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FBC Eulaton has served 673 meals between Oct. 1, 2015, and Feb. 29, 2016.

123rf.com

Physical & spiritual food

Hunger funds help church increase midweek student participation

By **Carrie Brown McWhorter**
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Shortly before the Wednesday evening service began April 6, a line formed in the hall outside the sanctuary of First Baptist Church, Eulaton, in Anniston. A diverse group of 21 candidates waited for their turn to join interim youth pastor Jim Usher in the baptistry. In the sanctuary, nearly 300 people crowded in to witness the decisions.

"What a day," Usher proclaimed as he stepped into the baptistry water.

"It doesn't get any better than this."

Ten years ago, attendance was low at First, Eulaton. The Calhoun Baptist Association church had only a handful of children who came regularly. One Wednesday night an adult caught one of the children snooping in the refrigerator. When she asked the boy what he was doing, he admitted he had not had supper and was looking for something to eat. Church workers found the boy something to eat and made a decision that night to start feeding whoever came on Wednesday night.

Longtime First, Eulaton, member Frances Vinson remembered that in the early days of the food ministry, church members prepared food at home.

"We had better desserts back then," she said with a laugh, prompting Usher to ask if there were brownies left over from that

night's meal. Turning serious, Vinson said the boy's need had opened the church's eyes to both the spiritual and physical needs in the community.

Full souls

"We are so blessed to be able to see that these children and youth are fed at least one hot meal a week besides their meal at school and then learn of Jesus' love for them," she said. "The time spent here at church, they are in a safe environment where they have their stom-

achs filled as well as their souls filled with the love of Jesus."

And the way First, Eulaton, was able to provide meals to children in the area was through the annual Alabama Baptist Hunger Offering. One-hundred percent of every hunger offering dollar goes to relieve hunger, according to Jim Swedenburg, state missionary for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (SBOM), who is responsible for promoting, soliciting for and securing the annual offering.

(See 'FBC Eulaton,' page 8)

"[Students] have their stomachs filled as well as their souls filled with the love of Jesus."

Frances Vinson
member, FBC Eulaton

COMMENT



Is Coca-Cola Opposed to Religious Liberty?

Much has been written about Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal's recent veto of House Bill (HB) 757 commonly known as the Pastor Protection Act. Deal, an active member of a Georgia Baptist church, said the bill "proposed to fix a problem that didn't exist in Georgia." Others called the bill a "solution in search of a problem."

The bill sought to ensure that religious officials are not required by law to participate in gay "marriage" ceremonies that go against their religious beliefs. It also sought to protect religious organizations which own property from having to use that property in ways that infringe on the religious beliefs of the organization.

A third stipulation was that faith-based groups could not be forced to hire or retain employees whose beliefs run counter to the organization's.

Stripped from the bill before it was passed 161-0 by the Georgia House of Representatives were references to businesses like florists, bakers, photographers and others being allowed to refuse services to gay "marriages" because of religious belief.

As an aside, one might ask where is the "freedom" part of religious freedom for such professionals if they are not allowed to act on sincerely held religious beliefs in the public square without undue interference by government?

Safeguards and protections

But back to this issue.

So careful were the crafters of HB 757 that an amendment was added stipulating the proposed law could not allow discrimination already prohibited by federal law. In other words, HB 757 was supposed to put into state law the same safeguards for religious freedom and protections against discrimination that were already established in federal law.

Some observers condemned pastors and others who supported the bill, saying ministers don't need new laws protecting them because



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

they already have federal protection. That is not entirely true. Yes constitutional protections are strong. But in *City of Boerne v. Flores*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that federal statutory safeguards provided by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) apply only to the federal government. That means RFRA does not protect against state or local actions which could burden a pastor or church's free exercise of religion.

Perhaps that is why 21 states have opted to adopt state laws based on the federal RFRA model to ensure that state governments do not attempt to burden religious liberty in ways already forbidden to the federal government.

HB 757 was the same kind of bill. And, according to reports, Gov. Deal said he did not oppose the bill in its final form when passed.

Still he vetoed the bill. Many believe his actions were based on threats from business interests that opposed the bill such as Coca-Cola, headquartered in Atlanta. Coke, NFL, Disney Studios and others insinuated they would withdraw business from Georgia if Gov. Deal signed the bill into law.

Gov. Deal was correct when he observed there are no laws requiring a pastor to perform a same-sex "marriage." A study by the Family Research Council concluded, "Pastors solemnizing civil marriages are not in immediate danger of being forced to perform same-sex 'marriages.'"

The study added, "There is no significant risk that pastors and churches can be compelled by a court to solemnize, host or perform a same-sex 'marriage' ceremony."

Concerning employment, the U.S. Supreme Court has held that churches and religious organizations have the right to hire and fire ministers as they wish. This right has been defined as extending down to teachers in schools who teach nonreligious subjects because they represent the teaching authority of the Church.

Before same-sex "marriage" became a national issue court cases had already begun defining the limits of religious property exemption. Frequently property put out for public use is covered by anti-discrimination laws.

Churches remain free to set their own use policies for property that is primarily for the use of members and the organization itself.

Freedom of speech, freedom of association, free exercise of religion, the Church Autonomy Doctrine and the Ministerial Exception Doctrine (both related to the First Amendment) all provide strong protections for pastors and churches. Additionally, RFRA specifies that religious freedoms cannot be burdened by the federal government without a compelling interest and then only by the least restrictive means.

If these established federal standards are the principles embedded in HB 757, then why are Coca-Cola, NFL, Disney and others opposed? Are they opposed to federal standards protecting religious liberty being incorporated into state laws?

Threats to businesses

Are these businesses opposed to religious freedom?

Do they want to force pastors to have to perform same-sex "marriages" despite their religious beliefs against such a practice?

Do they want to force a church to open its doors to practices which the church considers against its core religious convictions?

Do Coca-Cola, NFL, Disney and the others want to force a religious organization to accept leadership which mocks the sincerely held religious beliefs of the group?

Do these businesses want to run roughshod over religious liberty through state laws and local ordinances?

The threats of these businesses against the state of Georgia if HB 757 was signed into law raise questions about their commitment to one of the basic freedoms on which this nation was founded — religious freedom.

Right now it seems Coca-Cola and others are willing to trample this basic human right underfoot with little concern to its implications.

Baptist historian Bill Leonard recently pointed out that religious freedom has never come easy in the United States. The majority and the powerful most always try to control the minority with the weapons of privilege, he said, and there is no greater weapon of privilege than economic blackmail.

But Baptists have fought and died for religious freedom, not for themselves alone but for all. Today this nation is a better place because we cherish religious freedom.

Coca-Cola and the other businesses would do well to carefully consider the implications of their threats before joining efforts that downgrade religious freedom from an inalienable right to something subject to the whims of the majority and the powerful. ☩

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"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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Reducing the sanctity of marriage

Senate Bill 143 aims to form clear separation between church and state

By Martha Simmons
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

It's a cliché image but one that is steeped in generations of tradition: A probate judge is awakened in the middle of the night to perform a hurried marriage ceremony for a couple of lovebirds. That's not the way it happens these days, of course, but an Alabama bill awaiting a vote in the House this legislative session would put an end to probate judges even issuing marriage licenses, much less performing wedding ceremonies.

Senate Bill (SB) 143, sponsored by Sen. Greg Albritton, R-Bay Minette, was first floated in 2015 in response to a U.S. Supreme Court ruling calling for equal treatment for same-sex couples seeking to marry. Some Alabama counties have stopped issuing marriage licenses to all couples in an effort to circumvent the ruling.

Albritton's bill was passed by the state Senate on a vote of 23-3 in March. The bill mandates that "all requirements to obtain a marriage license by the State of Alabama are hereby abolished and repealed. The requirement of a ceremony of marriage to solemnize the marriage is abolished."

Albritton characterizes his bill as forming a clear separation between church and state, and says it also protects ministers from having to perform same-sex "marriages" because they would no longer be acting as agents of the state. "It keeps elected officials from preventing or performing civil ceremonies, but also prevents ministers from performing ceremonies under the auspices of the state," he said.

Under current Alabama law couples must obtain a marriage license, have it solemnized in a ceremony by an authorized person — a minister or a probate judge, for instance — who then signs the license before it is filed in the probate office.

Under SB 143, a new form functioning as a sort of marriage contract would be developed by the Alabama Department of Public Health, which tracks marriage statistics (see sidebar).

Changing traditions

Such a procedural change would turn tradition on its head and perhaps prove anticlimactic for the nearly 38,000 Alabama couples who marry each year, many of them in expensive and meticulously planned wedding ceremonies that follow multiple counseling sessions with the pastors who will perform the weddings. SB 143 also would mean that couples who are unchurched, need to be married quickly, or cannot afford a traditional wedding would no longer have access to a civil service.

Domestic violence agencies feared that funding derived from marriage license fees would be lost, but Albritton said the bill has been tweaked to funnel their funding through recording fees under the proposed



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash

new law. Other critics of SB 143 say it will result in legal complications for couples moving to or from the state or proving marital status for insurance or military benefits. Albritton acknowledges his bill does not address those issues and that they are likely to be fought out in the courts.

A mere transaction

However, for retired Baptist minister Gary Hardin, of Centre, the bill has much more serious consequences than legal battles. For couples to marry merely by signing some paperwork, he suggested, turns the commitment of marriage into a mere transaction.

"He can call it a form," Hardin said of Albritton's description of the proposed marriage paperwork, "but (it is) a kind of contract." And a contract "is not communicating to couples that this is a covenant relationship. This is a horrible message to couples.

"By using the terms 'contract' or 'form,' you have reduced marriage from its high and lofty level — biblically and in the sight of God — to something that is more on the low ground," Hardin said. "You are using terminology that devalues marriage."

Hardin said he learned of the bill only in February after reading about it in newspapers when it was introduced by Albritton. He questioned why the bill has been flying under the radar for nearly a year, and that none of the ministers he has spoken to were consulted or made aware of it. "It gives the appearance that these folks in the Legislature don't want their pastors to know what's going on," said Hardin, who has been writing legislators in opposition to the bill ever since he first heard of it.

SB 143, he said, is nothing more than an effort to appease the probate judges who want nothing to do with same-sex "marriages."

"It's an overreaction to gay 'marriage,'" Hardin said. "Probate judges have been saying to the Legislature to get this monkey off their back."

Hardin says this proposed law punishes traditional marriage as well as gay "marriage."

"Their alternative is for a couple to draw up a contract," Hardin said. "They leave some couples in a real bind. Most pastors are not

(See 'Marriage,' page 9)

Proposed procedure for obtaining a marriage contract under SB 143

A couple wishing to marry would simply submit affidavits, forms and data to prove they are legally qualified to marry and file those with the probate office. The effective date of the marriage would be when the form is signed and filed, not the date of any subsequent wedding.

Source: Senate Bill 143

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'Legacies of good care'

Brookwood Baptist Health unveils new brand

By Maggie Walsh
The Alabama Baptist

Brookwood Baptist Health (BBH) — the joint venture uniting the former Brookwood Medical Center with Baptist Health System (BHS) and Tenet Healthcare Corporation — unveiled and celebrated its new name and brand in simultaneous events at each of its five hospital locations April 5.

Keith Parrott, CEO of BBH who previously served as CEO of BHS, said the new name represents a lot of "brand value."

"We felt like both 'Brookwood' and 'Baptist' had long legacies of good care" and found that a great deal of positive influence surrounded both words, he said. And in the rebranding process, BBH considered its Baptist roots. "We went back to the original charter of why the Birmingham Baptist Association



Photo by Neisha Roberts

Samford University President Andrew Westmoreland and other participants sign a picture during one of five events April 5 announcing the new Brookwood Baptist Health name and brand.

started Baptist Health System 90 years ago and it was really about serving people through people-focused health care ministry," Parrott said.

This original focus has impacted the BBH brand, which was largely inspired by Ecclesiastes 4:12: "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend

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HEALTH CARE OPTIONS

themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” The three intertwined circles of the new logo represent how the three partner organizations together are putting people back at the center of care, according to a BBH press release. The rebranding will take place over the next six to nine months.

“While we have operated as one entity since the merger was finalized (in October 2015), our new brand solidifies our identity as a true community of care, united in service and devotion to the people we serve,” Parrott said. “Our commitment to caring for patients with quality, integrity and transparency is of utmost importance moving forward.”

Faith roots

As the son and grandson of Baptist ministers, Parrott said his “Baptist blood is pretty thick” and believes that helping people understand the love of Jesus Christ is the most important way to improve one’s health.

“Spiritual health is No. 1, but right behind that is physical health.”

That’s why staying grounded in BBH’s faith roots is integral to its mission of patient-centered care. “The best health care is health care that’s delivered with a Christian spiritual focus,” Parrott said.

The merger represents Central Alabama’s largest health care network with 77 care sites in addition to its five hospitals: Brookwood Baptist Medical Center in Birmingham, Princeton Baptist Medical Center in Birmingham,

Shelby Baptist Medical Center in Alabaster, Walker Baptist Medical Center in Jasper and Citizens Baptist Medical Center in Talladega.

The additional care sites include health centers, physician practices, imaging centers and a freestanding emergency department. Approximately \$250 million in capital investments are planned at care locations during the next five years.

The BBH network serves more than 1 million patients annually and employs more than 1,300 doctors and 7,200 staff. And with the “collective growth in footprint,” BBH will be increasing its nursing staff in the near future.

“The future of the new [BBH] community of care is one of more resources, innovation and expertise to extend our Christian ministry of healing to those we serve,” Parrott said. ✝

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CAHABA

► **Hopewell Church, Mari- on**, will celebrate homecoming April 17. Special music will be at 10 a.m. and the worship service will follow at 10:30 a.m. Former pastor Leroy Stringfield will speak. Lunch will be at noon in the Family Life Center. Joe Bob Mizzell is pastor.

COFFEE

► **First Church, Enterprise**, will hold a Ladies Power Lunch on April 28, 12-1 p.m. in its fellowship hall. Stella Casey Motley will speak on world religions. To RSVP call the church office at 334-393-5683 by April 26. Ben Bowden is pastor.

COLUMBIA

► **Bethel Church, Dothan**, will celebrate its 125th anniversary April 17. Sunday School will begin at 9 a.m. and the praise service will begin at 10:15 a.m. Craig Conner, pastor of First Church, Panama City, Florida, will speak. Tim Hall, of First Church, Demopolis, will lead worship. Lunch will follow. Ricky Plummer is pastor.

COOSA RIVER

► **The Westview Church**,

Sylacauga, Relay for Life Team will host a Cruise-In on April 30 at Noble Park, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. The event is open to classic cars and trucks, hot rods, new cars and trucks, motorcycles and tractors. There will be a 50-50 jackpot and hotdogs. For more information call 256-487-1410. Jimmie Roberts is pastor.

GENEVA

► **Ed Scott** is the new bivocational pastor of **First Church, Geneva**. He previously served as interim pastor at the church. He also serves as the chair of the graduate division, director of institutional effectiveness and institutional research and professor of Christian studies at The Baptist College of Florida in Graceville. He holds an associate's degree from Pensacola Junior College (now Pensacola State College) in Florida; a bachelor's degree from Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri; and a master's degree and doctorate from New Orleans Seminary. He and his wife, Lea, have two children.

NORTH JEFFERSON

► **North Jefferson Asso-**

ciation will hold a retirement reception to honor **Sue Brown** on April 17, 2-4 p.m. Brown served as the director of the C.A.R.I.N.G. Center in Gardendale for 27 years. Steve Loggins is director of missions.

RUSSELL

► **Summerville Church, Phenix City**, will celebrate a "Jubilee of Thanksgiving" on April 24, 10:30 a.m. for retiring the debt on sanctuary construction with a note burning ceremony. The service will include special guests and testimonies from the last 20 years. Friends, family and former members are invited to attend. If you have articles with a historical connection to the church call 334-298-4416. Robert Goodman is pastor. ☛

Grief ministry workshop coming April 28

For ministers interested in establishing or expanding a grief ministry, "A Necessary Grief: Essential Tools for Leadership in Bereavement Ministry" may be a good place to start.

The April 28 workshop will be held at Brookdale University Park across from Samford University in Birmingham from 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and is co-sponsored by Dignity Memorial/Ridout's Valley Chapel.

Through two sessions, participants will learn how to serve in practical ways and will be given tools for dealing with grief's difficult questions.

Co-facilitated by Steve Sweatt, LPC/LMFT and clinical director of Community Grief Support (CGS), and Larry J. Michael, pastor for adult ministries and parish associate at South Highland Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, the workshop will focus on models of grief and how grief impacts survivors.

A complimentary breakfast and lunch will be provided. To register, call 205-870-8667 or email communitygriefsu@bell-south.net. (TAB)

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ALABAMA UPDATES

PEOPLE, CHURCHES MAKING NEWS ACROSS THE STATE

Nichols retires after 45 years in ministry

After nearly 15 years as director of missions (DOM) for Calhoun Baptist Association, Sid Nichols has retired but he hopes to be remembered by those he worked with and served as a "man of God and an advocate and ambassador of the Southern Baptist Convention."

After answering the call to preach just after high school, Nichols earned a bachelor's degree from Samford University in Birmingham; a master of divinity degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky; and a doctor of ministry degree from Alabama Theological Seminary in Tuscaloosa.

Prior to his role as DOM, Nichols served as a pastor for 30 years in Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky including at Ashby Baptist Church, Brierfield; Samaria Baptist Church, Clanton; Prattmont Baptist Church, Prattville; First Baptist Church, Red Bay; Mount Hebron West Baptist Church, Elmore; Sage Avenue Baptist Church, Mobile; and Heritage Baptist Church, Dothan.

Drawing on his years of experience, Nichols encourages young pastors and fellow DOMs to remain faithful to the gospel and the mission of Jesus Christ.

"There is no substitute for true gospel preaching that points people to a relationship with Christ. ... Be intentional in teaching and supporting missions on all levels," he said.

Hill Crest Baptist Church, Anniston, hosted a retirement celebration honoring Nichols on April 10.

Nichols and his wife, Pam, plan to remain in Oxford where he will be available for supply preaching, revivals and special events. He was preceded in death by his first wife of 37 years, Barbara, and has two children and two grandchildren. To contact Nichols, email drsidsnichols@yahoo.com or call 256-282-6352. (Maggie Walsh)



NICHOLS

Longtime Cullman pastor, veteran retires

It wasn't until he was 28 and serving in the United States Air Force that Derald Briscoe felt God's call on his life to become a pastor.

While stationed at Vance Air Force Base in Cherokee, Oklahoma, Briscoe decided to devote his time and energy to serving as a bivocational pastor.

When transferred to South Dakota, Briscoe began serving First Baptist Church, New Underwood, South Dakota, and served the area for 12 years. He also served as moderator of the former West River Baptist Association in South Dakota.

When he retired from the Air Force after 20 years, Briscoe began serving West Side Baptist Church, Cullman, first as assistant pastor and then in 1995 as bivocational pastor.

He said one thing he learned during his nearly 21 years with West Side Baptist's congregation was to help people stay motivated in their faith and "keep peace within the fellowship."

Briscoe earned a bachelor's degree from Athens State University and is married to Patty. They have two children and four grandchildren.

In retirement, Briscoe said he plans to keep doing supply preaching and will "see where the Lord wants me to go." (Neisha Roberts)



BRISCOE

REFLECTIONS

"I'M NEW AT THIS, BUT A CHURCH OF THIS SIZE MUST BE DOING SOMETHING OFFENSIVE!"



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Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Knowing God

God Is Longsuffering But Disciplining

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
Special to The Alabama Baptist

The Bible uses a variety of expressions to reveal God's dual characteristics of being longsuffering, yet disciplining. For example, Exodus 34:6-7 gives God's response to Moses' prayer of intercession for Israel: "The Lord passed by before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.'"

With a similar emphasis on His longsuffering, the phrase "slow to anger" is attributed to God multiple times in the Bible. For example, Psalm 86:15 declares, "You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

Opportunity to repent

Divine longsuffering, often shown in deferred anger, is accomplished by looking to see people turn from their sinful ways. To this very end, Romans 2:4 emphasizes that God's longsuffering toward people who sin is with a view to granting them opportunity to repent: "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" Clearly God's longsuffering is not to be equated to endless indulgence.

God's longsuffering is balanced by disciplining love. At its best and most God-like, discipline is not punishment. Rather it involves instruction with a view to correction. God's goal in disciplining His children is improvement, not simply chastisement. His aim is always the perfecting of our character and behavior. The Bible illustrates divine discipline by referring to earthly fathers who engage in correcting their children. From the action of earthly

fathers, light is shone on the action of our Heavenly Father. For example, Deuteronomy 8:5 says, "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you." The Psalmist, believing that God disciplines those who live contrary to His will, prayed, "O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in Your wrath" (Ps. 6:1).

Proverbs 3:11-12 admonishes, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." Godly discipline is motivated by godly love and for us it is prime evidence that He loves us. Furthermore, God's discipline also is evidence of our genuineness as His children. This is put in the form of a question: "For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" The answer to the question is cast in the negative declaration, "If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Heb. 12:7-8).

When God's longsuffering transitions into discipline, He has a positive purpose in view. While we humans sometimes equate discipline with punishment, God purposes it for spiritual growth. Hebrews 12:10-11 declares, "He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness," before adding, "for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." †

Jerry Batson is a retired Alabama Baptist pastor who also has served as associate dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University and professor of several schools of religion during his career.



'We are being depleted'

Iraqi Christians fear extinction because of ISIS

Iraqi Christians gathered in Baghdad to mark Easter but celebrations were tempered by fears the Islamic State (ISIS) would eradicate their shrinking community, even as the army launched a U.S.-backed offensive to retake Mosul, Iraq, their ancestral homeland.

In mid-2014, Christians in Mosul were forced to flee when ISIS seized the northern city and began destroying centuries-old religious sites, ending a presence that once numbered in the tens of thousands and dates back to Christianity's earliest years.

U.S.-backed Iraqi forces launched an offensive against ISIS in mid-March that was touted as the beginning of a broader campaign to clear areas around Mosul, though progress has been slow.

"We are threatened with extinction. This is a harsh word but every day we are being depleted. Our people are traveling, migrating," said Muyessir al-Mukhalisi, a priest at Saint George's Chaldean Church in east Baghdad.

Like millions of other Iraqis forced to leave home by ISIS's seizure of one third of the country, members of the Christian minority have moved from northern towns and villages to the capital or other cities, and many have joined the masses fleeing to Europe.

Their numbers have fallen to a few hundred thousand from about 1.5 million before the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

Around 250 worshippers packed the pews for a Good Friday mass at the Catholic church fortified with concrete blast walls, concertina wire and armed policemen.

Boys reenacted the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the congregation sang hymns alternating between Arabic and a variant of the ancient Aramaic language spoken by Jesus.

The church provides food and money to 45 families displaced from Mosul by the ultra-hardline Sunni Muslim militants, who issued an ultimatum to Christians in 2014: pay a tax, convert to Islam or die by the sword. The jihadists then stripped hundreds of Christian families of their possessions as they fled.

Huda Meti Saeed, 30, who attended weekend services with her husband and three young children, said her family left Mosul two years ago. An uncle living there was kidnapped and killed around the same time.

"We cannot return. Our neighbors

came and took our house. They wanted to take us hostage and take all our valuables," she said.

The family does not plan to emigrate but even if the militants are soon expelled, Saeed said she ruled out taking her family back to Mosul, the largest city in the north where Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, Christians and Yazidis once coexisted.

"Very few people are thinking about returning to Mosul," she said.

Bishop Basilio Yaldo preached against retribution March 25, telling worshippers that Jesus' message of forgiveness had never been more relevant than it currently is in Iraq.

Some Christians fight with the security forces while others have taken up arms and formed militias to defend their lands against ISIS on the plains of Nineveh near Mosul, but the cleric's message seemed to resonate with attendees.

Reem Paulis Saada, a 27-year-old church volunteer, said after the mass, "Since we were young we

were raised that there should be love and tolerance. I will not seek revenge. What would I gain from revenge? It will come back to hurt me."

Saada, a pharmacist who devotes much of her free time to the church, added that although she was not hopeful about the future in Iraq, as one of the last members of her family still living in the country she felt bound to stay.

First century Christians

Christianity in Iraq dates back to the first century, when it was said the apostles Thomas and Thaddeus brought the gospel to the fertile flood plains of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates.

The country is traditionally home to many different Eastern Rite churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, and their presence was once a sign of Iraq's ethnic and religious diversity.

But now Christians say they are often denied freedom of expression in the predominantly Muslim country and, like many Iraqis, lack security, basic services and economic opportunity.

Mukhalisi said, "The issue is: What comes after the liberation of Mosul?" suggesting the Baghdad government needed to do more to protect Christians in areas under its control. "Thinking only about liberating Mosul does not provide relief to Christians." (RNS)

"[Iraqi Christians] are threatened with extinction. This is a harsh word but every day we are being depleted."

Muyessir al-Mukhalisi priest, Saint George's Chaldean Church

FBC Eulaton sees church growth through midweek student ministry

(continued from page 1)

The ministry at First, Eulaton, shows how meeting physical needs is connected to meeting spiritual ones, said Kristy Kennedy, associate in the office of associational missions and church planting at SBOM.

Every time a church or association requests hunger funds, Kennedy is in charge of reviewing and granting appropriate requests.

"It is very exciting to see the impact that hunger funds can make on a church and a community," Kennedy said. "What began with feeding a few hungry children has grown into physically and spiritually feeding whole families. Lives are being changed."

The church's most recent report to SBOM tells part of the story. The church served 673 meals between Oct. 1, 2015, and Feb. 29, 2016. Each Wednesday night, 40 volunteers work in the kitchen, teach or assist in classes, drive the buses to pick up and drop off children or help with the ministry in some way. And an average of 200 students attend consistently.

The other part of the story is that the attendance remains steady even in the summer, said Gary "Butch" Hathorne, who heads the midweek ministry. The students themselves are the biggest recruiters. "They talk it up to each other in school, and we go to the school to pick kids up after their practic-



Photo by Carrie McWhorter

Jim Usher (left), interim youth pastor for FBC Eulaton, baptizes a student April 6. The church ministers to children and youth by providing hot meals on Wednesday nights.

es and activities," Hathorne said, who estimates that the church's van ministry picks up 50 or more students every Wednesday.

Reaching parents

The impact of Wednesday nights is felt on Sundays too. More and more students are bringing their parents and the church is growing.

"The kids are reaching their own moms and dads," Hathorne said. Many of those parents, grandparents and friends were at the baptism service, and Usher did not miss the opportunity to share the gospel with them.

As he called those gathered

to make a decision to follow Christ, dozens came to the altar to pray. By the end of the night, 20 more had accepted Christ and indicated a desire to be baptized. Like those who were baptized earlier, those at the altar included teens and adults, parents and children, brown faces and white faces — all committing their lives to Jesus.

Pastor Randy Huddleston excitedly said, "That's what I'm talking about," as people came forward. "We think too small, but we have an amazing God with a mighty plan. We're going to do this every Wednesday night." ✝

Baptist NEWS BRIEFS

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CP contributions 6.5 percent above budget projection

NASHVILLE — Year-to-date contributions to Southern Baptist national and international missions and ministries received by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee (EC) are 6.5 percent above the year-to-date SBC Cooperative Program (CP) Allocation Budget projection, and are 3.09 percent above contributions received during the same time frame in 2015, according to a news release from EC President and CEO Frank S. Page.

"This report marks the second successive year that CP contributions have increased over the previous fiscal year's mid-point and is the highest mid-year total since March 2010," Page said. "We are surrounded by huge pockets of lostness across our nation and around the world. We praise the Lord for this continued rebound in support of our joint ministries through the Cooperative Program."

The \$99,315,836.09 received by EC for the first six months of the fiscal year, Oct. 1 through March 31, represents 106.50 percent of the \$93,250,000 year-to-date budgeted projection to support Southern Baptist ministries globally and across North America.

The total is \$2,978,751.71 or 3.09 percent more than the \$96,337,084.38 received through the end of March 2015. (BP)

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
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Gov. Bentley remains active Alabama Baptist

By **Jennifer Davis Rash**
The Alabama Baptist

Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley remains an active Baptist despite conflicting media reports on his church status.

Bentley, a former deacon and Sunday School teacher at First Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa, joined First Baptist Church, Prattville, in October 2015.

Travis Coleman, pastor of First, Prattville, confirmed Bentley is a member and regular attender of the church.

Bentley and his now ex-wife, Diane, began occasionally attending First, Prattville, after he was elected governor in 2010. He then joined the church after their divorce was finalized in late September 2015.

Gil McKee, pastor of First Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa, also cleared up "an apparent misconception among the media" about the relationship of First, Tuscaloosa, with Bentley.

"Gov. Bentley's departure from the congregation was his own decision and not the result

of a reported 'expulsion' on the part of the church," McKee said.

Bentley continues to face questions about his ability to lead the state after a recording of inappropriate comments he made to a female staff member three years ago were released March 23.

'Forgiving people'

During remarks at an April 4 media event at Limestone Correctional Facility, Bentley said he is asking "the people of this state to forgive me because they

are a forgiving people and they know God's grace."

A news video by al.com shows Bentley's full two-and-a-half-minute comments on the issue.

"I've asked God to forgive me because that's the most important thing. I want back in His fellowship. And so I asked God to forgive

me," Bentley said. "I own it. I did it. I point no fingers to anybody else. I make no excuses from that. I own my problem. It's not your problem. You have other problems. It's not your problem. It's my problem and I have to deal with that.

"And so I have humbly opened myself up to the people of this state and I have asked them to forgive me," he said. "And let me continue to do the things they elected me for twice and that's to try to make their lives better."

Rep. Ed Henry, R-Hartselle, filed articles of impeachment against Bentley on April 5. An investigative committee will be established to assess the articles of impeachment. The time frame for the process was unclear at press time. ✝



BENTLEY



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Marriage debate continues in state

(continued from page 3)
going to marry a couple without requiring them to meet with them a number of times for some pre-marital sessions. There are some couples who do need the civil service and they won't get that."

Albritton says he is taking flak from people on both sides of the gay "marriage" debate. "I'm accused of being homophobic, of trying to be the anti-gay guy, to try to contend with the Supreme Court. What my bill does is provide a legal means under which people may get married — homosexuals, heterosexuals — it provides the methods and the means."

However, what Albritton sees as a simple solution to a legal problem, Hardin views as an action that "sabotages what our churches are trying to teach" and tears at the very social fabric of traditional marriage.

"I am not for same-sex 'marriage.' I don't think God approves of that," Hardin said. "But the way they have overreacted, they have reduced the sanctity of marriage to a form. That's sad." ✝

LifeWay holds groundbreaking; expects move in 2 years

LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville appeared to leave little doubt of its aggressive timetable for construction of its new building. Officials broke ground for new headquarters April 6 just hours after closing the purchase of the property.

Within two years, LifeWay expects to move 1,100 employees into a new office building on 2.5 acres in Capitol View, a mixed-use urban development in Nashville's central business district.

On April 6 the future site of the nine-story, 250,000-square-foot building was primarily dirt and gravel, with front-end loaders waiting idly beside a huge white tent. Hundreds of employees gathered for a brief

ceremony to pray and dedicate the new location.

LifeWay President and CEO Thom S. Rainer said of the future of the new property, "It's going to be amazing to see what will happen. Lives will be changed and people will come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The only thing we can do in response is say, 'God, to You be the glory,' and pray that every day we will be used by Him."

Legacy of commitment

Frank S. Page, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee, expressed thanksgiving for LifeWay's legacy of commitment and quality. "We are proud to be partners

with this organization," he said.

The groundbreaking ceremony coincided with a celebration of the 125th anniversary of LifeWay, established in 1891 as the Baptist Sunday School Board. Its downtown Nashville campus eventually expanded to 14.5 acres, more than the ministry needs today.

In November 2015, LifeWay sold the property to San Diego-based Southwest Value Partners, a private real estate investment firm. The new owner plans to redevelop the site, but LifeWay will continue to occupy part of the property until its new building is complete.

In a chapel service for employees before the groundbreaking, Rainer outlined LifeWay's 125-year history through the accom-

plishments of its eight previous presidents, from entrepreneurial founder J.M. Frost, "one of my heroes of the faith," to Rainer's immediate predecessor, James Draper.

Rainer noted a worldwide shift toward digital technology since his own tenure began in 2006.

"As we move to Capitol View, the God who has been with us for 125 years will be with us in the future," Rainer said.

Employees then boarded shuttles to the new location, where Rainer and his executive leadership team tossed dirt into the air with ceremonial shovels.

Construction of the new building is expected to begin almost immediately. (BP)

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CHURCH POSITIONS

PASTOR

First Baptist Church, Crossville, Alabama, is searching for full-time pastor. Send resumé to: Pastor Search Committee, P.O. Box 69, Crossville, AL 35962.

PASTOR

Edgil Grove Baptist Church in Jasper, Alabama, is accepting resúmes for a full-time pastor. Send resúmes to: edgilgrovebaptistchurch@hotmail.com, or mail to: 100 Edgil Grove Rd., Jasper, AL 35503.

MINISTER OF MUSIC & EDUCATION

Union Hill Baptist, Oneonta, is seeking a full-time worship leader for a growing fellowship with two blended Sunday morning services. Educational experience should include small group ministry and discipleship for all ages. Please submit resúmes to: 2919 Co. Hwy. 39, Oneonta, AL 35121. 205-274-9232. bbarnett@otelco.net.

WORSHIP PASTOR

First Baptist Church of the Islands in Savannah, Georgia, is currently seeking a full-time worship pastor. We are located in a community with many young families and are surrounded by much opportunity for impact for the sake of the gospel. Our current morning worship attendance averages approximately 550 weekly in two morning services. We utilize a unique mix of choir, praise team and praise band in our worship setting. The worship pastor will fit within a multi-staff team and an amazing number of volunteer leaders to

help us fulfill our vision of leading others to know Christ, grow in Christ, show Christ through surrendered lives and to go with the gospel. The worship pastor must be able to effectively lead others into authentic worship and also disciple others. All applications will be prayerfully considered once we have received a cover letter, a resumé with references and a 2-3 minute video introduction of yourself as you briefly share your call to ministry, your passion for worship and your heart to impact others. A webcam or phone video is perfectly fine. Please email your cover letter, resumé and video link to: searchteam@fbcislands.com.

BIVOCATIONAL MINISTER OF MUSIC

Turnerville Baptist Church, Mobile County. Contact Bro. Jason Meaux at jmeaux@turnervillebaptist.org.

ASSOCIATE PASTOR TO STUDENTS

First Baptist Church of Dothan is looking for an associate pastor to students. Description: working with students grade 7 through college graduation. Resúmes to: Trent Dillard at tdillard@southernco.com.

YOUTH DIRECTOR

FBC Union Grove is seeking a youth director. Send resúmes to: FBC Union Grove, ATTN: Personnel Committee, P.O. Box 125, Union Grove, AL 35175.

YOUTH PASTOR

First Baptist Church of Alexander City, Alabama, is announcing the opening of a full-time staff position for minister to

students. We are praying for the Lord to call His chosen man for our youth, grades 7 through 12. The search committee is at work receiving resúmes at: P.O. Box 400, Alexander City, AL 35011. 256-234-6351. spsc@fbc-ac.org.

YOUTH/CHILDREN'S MINISTER

Southside Baptist Church, Princeton, Kentucky, is accepting resúmes for a full-time youth/children's minister. Bachelor's degree, seminary training and experience is preferred. Email: youthsearchteam@southsidebaptist.com or mail: Southside Baptist, ATTN: Youth Search, P.O. Box 684, Princeton, KY 42445.

PART-TIME DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S MINISTRIES

Woodward Avenue Baptist Church, Muscle Shoals, is accepting resúmes for the part-time position of director of children's ministries. Email resúmes to: info@woodwardavenuebaptist.org. Call for more details. 256-383-4078.

OTHER POSITIONS

DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS

Montgomery Baptist Association, Montgomery, Alabama, is accepting resúmes through May 1 for director of missions. Master of divinity degree from an accredited seminary. Fifteen years ministry experience preferred. Minimum two years as senior pastor preferred. Work experience in a multicultural community. See website for details: www.mgmbaptists.org/home/dom.

DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS

The Calhoun Baptist Association requests resúmes for the position of director of missions. Please send your resumé to: ATTN: DOM Search Committee, CBA, 1130 Woodstock Ave., Anniston, AL 36207.

PART-TIME PRESCHOOL COORDINATOR

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A Certain Trumpet

Sermons by Alabama Baptists

Christian Discipline Series

The Discipline of Cooperation — Luke 5:17-26

As a child I loved visiting the Farmer's Cooperative (co-op). I will caution you that there is an acquired smell and just about everything a child loves including live baby chickens. The co-op is a coming together of farmers who pool their resources in certain areas of activity for the good of members and nonmembers. There also are electric power cooperatives, student cooperatives and bank cooperatives just to name a few others. Somewhere along life's journey people seem to have learned that "we can do more together than we ever could alone" and used cooperation for the greater good and impact of many endeavors. The upside of cooperation is so beneficial and positive that one might think cooperation is a no-brainer. Here's the thing though — cooperation by its very nature means that in order to gain something you also must be willing to give up something. Perhaps it is the last part that causes some to pause and then selfishly pass on cooperation and opt for competition.

Competition vs. cooperation

Even the disciples of Jesus were not immune to this all too human proclivity. Mark 9:38 states that John saw "someone driving out demons in Your (Jesus') name and we told him to stop because he was not one of us." Ah, not "one of us." So let's confess that there is a power that seemingly, rightly only belongs to you and others have the audacity to innovate — without your approval.

How do you react when other churches in your area are having great success? How about when your peers and colleagues get the promotions and accolades? Perhaps there are times when all of us get more satisfaction in policing the borders of involvement in the Kingdom rather than celebrating the expansion of the Kingdom.

How did Jesus respond? The undisputed Champion simply said, "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you." Competition is much easier than cooperation.

But Luke 5:17-26 demonstrates that cooperation is a must for the greater

By Timothy E. Lovett

Timothy E. Lovett, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa, received his education from Boston University School of Theology; Samford University in Birmingham; and Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He and his wife, Penny, have one child and one grandchild.



good of the kingdom of God. Early in the public ministry of Jesus the power of God to heal the sick was on display. It has been my experience that the crowd of the curious sometimes gets in the way of those really in need. But when there is a task so urgent, like life or death, cooperation finds a way through the chaos and crowds.

In Luke 5:17-26 some men are carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and the text leads us to believe it is their conviction that if they can only get the paralyzed man to Jesus he will be healed. Underterred by the crowd, the men get the paralyzed man upon the roof and tear off enough of the roof to lower the man down on his mat right in front of Jesus. Here we surely see one of cooperation's greatest values: it takes many hearts and minds and hands working together for the greater good and impact. When this disciplined cooperation occurs the text says, "Jesus saw their faith and He said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'" The discipline of cooperation demonstrates faith in a way that serving alone never can.

Discipline of hard work

Dallas Willard in "The Spirit of the Disciplines" says, "A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and His Kingdom." Isn't that what we all dream of and want? What draws us to cooperation is the mystery of how working with someone

allows us to achieve something we cannot achieve on our own. Cooperation, however, requires the discipline of hard work and perhaps there is not a better example than marriage. So it is true that we must choose carefully those we cooperate with because there is give and take. A bonding occurs, we begin to lose our own identity and become something other than what we are alone. Let us celebrate that only God can take two and make them one and also can take many and make them one. When we observe full and mutual cooperation of two or more persons we see a reflection of the nature of God. And as God is reflected through our voluntary cooperation, Christ and His Kingdom are made known.

Exposing self-sufficiency

On April 27, 2011, a tornado ripped a horrific gash across the face of the city of Tuscaloosa and many other places in our state. In Tuscaloosa it removed not only rooftops but also the scales from our eyes. Self-sufficiency was exposed — for individuals and churches — for the blind-eye it has always been. There was so much suffering and so many needs that the option of going at it alone was ludicrous.

Before daylight broke the next morning help began streaming into our city. Our mayor braced us for a "marathon and not a sprint" as organization for the cooperation of many hearts and hands was underway. We learned again what "we can do more together than we ever could alone" means. When the ox is in the ditch every hand is welcomed. The unity within our community and churches was refreshing as we willingly laid down everything that normally separates us. It was not until thousands of hours and many weeks later that God taught many of us another lesson: even if everyone in Tuscaloosa had health, a job and a home with all the furnishings we would still have a problem that no amount of social and/or civic cooperation could cure. Sin only has one cure and that cure is the blood of Jesus Christ. This is the task so urgent that calls us to learn the discipline of cooperation: "to lay him before Jesus." ☩

Thousands in US on expired visas, report shows

By Neisha Roberts
The Alabama Baptist

In order to visit the United States from a foreign country a traveler must first obtain some kind of temporary visa. That temporary tourist or business visa allows a traveler to "visit" for a certain amount of time and then requires them to exit the country. But according to a recent Homeland Security report, there are thousands overstaying their welcome.

Out of 45 million U.S. arrivals by air and sea whose visas expired in fiscal 2015, Homeland Security estimates about 416,500 people were still in the country at the beginning of this year, according to the Pew Research Center.

Canadian visitors

Canada tops the list of visitors who failed to leave when their visas expired, with 93,035 visitors staying illegally. Mexico and Brazil rank second and third respectively.

These three countries make up more than one third of those who overstayed, according to the report.

Overstaying may not seem like an important issue at first glance. However, when one looks at the estimated 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants in the country, those overstaying visas become vital information because it is unclear how many of those unauthorized immigrants arrived legally versus illegally.

Although efforts have been made since the 1990s to better track foreign visitors, interest in tracking them grew exponentially after the 9/11 attacks when five of the plane hijackers turned out to be foreigners on expired visas.

Although the Homeland Security report is insightful, it is limited in its scope and included no reliable trend data that could shed light on whether overstays are growing or declining, according to Pew.

Declining over time

The report does indicate that the number of foreign visitors who overstay declines over time, noting that of the 45 million arrivals in 2015 about 527,000 remained in the country after their permission expired, a rate of 1.17 percent. Some of these overstayers departed even later, but 483,000 were still in the U.S. by Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year. More left after that, so by Jan. 4 only 0.9 percent remained in the country, according to the report.

Because there is not a comprehensive and systematic exit-entry recording process in place, there isn't a good way to understand the overstay issue nor a way to curtail it. And that correlates back to immigration, both illegal and legal.

According to the Center for Immigration Studies, before immigration reform can move forward, work needs to be done to better the U.S.'s nonimmigrant visa insurance policies and laws. ☩

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



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Final court ruling against VictoryLand could end electronic bingo saga

Using firm language, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled against VictoryLand's casino forfeiture case March 31. The decision allows the state to destroy more than 1,200 electronic bingo machines it confiscated from the casino and keep more than \$200,000 in cash seized during the 2013 raid.

"(The March 31) decision is the latest, and hopefully the last, chapter in the more than six years' worth of attempts to defy the Alabama Constitution's ban on 'lotteries,'" the Court stated in its opinion. "It is the latest, and hopefully the last, chapter in the ongoing saga of attempts to defy the clear and repeated holdings of this Court beginning in 2009 that electronic machines like those at issue here are not the 'bingo' referenced in local bingo amendments.

"All that is left is for the law of this State to be enforced."

Attorney General Luther Strange said of the ruling, "[It] is abundantly clear that electronic bingo is illegal and repeated court challenges to the contrary will not change that fact. I cannot say it any better than the Court itself.

"It is now up to the governor, ALEA (Alabama Law Enforcement Agency) and local authorities to ensure that the law is properly enforced."

Eric Johnston, a Birmingham lawyer who represents the Alabama Policy Institute and Alabama Citizen's Action Program,

said he believes the Court's ruling also has implications that reach further than bingo and possibly into statewide lottery and fantasy football debates.

"I have never seen the Alabama Supreme Court so direct and so detailed in what they were saying on any subject. They've made it real clear about what gambling is."

Defying the ruling

VictoryLand owner Milton McGregor held a news conference April 4 and said the casino would reopen early this summer despite the ruling. Macon County Sheriff Andre Brunson said the "games played in Macon County will be tested and approved to my satisfaction. Any person seeking to interfere with the operation of bingo games in this county will have legal issues to deal with from my office," reported the *Montgomery Advertiser*.

Gov. Robert Bentley shifted the responsibility of enforcing anti-gambling laws from executive-level sources to local officials in November 2015.

Senate Bill (SB) 320, which is currently progressing through the Legislature, would clarify that

voters in Macon County, where VictoryLand is located, intended to vote for electronic bingo when they passed bingo amendments in 2003. Also moving through the Legislature, companion bills SB 340 and House Bill (HB) 419 propose amendments that would allow electronic bingo in Greene County, home of Greenetrack gambling complex.

As for the fantasy football debates, SB 114 and HB 56 seek to establish the Fantasy Contests Act to regulate the operation of fantasy or simulated sports contests.

Strange said April 5 that paid daily fantasy sports contests constitute illegal gambling and issued cease and desist letters to DraftKings and FanDuel.

"As Attorney General, it is my duty to uphold Alabama law, including the laws against illegal gambling," Strange said in a press release. "Daily fantasy sports operators claim that they operate legally under Alabama law. However, paid daily fantasy sports contests are in fact illegal gambling under Alabama law."

Alabama is among 11 other states where paid daily fantasy sports contests are illegal. (TAB)

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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For April 17

Explore the Bible By Robert Olsen, Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Christian Ministries, University of Mobile

FAITHFUL Acts 5:25-32, 40-42

Returning to the Scene (25-28)

The disciples were faithful in obedience to God. They had been healing sick people and the demon possessed which caused a stir. The Sadducees had put them in jail out of jealousy but they were freed by an angel of the Lord.

So, having been freed, they began to teach again and once again this led to trouble. Consequently they were brought in front of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, and reminded they were not allowed to be preaching about Christ. Why would the disciples knowingly disobey an order given to them by the Jewish high council?

Standing Their Ground (29-32)

The disciples disobeyed the Sanhedrin because they knew this was God's will. Peter replied, "We must obey God rather than men." This is a crucial verse that cannot be overlooked. Christians are to be an obedient lot — we are to obey the laws of the land. The Bible says we are subject to those in authority over us (Rom. 13:1-7). So if this is the case Christians need to obey the laws of the land in which they reside.

Why then did the disciples disobey this clear order not to preach? There are times where the laws of the state go against the laws of God. When this is the case, Christians must obey God and not the state. This is especially relevant now. Christians all over the world are persecuted just for being Christians. They are told not to meet together, not to have Bibles, not to preach, etc., and yet they continue to do so. Why? Because this is what God commands.

In the United States living out the Christian life and acting upon biblical

precepts is becoming less and less acceptable. Laws have been passed that have made living out Christian principles more and more difficult. Just recently the Catholic organization Little Sisters of the Poor, which helps elderly couples, has gone to trial because they refuse to abide by United States Health Care mandates believing this violates their Christian faith. Situations like this will become more and more common.

Rejoicing for the Opportunity (40-42)

It is common to hear people question why there is suffering in the world. It is even common to hear Christians wonder why they are suffering when they have done nothing wrong, or even for obeying God.

However, one need only look at the Bible to see that it is quite frequent for godly people to experience suffering. This is true from Job to the prophets like Jeremiah and Daniel, and even to the New Testament with Paul, Stephen and Jesus Himself. Paul even says, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

Peter and the disciples were flogged for their disobedience to the Sanhedrin — flogged for preaching the gospel. How did they respond to this? They rejoiced. They rejoiced because they recognized that they were persecuted for their obedience to God.

How should this impact us? It should give us a confidence that when we face persecution, it is not necessarily because we have done something wrong. If we are doing God's will, we are not suffering for our disobedience but suffering because we are obedient. In many instances persecution of Christians throughout history has led to the growth of the Church — and that is an encouraging thought. †

Bible Studies for Life By Jim Barnette, Ph.D. Samford University and Brookwood Baptist Church, Mountain Brook

REDEEMED FROM POOR CHOICES Genesis 15:1-6; 16:1-5; 17:18-19

Trust what God tells you. (15:1-6)

The expression "the word of the Lord came," so common in the books of the prophets, occurs only here in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. This link to the prophetic texts gives a special status to God's promises. This is not "just another" divine word. Furthermore this word comes in "vision," which reinforces its prophetic quality.

Abraham had followed the Mesopotamian custom, well attested between 2000 and 1500 B.C., that the childless couples could adopt an heir. In some cases the heir would be a former slave. Adoption contracts stipulated that a natural son subsequently born would replace the adopted son as chief heir.

Verse 6 is used prominently in the New Testament (see Rom. 4:3, 20-24; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23). Abram's faith is "reckoned to him as righteousness." The verb for "reckon" has a liturgical background referring to when a priest formally declares a gift has been properly offered. In response to Abram's faith, God is the "Priest" who formally declares Abram is righteous. It is important to note Abram's righteousness is not the result of any accomplishments or acts of obedience. Rather it is Abram's faith that has brought him into a proper relationship with God.

Don't take matters into your own hands. (16:1-5)

To understand the conflict that ensues in this passage, one must understand the legal customs that were widespread at the time. A wife could give her personal maid to her husband in the event of her own barrenness. Then the child born of the maid was considered the wife's child. From the legal and moral standpoint, therefore,

Sarah's proposal was completely according to custom. Hagar does conceive but apparently she did not think of disowning the blessing of her womb in favor of Sarah. Rather she delights in it as a triumph over Sarah. Hagar looks "with contempt" at her mistress. Sarah recognizes that her legal status both as wife and as mistress of Hagar is now threatened. Instead of calling Hagar to task, she turns to Abraham, which is the proper legal action since Hagar now belongs to Abraham. Some versions translate Sarah's cry as "My wrong be upon you." However, given the husband's legal responsibility it is better translated, "My wrong is your responsibility." This cry was the customary legal formula with which one in Sarah's situation appealed for legal protection.

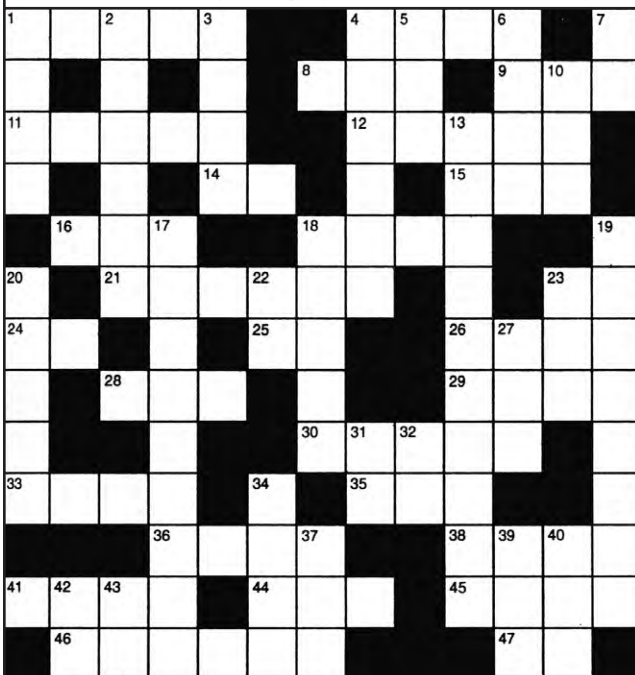
Refocus on God's plan. (17:18-19)

The first baby in Scripture to be named before birth was Ishmael and the second was Isaac. The two boys represent two different births. Ishmael represents our first birth after the flesh; Isaac represents our second birth through the Spirit (see John 3:1-8; Gal. 4:21-31). Isaac is the child of the covenant, and the people of that covenant will inherit the Spirit at the Church's own birth.

Chapter 17 concerns binding Abraham to God in radical faith. Yet by verses 17-18, Abraham completely doubts the promise, laughs at its incredulity and appeals to Ishmael, the son already in hand. Abraham is here again presented as the unfaithful one, unable to trust and willing to rely on an alternative to the promise. An echo of this unfaithfulness of Abraham is heard in the disciples who fail to understand and believe the promise of the gospel. Nevertheless by God's power and grace the promises of a covenant son and a saving Son are both fulfilled and Abraham and the disciples become radical in their faith. †

Christian Crossword

By Jesse and Sue Schrowang Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.



Across

- God's Son.
- First king of Israel.
- Tribe of _____. (Num. 1:25)
- Water vessel.
- Shall dwell at the ____ of the sea. (Gen. 49:13)
- And thou hast magnified thy _____. (Gen. 19:19)
- Spanish for "yes."
- In the twinkling of an _____. (1 Cor. 15:52)
- Jesus is God's ____.
- Substance used for washing.
- Jacob's first son. (Gen. 29:32)
- Each. (abbr.)
- Another word for "father."
- You (KJV).
- Gospel or Good ____.
- For ____ have sinned. (Rom. 3:23)

- Jesus cursed the fig _____. (Mark 11)
- Used to pierce the side of Jesus.
- ____ ye to the Lord. (Ex. 15:21)
- Girl's name.
- Whirlpool.
- ____ upon the name of the Lord. (Zeph. 3:9)
- Consider the lilies ... they toil not, neither do they _____. (Matt. 6:28)
- Long fish.
- Tree of knowledge of good and _____. (Gen. 2:9)
- Purpose.
- Extraterrestrial. (abbr.)

Down

- ____ the Baptist.
- Jesus is our ____.
- He was manifested to take away our _____. (1 John 3:5)
- ____ and Delilah.
- Fruit drink.
- "Peanuts" character.
- Indefinite article.
- Another spelling for a grain. (Ex. 9:32)
- ____ shall be hid from mine eyes. (Hos. 13:14)
- My sons, be not now _____. (2 Chron. 29:11)
- Son of man ____ and saves that which was lost. (Luke 19:10)
- Popular warm-weather sport.
- Texas basketball team.
- ____ the decree of the king. (Jon. 3:7)
- Female lamb used in sacrifices.
- Do they not ____ that devise evil? (Prov. 14:22)
- State. (abbr.)
- Places in Joshua:

- ____-dor, ____-Haddah, ____-Hazor. (one word)
- Garden.
- Esther spake ____ again. (Esther 8:3)
- ____ Maria. (Hail Mary)
- Past tense of "light."
- The 16th letter of the Greek alphabet.
- Opposite of "out."





“Not everybody’s gonna sing or raise their hands ... But there are many ways that [worship leaders] can help bring [worshippers] to life.”

Charles Billingsley
Christian singer/songwriter



Photo by Neisha Roberts

Face the *tension*

Charles Billingsley shares passion for seeing ‘lives moved’ through song

By Neisha Roberts
The Alabama Baptist

People worship in different ways.” The concept seems simple and clear but it is something often overlooked by worship pastors and leaders, according to Christian singer/songwriter Charles Billingsley, who also serves as worship pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia. He recently told *The Alabama Baptist* he found the start to his musical career in Alabama.

While studying at Samford University in Birmingham, Billingsley went on a retreat with Shades Mountain Baptist Church, Vestavia Hills. During the retreat he wrote a poem based on Matthew 10, “The Sparrow,” which later became a song on his first album.

Early music leadership

Billingsley later sang with contemporary Christian music group NewSong for about two years in the 1990s and has released 28 albums in his career between the group and solo work.

When he began serving in a music leadership role at Thomas Road Baptist, Billingsley said the tone of the church was unfortunately “all about performing from the platform” and not at all about worship.

He eventually got “fed up” because the congregation just wouldn’t sing, he said. He recalled how one evening he came to church when then-Pastor Jerry Falwell told the congregation that a church member desperately needed a van for a ministry she was running.

“Just as I was getting bitter, the Lord slammed me,” Billingsley said, explaining how the church gave \$7,000 in one night.

“I realized this was a worshipping body but they worship with their wallets, not their mouths, which by the way is much more sacrificial.”

‘Completely engaged’

“Not everybody’s gonna sing and raise their hands. ... I took a step back and God began to work in my own heart. ... I’ll never forget the day we turned a corner and we shifted from performing songs to a church that’s completely engaged in worship. But it had to begin with the worship pastor or worship leader.”

He encourages worship leaders to remember that as they lead a “seemingly dead congregation ... you sometimes just don’t know the whole story.”

“They may have lost a loved one that week or may have just had a fight with their spouse. They may just not feel good. There are so many elements at play. ... But there are many ways that you can help bring them to life.”

Billingsley said a worship leader must always learn to face the tension between technically presenting a song well and leading in worship at the same time.

“You’re trying to use your artistry and point it to a place of engagement with the crowd in the presence of

the Holy Spirit,” he explained. “If it’s just artistry, then you’re just trying to engage the crowd in your art.”

Training worship leaders and worship pastors how to handle this “tension” is something Billingsley is passionate about and gets to assist in as an artist-in-residence and instructor at Liberty University in Lynchburg.

When he’s not leading or teaching others how to lead, Billingsley is recording new albums.

He recently released his 29th album, “Right Here.”

“The lyrics are very intimate but there are soft songs and powerful songs,” he said.

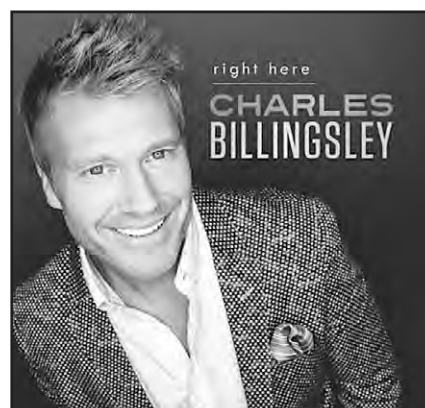
“[The new album] has a whole bunch of really great songs that point nonbelievers to Christ and encourages believers. There are songs

about the cross, about the resurrection and a song about the difference between knowing God and knowing about God.”

His motivation

Billingsley shared a song from “Right Here” during his time at the Alabama Baptist State Evangelism Conference held at First Baptist Church, Montgomery, in early March.

He said he keeps releasing new albums, teaching and appearing at events because of his motivation — “seeing people’s lives moved and changed” through song. ✠





BNG photo

Thomas Rusert waits for coffee shop patrons to take him up on his offer for free prayer.

'Free prayer'

Coffee shop prayer inspires marketplace ministry

Pushing the Church and its ministry beyond its four walls requires overcoming the fear and uncertainty that usually block the way, Thomas Rusert says.

Rusert, a Lutheran pastor in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, learned that lesson when he began making himself available for prayer and conversations in local coffee shops. He was so shy when he started out that he practically hid in out-of-the-way booths where it was difficult to see the "Free Prayer" signs he had propped up on the table.

Now Rusert's ministry is making steady headlines and he is shipping hundreds of his "Free Prayer" cards to inspired fans around the nation and the world.

Rusert's growing "free prayer community" landed him as the featured guest on a conference call of Baptist and other ministers interested in marketplace ministry March 17. He was asked if people actually sit down and pray with him.

"Every time I go out, someone stops by," Rusert said during the FaithSoaring Churches Learning Community's dialogue session.

"One out of three will sit down and say 'I could really use some prayer,'" he said. Others are intrigued, wrestling with decisions, questions, burdens or some heavy thought.

'Listen-first ministry'

"It's definitely a listen-first ministry."

It's also the kind of ministry that a growing number of churches need — and are clamoring for, said George Bullard, president of the Columbia Partnership and organizer of the March call titled "Free Prayer: A Case Study of Marketplace Ministry."

"I'm always looking for something that churches can do in the marketplace — to get them out of the building," he said.

Rusert's ministry is an example of marketplace ministry because it exists out of a church building in public, social settings where Americans actually do their living.

Panera Bread and Starbucks are examples of what experts call "third places" — because they rank in importance right between the two most important places — home and work, Bullard said, adding that

churches are no longer considered in the top three locations for most Americans.

Rusert's free prayer movement is a companion to chaplaincy, which meets a foundational need by showing personal concern, Bullard said.

Churches sometimes get caught up on making nontraditional outreach overly complicated. The idea behind inviting Rusert was to show that reaching into the marketplace can be as simple as putting up a sign in a coffee shop or other public venue, Bullard said.

No need for nervousness

Nervousness will dissipate as soon as the first person sits down to pray with you, Rusert said during the conference call. It happened for him when the Hindu owner of a store approached his table one day and asked Rusert to pray for the store.

Gone was the hesitancy and self-consciousness and the worry of what people would think of him.

Rusert said he came up with this not so much out of his own creativity, but from following good advice from mentors and speakers he has heard over the years.

One suggested that to be effective, a minister must spend at least half his time outside the church building, which includes hospital visits and other church duties. Another suggested treating nonchurch members as if they were members.

Finally he heard of a campus ministry that placed a couch in the middle of campus and invited students to tell their stories.

That led him to ask: How could he do a version of that in Doylestown, where he serves? His free prayer idea emerged.

Now Rusert said he's fielding a lot of inquiries from people interested in offering free prayer in their towns. He has created a website, lfreepayer.org, and a Facebook page for the growing community.

He said it's dawning on people why coffee houses are a good place to meet those in need of prayer.

"They have a reason to go to a coffee shop," he said, whether it's for coffee or a break from work. "Most of them don't have a reason to walk into a church." (BNG)

RELIGION in America

Compiled from Wire Services



Americans see religious liberty sliding, survey shows

NASHVILLE — Most U.S. adults say religious liberty is declining in America and Christians face more intolerance than ever. But nearly 4 in 10 also say Christians "complain too much about how they are treated," according to a new LifeWay Research survey.

The Nashville-based researchers conducted the survey in September 2013 and again in September 2015 shortly after Kentucky clerk Kim Davis served five days in jail and made international headlines for refusing to sign marriage licenses for gay couples.

The survey, released March 30, found:

- ▶ 63 percent of U.S. adults overall say Christians face increasing intolerance, up from 50 percent in 2013.

- ▶ 60 percent say religious liberty is declining, up from 54 percent.

- ▶ 43 percent say American Christians complain too much about how they are treated, up from 34 percent. (RNS)

NCAA won't divest from schools that discriminate

INDIANAPOLIS — The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) will not divest from colleges and universities requesting religious exemptions from Title IX regulations that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, the association's chief inclusion officer said March 15.

Bernard Franklin, executive vice president of education and community engagement, replied on NCAA's behalf to a request from more than 80 LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) sports, religious and youth advocacy groups that NCAA punish 59 campuses claiming a new rule extending Title IX protection to transgender students violates their Christian faith. A number of these schools are affiliated with state conventions of Southern Baptists.

Franklin said NCAA's diverse membership "offers students the opportunity to select from schools that value various attributes" and that Title IX waiver decisions are between the schools and the U.S. Department of Education, not NCAA. (BNG)

Sikh officer approved for active duty with US Army

WASHINGTON — A decorated veteran Sikh officer is the first to win an approval from the U.S. Army to continue on active duty while maintaining his religiously mandated beard and turban. The Army issued a decision March 31 concluding that to allow beards for medical reasons but ban them for religious reasons is a discriminatory bar to service for Sikh Americans, said Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, one of the law offices that argued Capt. Simratpal Singh's case.

Singh, a West Point graduate, an Army Ranger and a veteran who earned a Bronze Star in Afghanistan, "proves to our military that the religiously mandated turban and beard do not hinder the ability to successfully serve," said Sikh Coalition Legal Director Harsimran Kaur on April 1. "This decision gives hope that our nation's largest employer is making progress towards ending a policy of religious discrimination." (RNS)

Citizenship materials revised with 'freedom of religion'

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration has agreed to change the phrasing in citizenship study materials from "freedom of worship" to "freedom of religion," a change that more accurately reflects Americans' constitutional rights.

According to The Christian Post, the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Citizenship and Immigration Services notified Oklahoma Sen. James Lankford of the revisions to the materials March 28 after he requested the change in June 2015.

Lankford, co-chair of the Congressional Prayer Caucus and a former Baptist youth ministry leader, said, "The 'freedom of religion' language reflects our right to live a life of faith at all times, while the 'freedom of worship' reflects a right simply confined to a space and location." (TAB)