 2007 same-sex wedding of his son. A jury suspended him for 30 days, during which he was asked to decide whether he could comply with church law; if not, he was to surrender his clergy credentials.

In early December 2013, Schaefer said he would not voluntarily leave the ministry. He has said his actions were motivated by love.

ESPN hires Tebow as analyst for new SEC Network

BRISTOL, Conn. — Tim Tebow is returning to football — not as a player, but as an analyst for ESPN.

The former University of Florida star, Heisman Trophy winner and NFL player made his debut with the network Jan. 6 during pre-game coverage of the NCAA national championship game between Auburn and Florida State.

Tebow's main duties will be with the new SEC Network launching in August. He also will serve as a regular contributor on SportsCenter, ESPN Radio and the ESPN's Heisman Trophy coverage, according to an ESPN news release.

An outspoken Christian, Tebow is a member of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Fla. ☞