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INSIDE



Unchurched people likely to attend Christmas Eve service, Rainer says

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FROM DR. BOB TERRY
and the staff of
The Alabama Baptist

(Clockwise, left to right) beginning with top group photo:

Dr. Bob Terry, Teresa Maddox, Amy Hacker, Haley Piersol, Bill Gilmore, Maggie Walsh, Susan Stevens (outside sales representative), Neisha Roberts, Wanda Bergeron, Debbie Campbell, Deb Lowery, Thomas Felder, Melanie McKinney, Pam Holt (outside sales representative), Jennifer Davis Rash, Richard Maddox, Linda Harrison and Lauren Grim.

COMMENT

Taking Note of Jesus' Birth

In a nation where Pew Research says 92 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas, it is amazing that a misguided drive called political correctness continues to feed the "Christmas wars."

Some businesses seem to go out of their way to avoid taking note of Jesus' birth. Other companies wish shoppers "Happy Holidays." Political correctness says this expresses sensitivity to those who observe other holidays during this time of the year — Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and the like.

Not considered is the "slap-in-the-face" attitude conveyed to the 9 out of 10 Americans who honor Christmas as one of the most sacred religious events of the year. When businesses and others deliberately disregard the significance of the season to the great majority of Americans, it is no wonder people push against so-called political correctness.

Unfortunately today's Christmas wars are not new. Even on that first Christmas there were those who went out of their way to keep from taking note of Jesus' birth.

Simple faith

The Gospel of Luke tells of shepherds working through the night protecting the flocks from thieves and predators. Seemingly out of nowhere an angel appears and declared the long prayed for Messiah had been born that very night. The angel called it good news and said the child's birth would bring joy to all people.

It is hard to know if the shepherds were more startled by the appearance of the angel or the announcement that the Promised One was born in a stable and could be found lying in a feeding trough. Where was the pomp and circumstance due the King of kings and Lord of lords, they must have thought.

Simple faith was the response of the shepherds. They said, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened" (Luke 2:15). There was nothing about "let's see if it is true or not." From the first, they believed.

The Gospel of Luke says after seeing the baby in the manger the shepherds "spread the word about what they had been told about this child." But their reports did not generate belief. Rather those who heard the shepherds reacted skeptically. Those who heard the shepherds did not



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

go to the stable to see baby Jesus. Instead, Luke writes they were amazed at the fantastic tale the shepherds told.

Those who heard the shepherds went out of their way to avoid taking note of Jesus' birth.

Forty days later Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to be consecrated to the Lord. Just as the family entered the temple grounds Luke writes that Simeon, probably a temple priest, was moved by the Holy Spirit to meet them.

Simeon's age is not given but Luke does say that Simeon had received a promise he would not die before seeing the "consolation of Israel," the promised Messiah.

When Simeon saw Jesus he took the baby in his arms, probably performing the priest's role in consecration, and recognized the child as the promised Messiah. He declared, "My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-31).

Anna, an 84-year-old prophetess who lived at the temple, evidently overheard Simeon's declaration and began giving thanks to God for the birth of Jesus.

Telling others

In Luke 2:38 the writer says Anna "spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem." One can only imagine what Simeon said to those at the temple about how God had allowed him to see the promised Messiah.

But there is no indication that those who heard the reports of Simeon or Anna took note of Jesus' birth. Instead, Luke writes that after completing the requirements of the law, Joseph and Mary went home.

One would expect the priests, the pious Jews who frequented the temple, even the nationalistic

zealots at least to have explored the far-flung implications about what Simeon and Anna said; but no, there is nothing to indicate they took note of Jesus' birth.

At some point the Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem. Because they sought the newborn King of the Jews they went to Herod, king of the Jews for the past 35 years, to inquire of the baby's location. The Gospel of Matthew describes Herod's cunning. All the chief priests and all the scribes were brought before him to determine the birthplace of the Promised Messiah.

The answer was immediate. Bethlehem.

Herod conveyed this information to the Magi and sent them on their way. Amazingly the Magi went alone. No one from Herod's court accompanied them, not even to see this newborn king whom they feared might some day be a rival for Herod's throne.

None of the priests or scribes went with the Magi. These religious leaders had heard the Magi's announcement and even told Herod where

the new king could be found. But none went to Bethlehem to find the child and see the fulfillment of Israel's deepest longing.

Not even Jerusalem's curious accompanied them. The Magi's arrival must have caused a stir in the city — nobility from afar come to Jerusalem. Their claim about the birth of the King of the Jews must have been the talk of the town. But evidently not even the nosy and prying cared enough to travel the seven miles to Bethlehem to take note of Jesus' birth.

That first Christmas, God

revealed the true nature of the baby Jesus to male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, simple and profound. Some believed and, like the Magi, worshipped Him. But the majority — those who heard the shepherds on the hillsides, listened to Simeon and Anna in the temple or talked along the streets about the claim of the Magi — took no note of Jesus' birth.

Yet, Jesus is the "Word made flesh" who dwelt among us (John 1). Jesus is the One who paid the price for human sin (Rom. 3:23). Jesus is the One at the right hand of the Father making intercession for believers (Rom. 8:34). Jesus is the One who will come again in power and judgment (Acts 1:11).

And only in the name of Jesus is salvation found (Acts 4:12).

That is why it is important to take note of Jesus' birth and believe in Him like the shepherds, like Simeon and Anna and like the Magi. ✠

***"Only in the name of
Jesus is salvation found.
That is why it is important
to take note of Jesus'
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***The Alabama Baptist
will not publish a Dec. 29 issue.
The next issue will be Jan. 5.***

***To read a letter to the editor,
see page 5.***

TAB

THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

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

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Workplace commitment

Those with religious ties more attached to their jobs, study finds

Catholics are more emotionally committed to their workplaces than are evangelicals, and people with strong attachments to God, regardless of their faith group, are more committed to their jobs when they work for smaller companies.

Those and other findings about faith and the workplace were published in a new Baylor University study.

The research also found that people who are not affiliated with a particular faith tradition are the least likely to be attached to God — and also the least likely to be committed to their workplaces. They scored 6 percent lower than evangelicals and 9 percent lower than Catholics on a scale that measures how much an employee feels emotionally connected to their employer and fellow employees.

Satisfied with work

"We're not sure about the reasons for these modest differences," said Blake V. Kent, a sociologist in Baylor's College of Arts and Sciences. "But for religious believers, being committed to work may be a way of 'doing' a religious commitment — not just earning a paycheck, but rather, cooperating with God for a larger purpose."

Kent's study — "Attachment to God, religious tradition and firm attributes in workplace commitment" — is published in *The Journal of Social Psychology*.

The findings build upon a previous study by Kent, which found that people who see God as a "secure base" for intimacy and attachment are more likely to be emotionally committed to their workplace, satisfied with their jobs and see their work as a calling from God.



Unsplash.com

From an employer's perspective, having emotionally committed employees — those who want to stay in a job rather than because they simply need to or feel obligated to do so — is a plus. Higher levels of commitment have been linked to lower absenteeism and conflict, lower turnover and higher job performance and productivity, according to research.

For his latest study, Kent analyzed data from Baylor Religion Survey Wave 3, a nationwide random sample of U.S. adults completed in 2010 by the Gallup Organization. Respondents included 739 working adults who believe in God or a higher power and are from 1 of 4 religious groups: Catholic,

evangelical, mainline Protestants and those not affiliated with a particular faith tradition. (Jews and black Protestants were among those in the sample, but there were too few for significant findings about their work commitments.)

'Nonreligious vocations'

Kent said he focused primarily on Catholics and evangelicals as he saw differences emerge during data analysis — and because those faith groups have distinctive views about work.

For Catholics, the religious vocations such as priesthood are no longer associated with
(See 'Meaningful,' page 13)

Ministry Tips

OLD OR NEW, WHICH IS BEST?

By Edwin F. Jenkins

Interim pastor, Mount Zion Baptist Church, Huntsville

Churches and ministers often struggle to stay current and up-to-date. Whether it is the style of worship or the status of ministries or the condition of facilities, there seems to be a driving passion not to be called "old."

Oftentimes "old-fashioned" seems to indicate that whatever is being discussed has become somewhat stale, perhaps irrelevant or otherwise ineffective in light of current culture.

Perhaps we need to help each other

think more objectively by taking a look with a wider lens. "New" approaches and ideas and concepts can be attractive simply because we have not seen them before. The "new" thing may seem to be more enlightened or more acceptable because it is bright and shiny with no wear and tarnish, which inevitably come with time.

Actually, the "old fashioned" or "less recent" (as I sometimes prefer to label it) should not be jettisoned just because it has been around a while. In fact, if it has been around an extended time, it may have

proven itself valid simply by weathering the challenges of time.

What shall we do? Three suggestions:

► Open our hearts to consider the new while at the same time respecting (truly respecting) what may not be as new — in other words, less recent.

► Follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit as we embrace and undertake every pursuit to which He calls us.

► Stay together and stay focused on the One for Whom we pursue every mission and ministry that He has entrusted to us.✠



Most church resources geared toward large congregations, experts say

A few years back, Dennis Atwood was having a heck of a time getting his hands on a discipleship curriculum designed for small or even mid-sized congregations.

Most of what he found was tailored to churches much larger than the North Carolina congregation of which he is pastor.

"Either it was too ... complex or too surface and simple," Atwood said. So he took matters into his own hands and wrote a book.

While small-church ministers don't need to write books to instruct their congregations, Atwood and others say a willingness to innovate is a must in a religious culture dominated by mega- and other large churches.

But frustration about the lack of resources for churches with less than 150 in Sunday morning worship is real.

Karl Vaters unpacked the topic in his *Christianity Today* blog, "Pivot: Innovative Leadership from a Small Church Perspective."

'Big church perspective'

"You're looking for help to make your church better, healthier, stronger and more kingdom-minded, but almost everything you find comes from a big church perspective," Vaters wrote in the Dec. 1 post.

Small-church leaders usually are bombarded with ideas beneficial largely to big churches with big staffs, he said.

Ideas that Vaters said he read recently include holding regular staff visioning meetings, using video announcements and using only the most skilled people for ministry positions.

"I don't disagree with any of those ideas," Vaters wrote. "But none of these suggestions was tempered with recognition of small church realities and alternative solutions."

And it's not that smaller churches are unwilling to try those and other ideas.

"Most small churches would love to implement big church ideas, but like David trying on Saul's armor, they don't fit."

The lack of materials geared for small congregations, which comprise the majority of American congregations, is a serious

disconnect, said Eddie Hammett, a congregational consultant and president of Transforming Solutions in North Carolina.

"I think it's a very pressing problem that covers a lot of arenas in church life," he said, such as curriculum, bridging gaps between generations, committee structures and operations and pastoral function.

Materials for Sunday School and other religious education are often the scarcest.

"We (in Baptist life) have always followed an age-graded curriculum," he said.

And for Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, Georgia, in Butler Baptist Association, that traditional setup works, said Pastor Danny Ellis. In his church that runs about 80 on a Sunday morning, resources have never been difficult to find,

he said, but he sees where bivocational pastors "would have some trouble sometimes."

Like at Oakes Chapel Baptist Church, Vernon, in Lamar Baptist Association, for instance.

Joe Moseley, bivocational pastor of Oakes Chapel Baptist, said he does have trouble finding resources and materials for Sunday School for his church, where the average attendance for Sunday morning worship is 55. Of those, about 30 including youth and children come to Sunday School.

"Right now it's just one big hap-

py family in our Sunday School," he said. "We're not quite to the size yet where we can break up into different groups."

As one who has only been a pastor since April, Moseley said he's learning "more and more that the preaching is important but the Sunday School and small groups are what makes [spiritual growth] happen."

Even when the material exists, Hammett said, a lot of churches can't afford it.

Whether expense or lack of availability is the block, the way around requires ministers to know their churches and communities, Atwood said.

"The best advice I ever got in seminary was to remember that all ministry is contextual," he said.

"For me that means I take the best of what I can learn from other people," he said.

Focusing small

Overcoming challenges always requires a knowledge and acceptance of a church's setting, in addition to its size.

Israel Price, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church, Hamilton, in Marion Baptist Association, agreed.

While he's never had any problems finding resources that work for Mount Zion Baptist, which averages 130 on Sunday mornings, Price said the church's main focus is small groups.

"For us it's always been my goal just to love Jesus and love people. Keep it simple and teach the Word of God unapologetically," Price said. "If you can do those things, I know it'll work whether it's for 10 or 10,000 people." (BNG, TAB contributed)

ALABAMA UPDATES

PEOPLE, CHURCHES MAKING NEWS ACROSS THE STATE

Pleasant Ridge Baptist's Allen marks 30 years

For the past 30 years Jimmy Allen has led Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church, Dadeville, as bivocational pastor, something he said is a "unique experience."

"I look around and many of the people that were in youth group I have now performed their wedding ceremonies and sometimes their children's weddings," Allen said.

Prior to serving at the Tallapoosa Baptist Association church Allen served as bivocational pastor of Cusseta Baptist Church for 11 years. He studied business administration and music at Southern Union State Community College and Auburn University and owns a construction company, following in his father's footsteps, he said.

He grew up under "great leadership" at County Line Baptist Church, Camp Hill, and served with the youth group at First Baptist Church, Centre, where he was called to pastoral ministry.

Pleasant Ridge Baptist held a surprise celebration for Allen in October and invited friends, family members and church members to share about what Allen's ministry has meant to them.

While leading Pleasant Ridge, Allen has directed four building projects — enlarging the auditorium twice and adding two educational buildings and a gymnasium — and the church is currently debt free. He and his wife, Martha, have three children and six grandchildren. (Neisha Roberts)



ALLEN

Randall to retire from TBFA after 17 years

Tom Randall, who has served The Baptist Foundation of Alabama (TBFA) as vice president of ministry for more than 17 years, will retire Dec. 31. His primary role has been to oversee TBFA's Eldercare Ministry.

A native of Georgia, Randall earned his bachelor's degree from Mississippi College in Clinton and his master of divinity degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

He served as a pastor for 30 years, serving for more than 24 years at First Baptist Church, Union Springs.

As head of the Eldercare Ministry, Randall helped fulfill the "walk along beside" clients aspect of TBFA's mission as he assisted men and women in managing their lives and finances during their senior years.

Randall said he most values "the relationships with the people" he made while serving with TBFA. He and his wife, Judy, are members at First Baptist Church, Montgomery, and have two children and seven grandchildren. (TAB)

Alabama, Florida Baptist churches join choirs

When adult choir members of two churches from different states gathered Dec. 18 to sing in one Christmas cantata, it was "a little unique experience," according to Pastor William Aplin.

Aplin, who serves at Chapel Hill Baptist Church, Florida, said the idea was first thought of in the fall when Pastor John Lovelady, who serves at Paxton Baptist Church, Paxton, Florida, came as a guest speaker at Chapel Hill Baptist's revival.

"We thought it would be a nice thing to do together," Aplin said of the cantata, "Arise, Shine."

It was the first worship service the two churches had held together. Located only seven miles apart geographically, Chapel Hill Baptist and Paxton Baptist have combined youth group events in the past, Aplin said, and this cantata was a continuation of the partnership in ministry. But these recent events aren't the only connections between the two churches — more than 40 years ago Aplin was ordained to the ministry at Paxton Baptist. (Neisha Roberts)

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Church bombed in Egypt; 24 people killed

CAIRO, Egypt — At least 24 people were killed and 49 injured after a Dec. 11 blast near Cairo's main Coptic Christian Cathedral in Egypt, according to reports from the Egyptian state-sponsored Middle East News Agency (MENA). The attack occurred just days after another bombing in Cairo that killed six policemen.

MENA reported that someone threw a bomb into a small chapel, Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, attached to the St. Mark's Cathedral in the Abbassia district, Egypt's main Coptic church.

Photos and video showed shattered windows and deteriorated roofing in the aftermath. The bomb exploded on the side of the chapel traditionally used by women so most of the victims were women and children. The blast took place as a Sunday mass being held in the chapel was about to end and coincided with a national holiday in Egypt marking the birth of Islam's Prophet Muhammad, according to reports.

At press time, no group had taken responsibility for the bombing. (RNS, MS, TAB)

Christians acquitted after six months in jail

CHARIKOT, Nepal — Eight Christians accused of trying to convert children with a comic book were acquitted by a Nepali court Dec. 6, according to advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

The seven men and one woman were arrested in Charikot, Dolakha District of Nepal in June as part of a crackdown on Christian activities in the fledgling democracy. They were reportedly mistreated in jail before being released on bail for charges that can carry prison terms.

Evangelizing is prohibited under Nepal's new constitution, passed in September 2015, as it was under the previous constitution. But advocacy groups have recently detected increased enforcement and other anti-Christian efforts as officials seek to placate Hindus incensed about the new constitution. (MS)

Christian leaders defend religious liberty while rejecting gender identity laws

More than 20 leaders of Southern Baptist institutions — including Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham — have endorsed a new statement that defends religious freedom by rejecting sexual orientation and gender identity laws.

The document "Preserve Freedom, Reject Coercion" says even "narrowly crafted" sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) measures "threaten fundamental freedoms and any ostensible protections for religious liberty appended to such laws are inherently inadequate and unstable." The Colson Center for Christian World-

view released the statement Dec. 14 with 79 original signatories.

SOGI policies seek to add sexual orientation (including homosexuality) and gender identity (how a person perceives himself regardless of his biology at birth) to the classifications protected in civil rights law. The new statement says such measures at the national, state or local level are unnecessary and endanger the livelihoods of individuals and the accreditation, licensing and tax-exemption of organizations.

Also among the document's signers is Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission President Russell Moore.

Moore said, "Every person bears

the image of God and thus is deserving of dignity, respect and just treatment.

"At the same time, many of these legislative attempts at fairness actually end up implicating the consciences of believers in participating in actions we believe to be wrong," he said. "We must not negotiate away our convictions in the name of fairness, especially when the result is the incarceration of the conscience."

Bakers, florists

SOGI policies have especially affected professionals who serve at weddings — such as bakers, florists and photographers who disagree with same-sex "marriage."

Adoption agencies, religious colleges, ministries for the needy and churches are among the organizations that have faced legal action for their commitment to marriage as a male-female institution, their determination to maintain policies in keeping with their beliefs and their willingness to protect privacy by preventing people of one sex from using restrooms and locker rooms of the opposite sex.

Some evangelical leaders have sought to find a way to protect both sexual orientation/gender identity and religious liberty by including religious exemptions in SOGI laws. The new statement serves as a rejection of that approach.

"SOGI laws empower the government to use the force of law to silence or punish Americans who seek to exercise their God-given liberty to peacefully live and work consistent with their convictions," the statement reads.

The signers affirm in the statement every person is made in the image of God and should be treated "with love, compassion and respect." The statement may be read and signed at www.colsoncenter.org/freedom. (BP)

LETTERS

LIVING DIFFERENTLY

Thank you for the editorial in the Dec. 1 issue of the paper, "A Lesson from the First Century Church." You wrote of "living like a Christian according to the teachings of Jesus" and "an encounter with God that empowers the believer to live differently from the world."

Perhaps Jesus was thinking of that kind of world on earth (rather than in the afterlife) when He spoke of "the kingdom of God."

Jack Ferguson
Vestavia Hills, Ala. ✉

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Christmas festivities

Luther's, Calvin's disagreement on Christmas yields lessons for all Christians

When it came to celebrating Christmas, leaders of the 16th century Protestant Reformation were divided on whether followers of Jesus should say “bah humbug” or “joy to the world.”

While Martin Luther loved to celebrate Christmas with feasting and special church services, the so-called Reformed wing of the Reformation, led by Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, raised objections to such festivities, arguing believers should worship God only in ways explicitly commanded by Scripture and that a festival in December commemorating Christ's birth was not commanded.

The Reformed wing's Puritan heirs in England and New England were adamant in their rejection of Christmas celebrations. English Puritan William Prynne (1600–1669) argued, for example, that “all pious Christians” should “eternally abominate” Christmas festivities, said church historian Michael Haykin. In New England celebrating Christmas could result in a fine.

Drawing insight

Though few modern Christians share such sentiments against Christmas, a North Carolina pastor who holds a doctorate in church history said believers can draw insights from both sides in the debate.

Andy Davis, pastor of First Baptist Church, Durham, North Carolina, advocates a “mediating position,” in which believers acknowledge the good and fun of Christmas as good gifts from the Lord but also recognize that secular Christmas festivities can stray far afield from celebrating the incarnation.

“Take the Christmas blessings

and look upward to the Giver,” Davis said. “The happiness that we feel when we look at the lights and we enjoy the holiday — all of it comes from God. And ultimately God has so much more to give you than just that. He has His own Son, and the center of everything is the giving of Christ.”

Among the Reformers, differing views of Christmas stemmed largely from differing views of worship, said Haykin, professor of church history and biblical spirituality at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Luther held the “normative principle” — the belief Christians may worship God in any way not forbidden by Scripture — while Zwingli and Calvin held the “regulative principle” — the belief Christians may only worship God in ways commanded by Scripture.

Thus, Luther retained the Roman Catholic traditions of Advent and Christmas and may have been among the first people to decorate a Christmas tree with candles, Haykin said. “It was a festival he delighted to celebrate.”

The first seven sermons in “The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther” edited by John Nicholas Lenker are all designated for the Christmas season.

For Zwingli and Calvin, in contrast, “there are questions raised about” Christmas, Haykin said. He noted all Reformers praised God for the incarnation

but differed over the appropriateness of an official festival Dec. 25.

Elevating one day

Preaching on Christmas Day 1551, Calvin noted, “I see here today more people than I am accustomed to having at the sermon,” according to Calvin's “Sermons on the Book of Micah” translated by Benjamin Wirt Farley.

Then Calvin warned, “When you elevate one day alone for the purpose of worshipping God, you have just turned it into an idol. True, you insist that you have done so for the honor of God, but it is more for the honor of the devil.”

Being cautious

Still, Calvin's admonition seemed to be a caution rather than a prohibition of Christmas.

In a 1551 letter quoted by Presbyterian pastor Phil Larson, Calvin said he “pursued the moderate course in keeping Christ's birthday.” Similarly, in a 1555 letter he noted, “A church is not to be despised or condemned because it observes more festival days than the others.”

Nearly a century later the Puritans, who drew theological inspiration from Calvin among other sources, took his view a step further, formally outlawing Christmas in England in 1647, Haykin said.

In America the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony permitted nonbelievers among them to

celebrate Christmas in the early 1620s, Davis said. But when some nonbelievers were seen playing a game on Christmas Day, the colony's governor “confiscated their game equipment and said they were free to not work, but they had to stay indoors and would best spend

the time by reading the Bible and praying.”

Caution about Christmas in British territories prevailed until the 1800s, Davis said, because of a desire not to return to Roman Catholic practices.

The Reformers' and Puritans' reticence about Christmas should not be dismissed al-

together in the modern world, Davis said, noting the holiday often is celebrated with “fantastic busyness” and “materialism” but “no real, vibrant piety.”

Even when charity and thankfulness are involved in the celebration, Davis said, meaning-

ful references to Christ can be removed, as in Charles Dickens' famous novella “A Christmas Carol.”

Yet “you can go too far in the opposite direction” by eschewing traditional Christmas celebrations altogether, Davis said.

“The ‘eat, drink and be merry’ thing is like scraps that fall from the table of God. It's common grace blessings that people enjoy,” he said. “Why wouldn't you want something like that?”

Following the culture

It's understandable that some Christians reject Christmas activities that are merely cultural with no celebration of Christ, Davis said. But the culture “just doesn't get it” when Christians denounce the holiday altogether.

A more productive message in 21st century America is, he said, “These blessings are gifts from God. But He has so much more to give you than that. He came into the world to save sinners.” (BP)



LUTHER



CALVIN

REFLECTIONS

“YOU MIGHT NOT BELIEVE THIS, BUT IN THE OLD DAYS PEOPLE ACTUALLY SANG CAROLS IN CLASSROOMS!”



Across ALABAMA'S Associations

MADISON

► **Mountain View Church, Huntsville**, is merging with **Clements Church, Athens**, and will be named Clements Church, Huntsville. Jeff Pike, pastor of Mountain View, will be the campus pastor of Clem-

ents, Huntsville. Tim Anderson is pastor of Clements, Athens.

ST. CLAIR

► **Matthew Dickerson** is the new pastor of **Refuge Church, Ragland**. He and his wife, Stephanie, have three children.✱

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

Previously, Theology 101 has dealt with the nature of angels as revealed in the Bible. We noted that the Bible presents them as invisible, created, spiritual beings. This week we turn to consider some of the ministries angels are said to perform.

Hebrews 1:14 calls angels “ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation.” The term “angel” has as its basic biblical meaning “messenger.”

By definition, angels were often God’s messengers who brought His message to humans on earth. In Luke 1:11–17 an angel brought God’s message to a temple priest to tell him that he and his wife would have a son who was to be named “John.” Similarly, an angel named Gabriel delivered God’s message to Mary that she would bear a Son who was to be named “Jesus.”

An angel brought word to Philip telling him to take a journey on the road that led from Jerusalem to Gaza, a journey that would bring him into contact with a man of Ethiopia who needed help understanding the prophetic Scriptures. In Acts 10 we read about an angel instructing Cornelius to seek out Simon Peter. Acts 27 records how an angel stood by Paul during a stormy night giving him the message that he and the others on the ship were to be safe and that Paul was to stand before Caesar.

Glorifying, praising

Such were a few of the instances in which angels performed the basic ministry conveying messages from God. The most glorious message born by an angel was that which an angel delivered at the empty tomb, “He is not here; for He is risen” (Matt. 28:6).

Angels also are said to carry out a heavenly ministry of glorifying and praising God. For example, Psalm 103:20–21 admonishes, “Bless the Lord, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word. Bless the Lord, all you His hosts, you ministers of His.”

Isaiah’s vision of God’s throne contained angels called “seraphim” who cried out praise to God for His holiness (Isa. 6:1–3). At the time of Christ’s birth a multitude of the heavenly host praised and glorified God in the hearing of the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks (Luke 2:8–14).

Hebrews 1:6 tells us that when God brought the firstborn into the world, the instructions were, “Let all the angels of God worship Him.” In his vision of the future, John’s look into the heavenly scene is told in these words: “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was 10,000 times 10,000, and thousands of thousands saying with a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing’” (Rev. 5:11–12).

Delivering messages

A premier example of the functioning of angels was in connection with the entrance of God’s Son into the world. As just noted, an angel delivered the birth notice to Mary, complete with the gender of her unborn baby, as well as the name to be given Him. Quite fitting was the fact that an angel also showed up at Christ’s exit from the world with a message for Christ’s followers: “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). That message delivered by an angel remains the blessed hope of all believers.✠

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.



Mission:Dignity lends helping hand to SBC ministers, spouses

I’ve worked all summer — mowing yards, trying to save enough money to fix my wife’s teeth. I plan to work next summer to finish paying for her teeth.”

Hard work was nothing new for L.C. Jones. After decades of laboring in sewing factories, he was accustomed to sweating it out for the sake of his family. The blazing Texas heat wasn’t going to hold him back from earning enough so that his wife could get her teeth.

Even at age 86.

L.C. and his wife, Jerry, were married in March 1947.

Four years later,

they would come to faith in Christ and then answer a call to ministry in 1952, a call they were faithful to for 43 years.

“Most of my pastorates were bivocational,” L.C. recalled. “Some churches could hardly pay a small amount and none of them could contribute to a retirement plan. I never pastored any church — never considered any church — based on what money they paid. I just took what they offered and that satisfied me. Moving [around], I had to take whatever work I could find to support my family. That was just a fact. Most of the time, I worked in sewing factories as a maintenance man. In those days, no matter what town you went to, there was a sewing factory.”

But it was now 2012 and there were no more pastorates for the Joneses. No more sewing factories. And no extra money available for dental work — except for what L.C. earned that summer mowing yards. That’s

what prompted him to share his story.

Mission:Dignity, a ministry of GuideStone Financial Resources, responded with an emergency grant that helped provide for her dental work and other medical bills. It was in addition to the regular monthly assistance they had been receiving since 1999.

L.C. remembered how their grant started. “My wife saw an article in our state Baptist paper years ago about help for pastors like me. We applied and started receiving help. That made a lot of difference in our lives. We could stop at Dairy Queen and get a hamburger occasionally.”

The extra resources still make a difference for L.C.

since Jerry’s death two years ago.

“I get a \$913 Social Security check, and it’s hard to live on that. Sometimes you have different occasions come up when you’d like to go out and eat or something, but you can’t do that on \$913 a month.”

Mission:Dignity assists more than 1,800 retired Southern Baptist ministers, workers or their widows in need. Individuals and couples who meet guidelines for income, assets and years of paid Southern Baptist service are eligible for \$225–\$600 per month.

“I’m more thankful for the opportunity to pastor than I am for the help I receive,” L.C. said. “It was a privilege to be the pastor for these people. I may not remember all of them, but I haven’t forgotten pastoring them.”

For more information, visit MissionDignity.org. (GuideStone)



Mission:Dignity

Internship experience at *The Alabama Baptist*



Photo by Maggie Walsh

Congratulations to Shaun McCormack (left), who has served in TAB’s marketing internship for the past year. Shaun is among the December graduates of Samford University in Birmingham. He earned a bachelor of science degree in business administration. Thank you for serving with TAB, Shaun. And thanks to Hannah Muñoz (right), who is beginning her final semester in the editorial internship at TAB. Hannah has been with TAB for nearly three years and will graduate from Samford in May.

Unchurched people likely to attend Christmas Eve service, Rainer says

Easter might be the day that the most churchgoers show up at the same time, but Christmas Eve is probably the most likely day for an unchurched person to walk through a church's doors, according to Thom S. Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources.

'Incredible opportunity'

"It is an incredible opportunity for most congregations," he wrote on thomrainer.com.

There are five key reasons for that phenomenon, according to Rainer:

1. Christmas brings extended family members together from different places, and often both church and unchurched people are among them.

Those who don't attend church are often invited to a Christmas Eve service by their Christian family members, Rainer wrote.

2. Most unchurched people "have some sentimental attachment to Christmas," he wrote.

"They may not be overtly religious, but they have some warm memories of Christmas Eve and the entire Christmas season."



123rf.com

3. Most people who don't go to church know and like Christmas songs, according to Rainer, and they feel confident they can go to a Christmas Eve service and hear those songs.

Looking for hope

4. The unchurched "are looking for hope in the Christmas season," Rainer wrote. "Many of them come on Christmas Eve

expecting to hear a message of hope or to sing the songs of the hope-filled message of Christ's birth."

5. Christmas is one of the few moments that most people have fond feelings about tradition, he wrote. A Christmas Eve service is a place they expect to be a part of those traditions, "to sense, hear and embrace" them. (TAB)



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'Jesus at center'

Mobile-area transition ministry focuses on rebuilding lives

By Grace Thornton
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Rocque Waites grew up as a pastor's kid in South Carolina. He went to college, got a business degree — and got into drugs.

"I was pretty heavily involved in trafficking cocaine," he said.

But then he got saved, got married and went to seminary. Things were looking up.

Until he got divorced and found himself spiraling back into addiction.

"Eight years later I was in the woods running from the feds because I was manufacturing methamphetamine," Waites said. "I served four years in prison."

Re-entry support

And then for the final months of his sentence, he was sent to the PASCO home in Mobile.

That's where everything changed.

PASCO — which stands for Physical And Spiritual Christian Outreach — serves as long-term support for people coming out of rehab or prison to help them get a strong foundation for re-entering normal life.

The men's program was started nine years ago by Phillip Stanford, a member of Moffett Road Baptist Church, Mobile

— himself a former addict.

"When PASCO started nine years ago, there was no other transition ministry for people coming out of rehab to help them start to rebuild relationships, get a work ethic and just generally prepare for life," said Waites, who now serves as director of PASCO. "Phillip put together a program for men to rebuild their life and get stability and a firm foundation with Jesus at the center of it. There's no way to walk free without Jesus at the center."

Currently 23 men and eight women are a part of the program at PASCO's new facility — but since the organization's founding, nearly 400 people have gone through the program.

"They come through orders from the courts, from Alabama Department of Corrections Parole, from voluntary admissions via various drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs such as the Home of Grace, the Mission of Hope, Bradford, the Wings of Life, the City of Refuge and many more," Waites said. "We have a really good success rate. And we have a passion about it

because we see the benefit and the fruit in the men's and women's lives."

PASCO has room for 28 men and 16 women currently but they're preparing to double that capacity soon, Waites said. "We've got the space — all we need is a commercial kitchen that can feed that many people."

It's that side of things — the food preparation side — where

Martha Maddox and a number of others have gotten plugged in over the years.

"I met Phil-

lip at church a number of years ago and I saw the need and got busy," said Maddox, a member of Moffett Road Baptist and PASCO board member.

Group effort

Maddox, a retired home economics teacher, said she wasn't daunted by the idea of cooking for roughly 30. But she couldn't do it herself every night of the week, so she developed a calendar for area churches, individuals and groups to provide meals for the residents at PASCO. Now every Monday through Friday the facility's meals are covered.

"It's the sweetest, most willing group of people I've ever seen.

For instance, Dayspring Baptist Church delivers meals three Tuesdays of the month and Luke 4:18 Fellowship brings meals two Wednesdays," said Maddox, noting that about a dozen area churches participate. "When we deliver food it's a way for us to say 'we love you and God loves you' to those men and women."

Making a difference

And now she's working to help Waites write grants and raise money for the commercial kitchen he needs to run PASCO at full capacity.

"They could have 60 men if they could get that kitchen," Maddox said. "I really feel like this will happen. God will provide."

Waites said he knows the program is making a difference.

"If someone goes through this program, they've got a full year of having someone help them walk soberly, learn accountability, learn to walk with the Lord and learn to take responsibility," he said. "We watch the Lord work in these men's and women's lives over the course of our nine-month program and stand amazed at the difference that the love of the Lord works in their lives."

For more information about PASCO, visit www.facebook.com/thepascohome.



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- 5** Hold your device over a page or image in *The Alabama Baptist* (TAB) marked as augmented reality and watch the paper come to life.

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- 7** Each week when TAB arrives, open the app and hold your device over the augmented reality articles.

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Rashional THOUGHTS

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE WHEN LIFE HAPPENS

Evaluating my faith, obedience

My friend had to cut our phone conversation short because she had to “cram” for her Bible study class coming up that night.

“I know this isn’t the way I’m supposed to be studying the Bible,” she said. “The study I am in is designed so that we read a little each day building up to time for the class, but this is just where I am right now.”

I assured her she likely wasn’t alone, that others in the class are probably doing the same thing. I’ve been there before myself.

Committing to a weekly Bible study with built-in accountability sounds great when you sign up, but then you actually have to follow through with the plan. That’s when life seems to always get in the way.

Finding time to read and quietly meditate on Scripture will be an eternal battle I fight.

But I’ve found the most success by simplifying my daily Bible reading to a specific chapter or section of a chapter, spending time meditating on the words and listening to God rather than trying to accomplish too much too fast.

For the past few years I’ve followed a plan that has been featured in previous issues of *The Alabama Baptist* (TAB) — D-Life (www.livethedlife.com).

True discipleship

Once I grasped the idea of truly living a life of discipleship, I was freed from the temptation to read and study solely to answer the questions in the study book or to see how quickly I could read through the Bible each year.

TAB will feature a variety of articles on discipleship and processes that are working for congregations around the state in each of the January issues.

The start of a new year provides a great time to hit the reset button on all things, especially our Scripture reading methods.

And I couldn’t help but get a head start thinking about the importance of prioritizing our time in the Word as another friend shared with me recently about a sermon series she has been meditating on.

It deals with how we as believers tend to have spiritual amnesia and must stay in the Word daily in order to remember God’s truths and not stray from His path.

I had never heard it described that way but it makes total sense. No matter how simple the command “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength ... and love your neighbor as yourself,” we still can’t seem to remember all the parts of it.

We are so easily distracted, exhausted, tempted and disillusioned. And when we return to the Word completely, openly and repentantly, it is obvious, so very obvious.

Yet one day away from the Lord takes our eyes off Him even if just for a moment; a week away moves our whole being away from Him.

Weeks can easily turn into months and months into years and then the spiritual amnesia moves to a critical level.

We are called to trust, have faith and follow the Lord in obedience, but without including Him in every part of us and prioritizing focused time with Him, how will we grow in our faith? How will we become more like Him?

His ways are certainly not our ways, as Scripture says, but we are called to trust and follow even when we don’t understand.

My life group leader at church challenged our class in mid-December in the area of faithful obedience. He asked us to ask ourselves:

“Am I living a life of faithful obedience that will bring blessings to my life and those near me? Or do I think I know better?”

RASHIONAL Extras ...



'Tis the Season to be Holy

By Pastor Franklin L. Kirksey
First Baptist Church, Spanish Fort

During the Christmas season we need to give serious thought to the question, “What good is it to be jolly if you are not holy?”

Actually, it is always the season to be holy. Holiness never goes out of season.

Holiness is not just a trivial pursuit.

Hebrews 12:14 reads, “Pursue peace with all people and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”

Holiness is essential.

Hebrews 12 also outlines three ways we can relate to holiness:

1. Be a partaker of holiness.
2. Be a pursuer of holiness.
3. Do not be a profaner of holiness. Instead be reverent and devoted.

The evaluation of our worship, our work and our worth will be based on God’s holiness.

What is a quiet time?

By Larissa Arnault Roach
LifeWay Christian Resources

Quiet times can look different for every person (some of them aren’t even quiet). Maybe you like journaling, maybe you don’t. Maybe you use an app or an online Bible study. Maybe you use a guided reading plan. Maybe you work through a prayer list. Maybe your prayers are spontaneous and in the moment. No matter what your personal quiet time looks like, only two things are required:

1. Time in God’s Word.
2. Time in prayer.

EDITOR’S NOTE — This is an excerpt from the Dec. 13 “Quiet Time Problems (and Solutions!)” post on blog.lifeway.com. The blog post concludes with an invitation to participate in committing the first 40 days of 2017 to prayer and Scripture reading by signing up for a daily email providing directions for each day. See “Start 2017 with 40 Days of Prayer + Scripture” at blog.lifeway.com to sign up.

As a Christian layperson, I am convinced that our professions should be used to the fullest extent for God’s purpose. As a financial planner, specializing in the areas of charitable gifting and estate planning, I am able to help with endowment plans for churches and other Christian ministries. This is especially important to create financial resources that will enable the expansion of these vital ministries.

As Christians, we must remember the divine calling in all that we do. I am firmly convinced that as a layman God has called me to share the gospel no less than if I were a vocational minister. I believe the same is true for all Christians.

We are all called to be the light of Christ in a world of darkness.

Rick Brown
Macon, Georgia

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, against such things there is no law.”

Galatians 5:22–23

“We should have great peace if we did not busy ourselves with what others say and do.”

Thomas á Kempis

“Broken relationships are a razor across the artery of the spirit.”

Richard A. Swenson, M.D.

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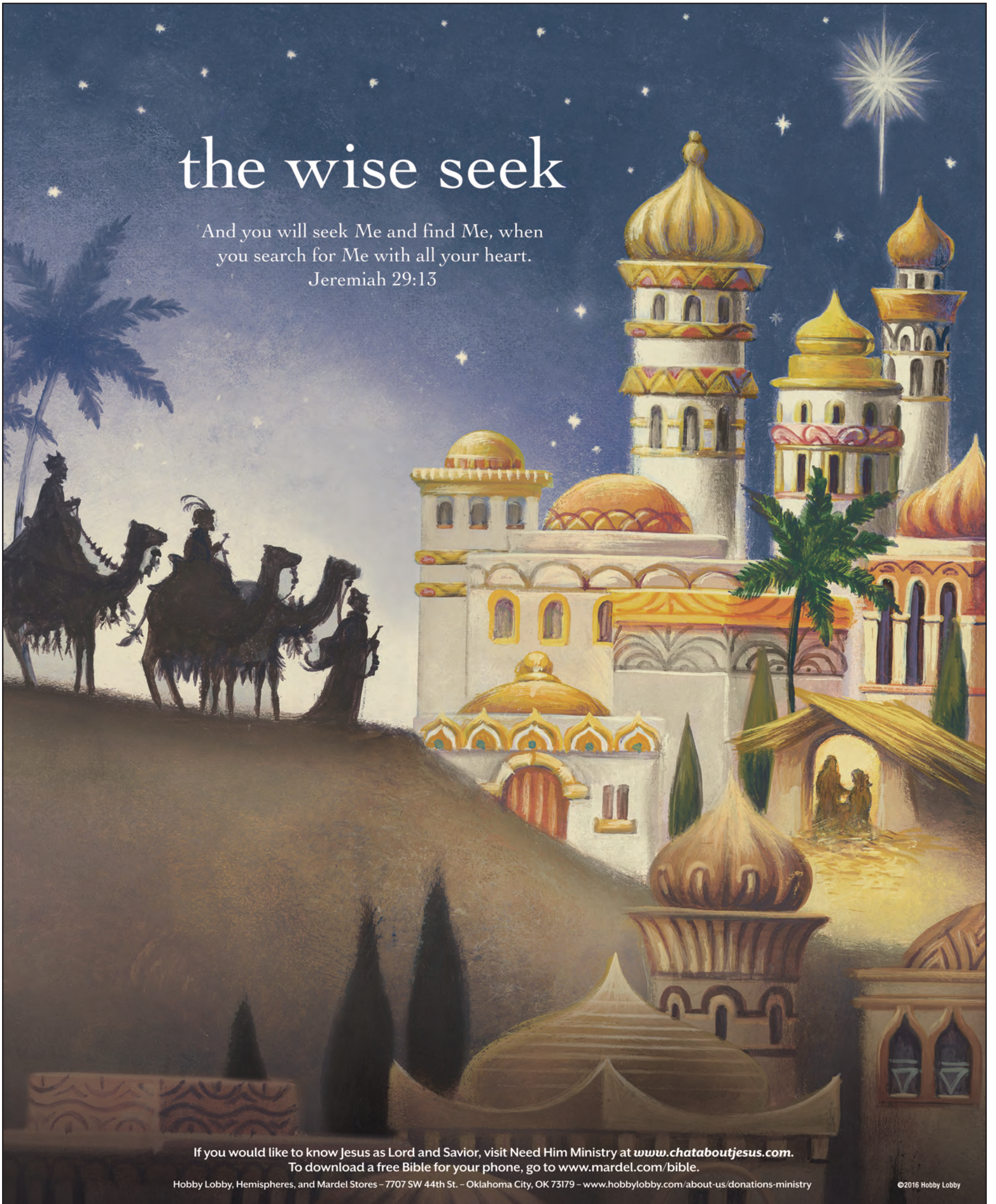
“The fact that I am a woman does not make me a different kind of Christian. But the fact that I am a Christian does make me a different kind of woman.”

Elisabeth Elliot

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Jeremiah 29:13



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Meaningful, creative work can have influence on employees' commitment, study finds

(continued from page 3)
 a superior state of holiness. Those "nonreligious vocations" also can pursue holiness through work, according to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which changed the Catholic Church's teachings on the purpose and value of work.

'Restorative act'

Meanwhile, for many evangelicals "work is necessitated by the fallen human condition, but it can be pursued in partnership with God as a restorative act," Kent said. "They 'bring the Bible' to work with them more so than other religious traditions, including sharing their faith and seeing their work as having spiritual meaning."

While study findings do not indicate a cause for differences in workplace commitment between the two groups, Kent said he has ideas that may explain the gap.

"Catholics by and large are committed to one large institution, while evangelicals tend to shop for whatever church suits their tastes," he said. "Evangelicals sometimes don't even know the denomination their church belongs to, if it belongs to one at all. Lower levels of congregational commitment may subtly translate to decreased commitments in the workplace."

In theory, attachment to God occurs before organizational attachment, Kent said.

"But it's possible it might also work the other way around," he added. "When work is meaningful, creative and well compensated, those benefits may influence a believer to perceive God as caring. But if the believer has a bad work experience or faces layoffs or chronic unemployment, what then? That might be seen as a failure on God's part or a sign of disfavor and result in decreased attachment."

The views of religiously unaffiliated individuals, who have lower levels of attachment to God and less commitment to the workplace, also might be a topic for further study, Kent said.

Attachments in one area are conceptually associated with attachments in other areas, and it would be important to know if decreased attachment to God or work is related to other attachments like family or romantic partners.

He stressed that findings do not imply employers should preferentially hire Catholics.

Boosting morale

"That would not be desirable or possible — but the findings do suggest holistic strategies for engaging workers are in order," Kent said.

"Workplace spirituality scholars already have shown that meditation and spiritual practice boost employee commitment and morale." (BNG)

Samford top-ranked Alabama school 'for value'

Samford University's national reputation as one of the nation's leading private Christian universities has been affirmed by its jump in the Kiplinger's Personal Finance's list of the Top 300 Best College Values of 2017.

Samford was ranked No. 40 best value of the top private universities, up from No. 49 in the 2016 listing.

Samford also was ranked No. 130 in the overall combined list of public and private institutions, up from No. 165.

Samford has been on the Kiplinger list for multiple years and is the highest ranked university in Alabama for 2017. Samford is the only private university ranked from Alabama and is ranked ahead of the other three Alabama

schools making the overall list.

The other Alabama schools are the University of Alabama (No. 195), Auburn University (No. 221) and Birmingham-Southern College (No. 223).

Introduced in 1998, the rankings now combine public and private universities and private liberal arts colleges into a single comprehensive list. (SU, TAB)

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Let's all look for opportunities to share the Good News with those still in darkness this Christmas season. Merry Christmas.

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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For December 25

Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.
Dean, School of Christian Studies, University of Mobile

SAVIOR ANNOUNCED
Luke 1:26–38

This week we divert from our study of the Settlement Period of Israel’s history to focus on the announcement of our Savior. What a contrast — from Joshua leading the armies of Israel to our Jesus (Greek for “Joshua”) to be born as a helpless babe.

A Message Sent (26–29)

God reveals His will. He speaks both directly and indirectly — here through prophets, there through signs and wonders. Rarely in Scripture do we read of an angelic visitation. Even less frequently do we see the messenger named. In this passage, Gabriel (mighty one of God) is the chosen communicator to deliver the message regarding the Messiah. Readers should not be surprised by this, as Gabriel also brought a messianic message to Daniel (Dan. 9:21, 24–27).

Mary was the chosen vessel to carry, birth, nurture, agonize, grieve and ultimately worship Jesus the Messiah. How appropriate a song like “Mary, Did You Know?” to ponder her experience as an untouched young woman set apart to fulfill God’s purpose. Who but God could have known that the woman who bore the promised seed (Gen. 3:15), the virgin who would conceive (Isa. 7:14), would come from the region of Galilee (Isa. 9:1–7) and give birth to her first-born son in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2)?

The Message Delivered (30–33)

God keeps His promises. God began revealing His redemptive plan back in the garden, indicating that the seed of the woman would bring deliverance but at the price of suffering, bloodshed and death. God also promised Judah (Gen. 49:10) and David (2 Sam. 7:16) that from their descendants would come the everlasting King (Isa. 9:7).

As we read Luke’s and Matthew’s Gospel

accounts together, we see that both Joseph and Mary were visited by angels. Both of them were told to name the boy “Jesus,” meaning “salvation.” Both were told the baby would not be by physical union but by supernatural conception.

Questions Answered (34–37)

God answers our questions. “But wait,” you may say. “What about Zechariah? He was unable to speak after he questioned God’s messenger.” This is true but the priest should have been intimately aware from Scripture that God had made previously infertile women fruitful with children. Consider Sarah (Gen. 18:10–12), Rachel (Gen. 29:31; 30:22) and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:2, 19–20). Had God not heard their prayers? Why would Zechariah question God’s ability to provide a child to an infertile couple?

Mary’s question was different. Never in the Torah, prophets or writings had a virgin been supernaturally impregnated to give birth to God Incarnate. The promise had been given centuries before but it had never been fulfilled. Gabriel explained that a supernatural event would take place by which Mary would give birth to the Son of God.

Willing Submission (38)

God receives glory through obedience. Through Mary’s simple statement she communicates her absolute surrender to the will of God: “I am the Lord’s slave. ... May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Later she confesses her need for a Savior. She recognizes her place in history and she gives God glory for His greatness, His goodness and His grace (1:46–55).

As we celebrate our Savior’s birth may we consider ourselves slaves like Mary. When Jesus’ brothers came to faith they considered themselves His servants. “My mother and My brothers are those who hear and do the word of God” (Luke 8:21).✠

Bible Studies for Life

By Jim Barnette, Ph.D.
Samford University and Brookwood Baptist Church, Mountain Brook

GOD’S LIVING WORD SAVES
Psalm 119:41; Luke 1:30–35

God promised His salvation would come to us. (Ps. 119:41)

Psalm 119:41–48 has a different tone from the previous section (vv. 33–40) in that verses 41–48 are without anguish and desperation. The psalmist implies here what he makes explicit in the stanza to follow: he is under duress. For this reason, he begins by asking that God’s “steadfast love” and “salvation” come to him. While the psalmist continues to petition the Lord, the dominant theme is assurance based on trust and hope. The occurrence of “steadfast love” in verse 41 is the first of seven (see vv. 64, 76, 88, 124, 149, 159).

God’s very essence is steadfast love and by nature of that love His Word is to be trusted. The Lord’s instruction bears out this unchanging love for humanity and His deliverance is guaranteed by His promises. The sudden shift in mood from the previous stanza is a reminder that Psalm 119 does not tell a single story. Life consists of sudden transitions, along with times of trial and times of victory.

God’s orders has given the psalmist freedom, a fact in contrast to the opponents who belittle him. If this man is secure in his awareness of God’s good will toward him, then human derision cannot touch him. The psalmist may still be taunted (v. 42), but he lives joyfully by trusting the freeing truth.

Salvation comes through Jesus, who is fully God. (Luke 1:34–35)

The word for “overshadow” carries the sense of the Lord’s holy, powerful presence, similar to the cloud that covered the tabernacle when the tent was filled with His glory (Ex. 40:35; Num. 11:25). The word is used in all three accounts of the transfiguration to describe the overshadowing of the cloud.

Unlike Zechariah, Mary does not ask for a confirmatory sign (Luke 1:18) but only for enlightenment on how God will accomplish this miracle. Where Zechariah’s question was motivated by unbelief, Mary’s was motivated by belief. Such is one more reason for God finding favor with Mary: her faithfulness. Even when matters did not make sense, Mary the favored one was steady in her trust in the Lord.✠

with God.” The angel goes on to explain why this grace with God is so significant for Mary. The wording here is virtually identical to the “virgin” passage in Isaiah 7:14 and to the assurance the angel of the Lord gave the fugitive Hagar in Genesis 16:11. The word “virgin” is not mentioned in the allusion to Isaiah; however, Mary’s question in verse 34 clarifies that she is a virgin — a fact that Luke has mentioned in verse 27.

The name “Jesus” (“Joshua”) had been common in Old Testament days and continued to be a popular name through the first century A.D. Furthermore, the Old Testament concepts of “throne,” Davidic line, “reign” and “kingdom” are spoken of as eternal. In 2 Samuel the prophet Nathan was told that through David’s son, God would “establish the throne of His kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:13). Similarly the angel announced that Mary’s child would “reign over the house of Jacob forever.” God’s promises were about to be fulfilled in a way that David could not have imagined.

The Alabama Baptist will not publish a Dec. 29 issue. Sunday School lessons for Jan. 1 will be available at www.thealabamabaptist.org.

Christian Crossword

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Across

1. “And if a son, then an ___ of God.” (Gal. 4:7)

4. Energy.

7. Printer’s measures.

10. Eastern U.S. state.

11. “For there is hope of a ___, if it be cut down.” (Job 14:7)

12. Churchill gesture.

13. High school ___.

15. Nard.

17. Twelve lions stood around his throne. (1 Kings 10)

19. Vowels in chorus of children’s song.

20. Carter cabinet member.

22. North Atlantic food fish.

26. Deborah accompanied him.

29. They travel through the Loop.

31. Year. (Sp.)

32. “And the king of the south shall be moved with ___.” (Dan. 11:11)

34. “The ___ pot is for silver.” (Prov. 17:3)

36. Small bit.

37. “Eat not of it ___ ... but roast it with fire.” (Ex. 12:9)

39. To tend.

40. Father of Peleg and Joktan. (Gen. 10:25)

42. Sister of Absalom.

44. Preposition.

46. “___ shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.” (Ps. 91:10)

50. After dusk. (poet.)

54. Congolese river that forms Ubangi.

55. Light touch.

56. Sanction.

57. Egyptian sun deity.

58. Tropical bird.

59. Son of. (Heb.)

60. Fencing implement.

of the air.” (Eph. 2:2)

5. Even. (poet.)

6. St. ___. (FL city)

7. Palindromic name.

8. “Quit you like ___.” (1 Cor. 16:13)

9. Arrange.

11. Sat. TV fare. (colloq.)

14. Recto. (abbr.)

16. Wrong. (prefix)

18. “Woe unto him that striveth with his ___.” (Isa. 45:9)

21. Mischievous one.

23. Absalom’s defining feature.

24. Yearbooks. (abbr.)

25. Venetian magistrate.

26. Alphabet sequence.

27. Jezebel’s “better” half.

28. The ___, Douglas novel.

30. “The Lord spake unto Moses in the wilderness of ___.” (Num. 3:14)

33. Rodent.

35. “Bring them up in the ___ and admonition of the Lord.” (Eph. 6:4)

38. “Your children shall ___ in the wilderness.” (Num. 14:33)

41. Tore.

43. “And if it be ___ that I go also.” (1 Cor. 16:4)

45. Puncture.

47. Amass.

48. Building extension.

49. To advise; counsel.

50. Greek letter.

51. Actor Johnson.

52. Spire ornament.

53. Philippine tree.

Want to know GOD?

By Jenni Ingram
Member, First Baptist Church, Gantt

In Sunday School our lesson spoke about homeless people, and then coincidentally our sermon title was, "Jesus Encounters a Blind Man." The holiday season is upon us and I wonder how many of us get so distracted, so busy, so stressed that we become blind to what is going on around us? How many people have we passed while shopping that are in pain, either mentally or physically? How many people are so hungry, seeing your shopping cart full makes them consider violence just for a small morsel?

Jesus taught us in Matthew 25:40, "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for Me.'" God promises us 365 times in Scripture there's no need to worry. Jesus goes further in Matthew 6:25-34 telling us what not to worry about. So for believers, we are assured that our Father in heaven already knows our needs and we will be taken care of.

We must learn whatever lesson He has for us to learn in the middle of our struggle; however, we remain confident of His love and faithfulness. If you have not accepted Jesus' free gift of salvation, wouldn't you like to have that assurance and peace that only comes from a personal relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

As for our time here on earth I am challenging myself, and also all of you, to send an uplifting card for no special reason, give a hug to someone hurting or buy someone a hamburger. Jesus opened the eyes of the blind for a reason. Don't turn a blind eye — be a witness. #

'Hold a space'

Amy Grant encourages audiences to find comfort in Christ this season

By Leann Callaway
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Desiring to bring a glimpse of hope and healing for those hurting during the holidays inspired six-time Grammy Award-winning recording artist Amy Grant to compile a collection of inspirational songs for her first new Christmas album in nearly 20 years.

The album is ranked among the top seasonal releases and earned the No. 3 spot on Billboard's Holiday Albums chart.

With vulnerability and authenticity expressed in her song lyrics, Grant relates to audiences on a personal level about her own emotional struggles that are stirred up during this season while remembering loved ones.

"When I was in college, there were five generations alive in my family and all together for the holidays," Grant recalled. "I get nostalgic at Christmastime when I'm remembering that room full of people and thinking about enjoying a cup of tea with my

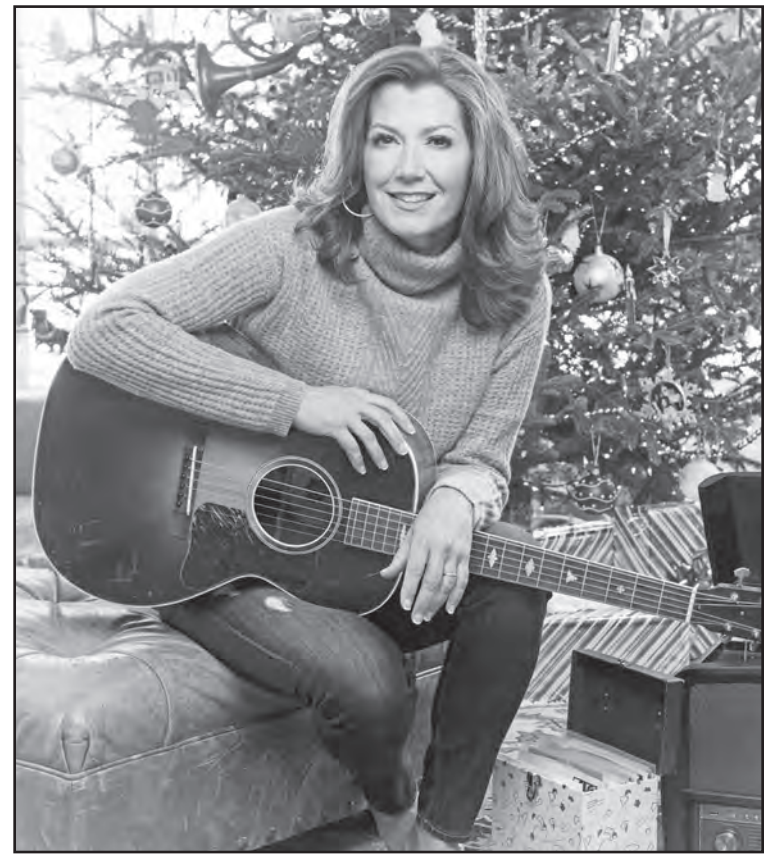
grandmother. I really wanted to incorporate that sentiment into this Christmas record and to be mindful that some people are opening the door to excitement and joy while others are going home to an empty apartment.

'Rare' experience

"As I've been exposed to more people's Christmas experiences, I realize how rare my family experience was growing up. I'm so much more aware that a lot of people are facing the holidays alone and dealing with the emotions that come along with remembering loved ones they've lost."

By sharing these struggles, Grant hopes that people seeking comfort will find strength in Christ this season — as the songs on "Tennessee Christmas" are designed to point listeners to the Savior who will sustain them throughout any situation.

"I wanted this record to communicate a faith message, a fun message and a foundational message reminding people that this isn't an easy road but we aren't alone in this journey because God



Amy Grant

Photo courtesy of The Media Collective

is with us," Grant noted. "Our efforts to reach out and support each other are done through sentimental songs and songs that paint simple pictures with a powerful message. I want to remind people that it's important to hold a space for all of the sadness that's a real part of life, but let's also hold a space to invite in the good news that brings peace on earth and goodwill toward men."

Remain focused

Through her music and message, Grant remains focused on connecting audiences to God's unfailing love and grace.

Throughout December, Grant has been helping to promote and support Operation Christmas Child (OCC) while touring across the country performing festive holiday songs and traditional carols with a full symphony orchestra alongside fellow Grammy Award-winning recording artist Michael W. Smith and special

guest Jordan Smith, season nine winner of NBC's reality singing competition "The Voice."

Since its inception in 1993, OCC, a project of Samaritan's Purse, has sought to spread the love of Christ to impoverished children around the world through a shoebox full of small gifts at Christmas.

"When a song is used to connect people to Christ, it's the most powerful form of musical expression," Grant said. "Music is a powerful tool and can often reach people in a different way than spoken words. Music has a way of disarming people and speaks to them in a way that refreshes them and puts them at ease."

"I hope people walk away from my concerts with a sense of being connected to the message of the gospel. The most important message that I want to share with people is about what matters most in life and to help them realize their need for Jesus." #

'Religion, Ethics NewsWeekly' to air last episode in 2017

Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly, an award-winning weekly television series, will end in early 2017 after a 20-year run.

The last episode will air Feb. 24, announced WNET, the parent company of THIRTEEN Productions.

"It has been a great privilege to report the many ways people of faith worship and serve others," host and executive editor Bob Abernethy said in a statement Dec. 14. "We are deeply grateful to our thoughtful staff and also to our viewers, many of whom have told us the program consistently affirms the values they most respect."

The show's 20 years of broadcasting is

unusually long for syndicated series and TV programs in general.

Founded by Abernethy and launched in 1997, it provided national and international news coverage and analysis about religion.

High-profile interviews

It included interviews with newsmakers ranging from the Dalai Lama to former president Jimmy Carter; profiles of religious leaders such as evangelist Billy Graham and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks; and surveys about faith after 9/11 and about "nones," or the unaffiliated.

Stephen Segaller, vice president of programming for WNET, said, "WNET is honored to have been the producing station for

'Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly' all these years. We take great pride in all the awards and accolades the series has deservedly garnered during this time."

The show won more than 200 industry awards including all of the Religion News Association's (RNA) 2016 honors for television news magazine religion reporting and made similar RNA sweeps in two previous years. It also was honored with the Wilbur, Gracie Allen and New York Festival awards.

The statement said the series' website, which won five Webby Awards, will remain available. It provides access to an extensive archive, including transcripts of individual shows and streaming videos. (RNS)





Photo courtesy of Anastasia Baptist Church

'The Innkeeper Presents — We Call Him Savior' overcomes Hurricane Matthew's mayhem across St. Augustine, Florida, to draw 1,500 attendees for two performances in early December.

Important message

Florida church shares Christmas message despite hurricane

Michael Arnold and his family were among hundreds of St. Augustine, Florida, residents who fled their homes in early October as Hurricane Matthew trailed close behind.

And while St. Augustine, known as the nation's oldest city, didn't take a direct hit from the hurricane, coastal flooding from its storm surge and near-hurricane-force winds wreaked havoc for many who call it home. Financial reports released Dec. 12 indicate it sustained an estimated \$7.1 million in damage.

When the bridges reopened in October and Arnold returned home after a three-day mandatory evacuation, he discovered his garage had been flooded and roof would need to be replaced, while residents just one street away experienced catastrophic damage. "We're living in our house," Arnold said thankfully.

The first weekend of December marked another homecoming of sorts for Arnold as he and more than 200 members of Anastasia Baptist Church, St. Augustine, debuted their Christmas musical, "The Innkeeper Presents — We Call Him Savior."

The play, which chronicles the life of Christ from His birth to His crucifixion, resurrection and expectant return, was written and produced by church members Donna and Ray Garner.

For Arnold, who played a minor role in the church's Christmas musical two years ago, the opportunity to play the role of Jacob, a modern-day innkeeper, is symbolic of his real-life discovery of Jesus as his personal Savior.

'New man'

"I'm a new man," Arnold, a 46-year-old language arts teacher, said of his spiritual rebirth in mid-life. "I'm completely different than I was two years ago."

Ray Garner, 68, a financial planner and former church planter/music minister, said that's "the No. 1 purpose" of the script his wife wrote to go along with the 19-song arrangement, which also includes several original lyrical and musical compositions written by church members.

The one-hour and 40-minute production featured a 40-member adult choir, 27-member orchestra and nearly 30-member children's ensemble including six classical ballet dancers.

"Our purpose is to equate the baby in the manger with the God-man who went to the cross and was crucified and resurrected," Garner said. "He had to die so that we could live."

David Elder, Anastasia Baptist's worship pastor since 2005, said that since the church's first production of "The Innkeeper" in 2009, new characters, plot developments and musical compositions are added with each subsequent production.

Standing strong

Wynne Toler, a 55-year-old draftsman for a steel fabrication company, has portrayed the first-century innkeeper named Yacob since the beginning of the production.

In a church that averages about 1,500 people for weekly worship, Toler still isn't sure how he landed the role but he's glad for it.

And when Hurricane Matthew left a swath of destruction across the barrier island south of Jacksonville, Toler said, there was never a doubt that the church's Christmas musical would still happen.

"The message is way too important," he said. "Sometimes God sends us challenges to find out how really committed we are to Him."

Since Hurricane Matthew's onslaught in October, church volunteers have helped about 130 families, more than half of whom aren't members of Anastasia Baptist, with recovery efforts.

Southern Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers from around the state as well as Alabama also have helped repair flood and wind-ravaged homes.

Meanwhile, about 1,500 people attended the church's Christmas musical Dec. 2 and Dec. 4 in the christian life center on the Island campus, though the outdoor Bethlehem Village had to be scaled back because church volunteers had been focused on storm recovery outreach efforts. (BP)

RELIGION in America

Compiled from Wire Services

B&B fined for not hosting same-sex wedding

PAXTON, Ill. — A Christian-owned bed and breakfast that refused to host a same-sex wedding will have to pay \$30,000 to the couple after a panel from the Illinois Human Rights Commission (IHRC) refused to hear the facility's appeal.

But owner Jim Walder said he planned to appeal to the full state Human Rights Commission, according to The Christian Post. Walder said he was opposed to hosting the wedding in 2011 at TimberCreek Bed & Breakfast in Paxton, Illinois, because of religious reasons.

"In our opinion, forcing a small business with one employee to host a gay 'marriage' which violates the owner's sincerely held biblical belief that marriage is between one man and one woman is an extreme circumstance, especially when marriage has been understood for thousands of years to be a union between one man and one woman," he said. "We believe homosexuality is wrong and unnatural based on what the Bible says about it. If that is discrimination, I guess we unfortunately discriminate."

The same-sex couple argued that Walder's denial of service was a rejection of the Illinois Human Rights Act, according to the Post.

"This feels like blatant reverse discrimination against all business owners, Christian or otherwise, by the IHRC, which is supposed to be an unbiased neutral party in resolving complaints," Walder said. (TAB)

Vatican reaffirms decision to ban gay priests

VATICAN CITY — A Vatican decision to reaffirm its opposition to gay priests has angered activists who thought Pope Francis was changing Rome's attitudes toward homosexuality.

In a new document on the priesthood, the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy reiterated a 2005 statement declaring that men with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" or those who "support the so-called 'gay culture'" cannot be priests.

The new document, "The Gift of the Priestly Vocation," noted the Church's policy on gay priests has not changed since the last Vatican pronouncement on the subject in 2005.

The lengthy document, which only deals with sexuality on a few pages, says "the Church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question, cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called 'gay culture.'"

In an interview with *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican daily newspaper, Cardinal Beniamino Stella, head of the Congregation for the Clergy, said the guidelines for training priests needed to be "revamped" to take into account developments in society and the pope's concerns about the priesthood. (RNS)

Atheist billboards urge people to skip church

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — A national atheist group recently posted billboards in several cities to encourage people to skip church this Christmas as part of its "Atheist Christmas" campaign.

One billboard in Colorado Springs, Colorado, features a mother with her daughter, who is reading a text from a friend on her phone. "U going to church this Xmas?" She responds, "Lol. No way. I don't believe that stuff anymore." The friend replies, "What will your parents say?" And she texts back, saying, "They'll get over it. :-p."

Another billboard posted in Lynchburg, Virginia, and Shreveport, Louisiana, says "Make Christmas Great Again, Skip Church!"

According to The Christian Post, David Silverman, president of American Atheists, said, "More and more Americans are leaving religion, but we still have work to do when it comes to fighting the stigma many atheists face."

The group cited a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute that showed 39 percent of people age 18–29 in the United States are now considered nonreligious. (TAB)