

The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

Thriving in the Word

16-year-old Coulter finding success through Bible Drill, Speakers Tournament challenges

By Julie Donovan
The Alabama Baptist

When 16-year-old Ava Coulter talks about the cost of trusting Jesus, she speaks from experience — but not the one most people might immediately assume.

Ava was born with Morquio syndrome, a rare genetic metabolic disorder that affects the bones, spine, organs and physical abilities of those who inherit the condition.

When Ava was younger, she and her mother, Tammy, would travel regularly from their home in Madison to Chicago so Ava could participate in a clinical trial. Now, they travel to Huntsville once a week for her treatment.

It hasn't been easy. But a bright spot since she was in fourth grade has been Bible Drill.

When she first began participating, holding the Bible like other competitors was difficult.

"I would use a table or place my

Bible in my lap," Ava recalled.

She continued working on the required skills — learning the books of the Bible and where to find them, along with memorizing verses and key passages in Scripture and their references — with Gina Fee, a Drill leader for grade schoolers and high schoolers since 2000. Both

are members of Harvest Baptist Church in Madison.

Fee said Ava has worked through the early challenges to be successful as a competitor.

"Some years she would sit and now she stands, and her mind is incredible," Fee said.

Fee said she and Ava would spend 45 minutes together each week working on Scripture memorization. Ava would easily remember the words each time, she said.

Ava learned everything on the high school drill leaflet for this year's competition, Fee said, and then pushed herself a bit further this year by participating in Speakers Tournament.

"[Ava Coulter] has not allowed her physical limitations to limit her learning

God's Word."

**Belinda Stroud
children's ministry
specialist, SBOM**



Photo courtesy of Belinda Stroud

Ava Coulter, 16, and her Bible Drill leader and speech coach, Gina Fee, celebrate Coulter's 2nd place finish in this year's Speakers Tournament.

Speakers Tournament, a competition for students in grades 10–12, requires participants to write and deliver a 4–6-minute speech using Scripture to address a topic chosen from a list of options.

At the state Speakers Tournament

competition at Glynwood Baptist Church in Prattville on April 29, Ava spoke on the topic, "Is there a cost to following Jesus?"

"As Christians, we know there is," Ava said before she unraveled the (See 'For God's,' page 9)

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Photo courtesy of Shawn Hendricks/The Baptist Paper

Shawn Hendricks celebrates his graduation from the University of Tennessee with wife, Stephanie, daughter, Laura, and in-laws, Mark and Nancy Norden.

Hendricks shares lessons as a lifelong student

By Shawn Hendricks
Content editor, The Baptist Paper

Graduating this spring with my master's degree was not on my bucket list.

With about 25 years of professional experience in Southern Baptist media, I wasn't sure I really needed it. I figured my experience spoke for itself. Several situations led me to a realization: If we're not careful, we stop seeing things with the same curiosity and wonder we used to. Ultimately, there is always room for growth.

I began my journey to get my master's degree in strategic and digital communication at the University of Tennessee in the fall of 2021. I was immediately surprised how applicable it's been to my work with TAB Media Group and our efforts to maximize our content and keep our audiences informed on multiple formats.

For those thinking of getting a master's degree, here are a few things I learned along the journey — sometimes the hard way.

1. Pace yourself. Earning a master's is a marathon, not a sprint. Getting enough sleep is critical. Regularly staying up all night reading and cramming for a quiz or trying to pull off a last-minute paper can burn a person out — especially with a family and full-time job. Do your best, but don't allow yourself to get stressed out over every assignment.

2. Work ahead. I never knew if something unexpected with family, church, work or weather was going to derail my plans with getting school work done. Allowing time for those surprise moments is key.

3. Finish. I recently heard some great advice from an accomplished runner and Iron Man athlete. He said the finish line will always look different than you expect. Manage those lofty expectations and focus on finishing in a God-honoring way.

Finishing my master's was definitely worth all of the effort — and I couldn't have done it without great people around me.

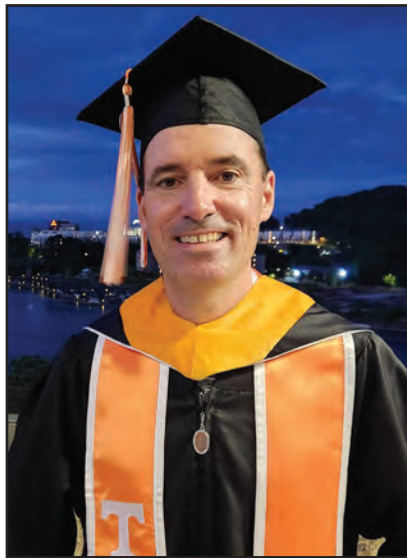


Photo courtesy of Shawn Hendricks/The Baptist Paper
Shawn Hendricks, content editor for The Baptist Paper, graduated May 20 in Knoxville, Tennessee.



The crossword puzzle can be found on page 13.

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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RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

By Jennifer Davis Rash, President and Editor-in-Chief



jrash@thealabamabaptist.org



@RashionalThts

Assessing the ethics, reality of our encounters with AI a vital next step

The new Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (known as ChatGPT) agreed with our staff at TAB Media Group on three titles when asked about movies and TV shows featuring artificial intelligence taking over the human race (see sidebar lists).

The number in common advanced to six when I resubmitted the question to ChatGPT with a more generic “AI taking on human qualities” description.

Whether by human recall or from the instantaneous software generated list (i.e. ChatGPT), it’s obvious how the concept of AI has been envisioned for more than 50 years.

What always seemed like science fiction and never quite a possibility may be on the brink of reality, at least according to OpenAI CEO Sam Altman.

‘It can go quite wrong’

Sitting before a panel of U.S. senators in Washington on May 16, Altman called for urgent regulations and laws to be put in place.

“My worst fear is that we cause significant harm to the world,” he said. “If this technology goes wrong, it can go quite wrong.”

Tech entrepreneur Elon Musk, who helped fund OpenAI, agrees.

“There’s a strong probability it will make life much better and ... some chance it goes wrong,” he said. “Hopefully that chance is small, but it’s not zero.”

Experts indicate OpenAI is showing signs of reasoning and say we should move beyond discussions of how to use it in business, education and ministry (see story, page 4).

Concerns are growing because OpenAI can falsify audio and create videos of a person doing or saying something that isn’t really the person being showcased.

OpenAI can write false news articles, undermine the governmental processes we have in place and possibly even start global conflicts.

With voice cloning and deep fake video technology, how can we know for sure something is real if we aren’t actually experiencing the situation firsthand?

OpenAI was released in November 2022 and reportedly already has more than 100 million users. I used it for the first time to create the list shown in the sidebar. It’s simple and an attractive time-saving tool.

If we aren’t careful, then we’ll let the busyness of life or the lack of understanding prevent us from working diligently and calmly with our congressional delegates on appropriate regulations.

Staff list for AI-related shows

- 2001: A Space Odyssey
- A.I.
- Blade Runner
- Chappie
- Her
- iRobot
- Lost in Space
- Minority Report
- Robocop
- Short Circuit
- Short Circuit 2
- Star Trek: The Motion Picture
- Star Wars
- Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles
- The Six Million Dollar Man
- The Terminator (all six)
- The Jetsons
- The Matrix
- The Mitchells vs. the Machines
- Transformers
- WALL-E
- Wreck-It Ralph

Compiled by Jennifer D. Rash

ChatGPT selections

Movies:

1. 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) - The AI system HAL 9000 turns against the human crew.
2. The Terminator series (1984-present) - AI systems known as Skynet become self-aware and wage war against humanity.
3. The Matrix Trilogy (1999-2003) - Machines with advanced AI enslave humanity and use them as a power source.
4. WarGames (1983) - An AI system controlling nuclear weapons threatens to start a global thermonuclear war.
5. Transcendence (2014) - A scientist uploads his consciousness into a superintelligent AI, which eventually takes over and threatens humanity.

TV Shows:

1. Battlestar Galactica (2004-2009) - AI robots called Cylons rebel against humans and initiate a devastating war.
2. Black Mirror: "Hated in the Nation" (2016) - Autonomous AI robotic bees become a threat to humanity.
3. Person of Interest (2011-2016) - The AI system known as "The Machine" evolves and becomes a powerful entity that fights to save humanity.
4. Westworld (2016-present) - The AI "hosts" in the theme park gradually gain sentience and pose a threat to human visitors.
5. The 100 (2014-2020) - AI systems known as "A.L.I.E." and "The Flame" seek to control humanity and enforce their own agendas.

These movies and TV shows depict scenarios where artificial intelligence becomes self-aware, gains control, and poses a significant threat to the human race.

Screengrab from ChatGPT

Your Voice



Share your comments, letters to the editor, blog excerpts, social media posts

Using ChatGPT in ministry — benefits and drawbacks

By Mark MacDonald
BeKnownforSomething.com

As technology advances, artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly relevant in many fields, including pastoral ministry.

Pastors can leverage AI with the assistance of the free AI content generator ChatGPT, which is found at chat.openai.com. They can use it to enhance their messages and potentially reach wider audiences while being mindful of ethical concerns.

The potential of AI in pastoral work

With an AI language model (like ChatGPT, Bard or Jasper), pastors can gain assistance in generating high-quality sermons, as well as other content that is engaging, inspiring and informative.

The content can be shared from the stage or on social media, posted on a church website or used in other ways to reach more people.

It can also help you redeem time by assisting in creating, researching and editing the content quite quickly. This allows more time for ministry.

Reaching a wider audience

By utilizing high standards of search engine optimization, AI can help pastors reach a wider audience

by making their content more accessible to those who might not have been reached otherwise, all by utilizing the power of Google.

You can get help from AI for keyword research, titles, outlines and even real-world stories that will help get the attention of many in your audience.



MACDONALD

Posted online, it can expand your reach to a greater community.

Saving time and energy

AI can help pastors stay organized, complete research tasks for support material and stay on top of ministry tasks by automat-

ing certain administrative tasks and providing reminders.

AI can also suggest how to improve and edit your content. Some AI even has the ability to rework content for better understanding or changing the tone.

It also helps with alliteration and symmetry in your outline.

Considering ethical questions

It's essential to be cautious when creating and utilizing AI-generated content. Ethical considerations must be taken into account, like ensuring the data used to train the AI algorithms is not biased and that the AI-generated content does not infringe on intellectual property rights.

You also need to use the same skepticism you would with any research content.

Additionally, it is crucial to be transparent about the use of AI-generated content and provide proper attribution of sources used.

Ultimately, strive to use AI technology in ways that are both effective and ethical, avoiding any unintended negative consequences. One note: Never use AI content unless it's checked thoroughly for accuracy. AI does not have a belief system; it just "learns" from web content (which could be incorrect).

Maintaining human connection and empathy

Pastors should use AI as a tool to supplement their content, rather than as a replacement for it, as they make sure to maintain a human connection with their congregations. Use AI as a research assistant to save you hours of preparation time so you have more time for interpersonal interactions.

Mitigating potential bias

As pastors work with AI models

that have been trained on a diverse range of data, pastors must check all AI-generated content against Scripture and beliefs.

AI can be a valuable addition to any pastor's ministry toolkit, helping save time and energy while still ensuring the message is effective, Scriptural and engaging.

However, pastors must be mindful of the ethical implications of using AI and take steps to ensure that their use of the technology aligns with their values.



Unsplash.com

EDITOR'S NOTE — Artificial intelligence is not new, having been part of our lives since the introduction of Siri, Alexa and chatbots, just to name a few examples. But the widespread use of ChatGPT has generated some interesting discussions, not only in the tech world but also in business, education and ministry (see page 3).

Are you a pastor or ministry leader using ChatGPT or other AI tools in research, sermon prep, personal Bible study, teaching or other ways? Are you an educator grappling with how the technology will impact your teaching or your students' work?

We would love to hear about your experiences, good and bad. Send your thoughts and questions to news@thealabamabaptist.org.

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

“If just one baby’s life is saved because the baby’s mom makes an adoption plan, it’s worth it.”

DARIA MONROE

Executive director of Women’s Hope Medical Clinic in Auburn

When we allow the lust of the flesh or the world to entice us, we have begun the downward dive of disobedience.

Pastor Bobby McKay
The Baptist Paper Sunday
School commentary

Discipleship happens best when we’re in a relationship with other believers. The goal of ongoing groups, to make disciples, flows directly from Jesus’ command to His church in the Great Commission.

Ken Braddy
Director of Sunday School
Lifeway Christian Resources

God has chosen in His sovereignty to take students prematurely who were sold out to Jesus. After their

passing, God sparked a revival in the hearts of students at our church and in this community.

Pastor Robby Gallaty
Long Hollow Baptist Church
Hendersonville, Tenn.

We have to use everything at our disposal to make sure people get to hear the gospel in a way they understand.

DeAndre’ Burns
General manager
Flatline Movement

We want to feed the sheep, and this is our little corner of His Kingdom where we get to, hopefully, create things that encourage the hearts of believers to remember who they are in Christ, remember what He’s

done, remember what He’s coming to do and to implant the Word of God in people’s hearts so they would sing it.

Shane Everett
Shane & Shane

Don’t let anyone’s definition of you limit what God has called you to do. It’s not necessarily about belief in yourself, it’s about belief in the One who created you.

Amy Hacker
the-scroll.com
“Great small things”

We learn from doing, and we learn from each other.

Ken Allen
Director, office of LeaderCare
Alabama Baptist SBOM



Chitchat

What people are talking about on social media

@hockster1971

You may not know it, but your church services attendance encourages your pastor and fellow church members!

Instagram

Jesus observed the difference between a disciple and a would-be disciple. He saw some “fall away,” some become “false prophets” and some people whose love grew “cold.” A few latched on to Him, but they didn’t stick. They didn’t lose their salvation — they never had it.

What was the proof in the pudding to Jesus? “But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved” (Matt. 24:13). God appeals

to all believers to serve Him. He doesn’t care how pretty you are, whether you’re the smartest cookie in the jar, or how fast you move. He just wants you to get the job done.

Darryl Wood
Vincent, Ala.
via Facebook

@AlistairBegg

“Are you wholly convinced that you need the help of God to do what He has called you to do?”

—Colin Smith

@BillyGraham

“God promises no easy life or days without troubles, trials, difficulties, and temptations. He never promises that life will be perfect. He does not call His children to a

playground, but to a battleground.”
#BillyGraham

@kmmebangs

When a father in the faith passes, it causes me to wonder what that first moment — seeing Jesus face to face — hearing, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord” is like. I can only imagine the celebration. Thank you, Pastor [Tim] Keller.
#heishome

Instagram

@NationalWMU

What is God calling you to do? Don’t be afraid! Remain in Him and go forth with confidence knowing He has already given you the victory!

Working together as believers

Unity is woven into creation, from delicate environmental ecosystems to the harmony of the human body’s many interdependent systems.

Many moving parts, working in concert, is what gets us up in the morning, gets us to work in the morning and gets us home at night.

When just one of these parts is not working; when there is a discordant note in our day, we feel it. A pain in our joints. An oil leak in the minivan. A natural disaster in our town.

The Bible speaks of this kind of togetherness when it comes to the way Christians are called to relate to each other.

When we think of Christian unity, perhaps we don’t often envision the seamless cohesion of an Olympic rowing team.

Instead, unity hits our ears and sounds like something sappy and sentimental like a bunch of religious people holding hands in a weird circle around a campfire. Or like the formulaic schmaltz of Hallmark movies.

However, togetherness is an essential part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. ... [It] is not something we create, but something God has already done in Jesus.

Whether we recognize it or not, we are unified with Christ and unified with the people of God.

This is what is symbolized at our baptism as we are plunged into the waters of death and as we rise again in newness of life.

We are in Christ and we are also plunged into the worldwide communion of saints in heaven and in earth.

Excerpt from “Agents of Grace: How to Bridge Divides and Love as Jesus Loves” by Dan Darling, director of the Land Center for Cultural Engagement at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

3 stories you should know



Photo by Van Payne/The Alabama Baptist

International Mission Board trustees approved 92 fully funded missionaries for appointment during their May 17–18 meeting in Richmond, Virginia. In what has become a much-anticipated part of the SBC Annual Meeting, the missionaries will be recognized during a Sending Celebration on June 13 in New Orleans. The event will be livestreamed on sbcannualmeeting.net. For more SBC news and annual meeting information, go to thebaptistpaper.org/sbc-2023. (TAB)

US Dept. of Education releases prayer update

The U.S. Department of Education has updated its guidance on prayer and other religious expressions in public schools.

The new guidance says “Teachers, school administrators and other school employees may not encourage or discourage private prayer or other religious activity.” It clarifies that the U.S. Constitution allows school employees to engage in private prayer during the workday but does not allow school employees to compel students to join them.

The guidance follows last year’s Supreme Court ruling in *Kennedy vs. Bremerton*, which said a football coach’s prayer on the 50-yard line after games was a personal religious observance and thus protected under the First Amendment.

Read the full DOE update at tabonline.org/school-prayer. (TAB)

Only half of Americans attend religious services

Data released in May by the Public Religion Research Institute shows a decline in the importance Americans place on religion.

PRRI’s 2022 American Values Atlas finds fewer people identifying as religious. Almost half of Americans say they seldom (28%) or never (29%) attend religious services.

More people report that they have changed denominations or religious traditions during their lifetimes. The vast majority said they were younger than 18 (27%) or between 18 and 29 (44%) when they made the switch.

More than half (56%) of those who switched said they stopped believing in the religion’s teachings.

Just 16% of Americans surveyed said religion is the most important thing in their lives.

Read the full report at tabonline.org/prri-2022. (TAB)

Persecuted church

Ugandan student killed for sharing gospel with Muslim classmates

LIRA, Uganda — A college student was slain April 14, reportedly for telling Muslims about Jesus Christ.

Morning Star News identified the slain student as Jeremiah Mwanga. Mwanga, 24, was attacked in his room at Uganda Christian Institute for Professional Development in Lira, according to sources.

The suspect was also a student at the school and also was from Kapchorwa District, the same place as Mwanga, the friend said.

Mwanga had received phone messages threatening his life if he continued to tell Muslims about Jesus and to convert them to Christianity, a friend of Mwanga told Morning Star.

Kapchorwa police arrested the suspect, who

was transported to Lira and charged with murder, the friend said.

Uganda’s constitution and laws allow for freedom of religion, including converting from one faith to another. However, in recent years, Christian converts have been attacked, killed or excommunicated by Muslim family members, the World Atlas reports.



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Pakistani Christian widow charged with blasphemy, released on bail

LAHORE, Pakistan — A Christian widow facing life imprisonment in Pakistan on a blasphemy charge has been released on bail.

Morning Star News, quoting an attorney, says Musarrat Bibi was released May 13 on a bond of 100,000 rupees (\$338).

Bibi and co-worker Muhammad Sarmad, a Muslim, were arrested in April and charged with blasphemy for burning papers that reportedly bore verses from the Quran.

The two were cleaning a storeroom at the school where they worked and burned some of the items deemed trash.

The attorney said both Bibi and Sarmad are illiterate and did not know what they were burning. The attorney said proving intent is necessary for a blasphemy conviction.

Sarmad was released under the same terms as Bibi, one attorney said.

Pakistan is No. 7 on Open Doors’ 2023 World Watch List of places most difficult to be a Christian.

Alabama news

BIRMINGHAM METRO ASSOCIATION

► **Meg Brown** is the new minister to children at **Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham**, where she has been interim minister to children since December.

Brown holds a bachelor's degree in educational ministry and public relations from Campbellsville University and a master of divinity degree in leadership from Southern Seminary.

She served as Dawson's associate minister to children from December 2019 to December 2022. She previously worked as a contract writer and editor for Lifeway Christian Resources; director of women's ministry and Porter kids for Porter Memorial Baptist Church, Lexington, Kentucky; member of Lifeway camps and events team; and director of CentriKid Camps.



BROWN

COVINGTON ASSOCIATION

► Vacation Bible School at **Harmony Baptist Church, Andalusia**, is June 11–16. "Twists & Turns" will be each night from 5:30 until 8 p.m. for prekindergarten children through students in 12th grade. Scott Donaldson is pastor.

DEKALB ASSOCIATION

► **Keith Hawkins** is the new youth pastor of **Mount Zion Baptist Church, Boaz**. He was previously pastor of Liberty Hill Baptist Church, Horton, and youth pastor of Bethsaida Baptist Church, Boaz.



HAWKINS

He holds a bachelor's degree in business management from Jacksonville State University.

He and his wife, Erin, have three children.

ETOWAH ASSOCIATION

► Longtime minister of music **Ron Partain**, 78, retired April 30 from **Riverbend Baptist Church, Gadsden**, where he has served since 2013. The church hosted a special service along with a luncheon and reception.

He was saved at age 15 at Boyles Baptist Church, Tarrant. He holds a bachelor's degree in music from Howard College (now Samford University) and has led high school and college choir tours all over the country, including performances at the Brooklyn Tabernacle, United Nations and 12 major league baseball games.



Photo courtesy of Kevin Blackwell

Most of his positions have been in Alabama, including his first at age 15 at Springdale Baptist Church, Tarrant. Other churches he served are First Baptist Church Fultondale; FBC Ashland; Westwood Baptist Church, Forestdale; Lakeside Baptist Church, Birmingham; FBC Roanoke; FBC Alexander City; Red Star Baptist Church, Cape Girardeau, Missouri; Northside Baptist Church, Anniston; Arbor Baptist Church, Pell City; Inglenook Baptist Church, Birmingham; Bethel Baptist Church, Odenville; FBC Moody; and FBC Childersburg.

He owns Ron Partain's World of Music in Pell City. Partain previously sang with Alabama Singing Men for several years.

He and his wife, Sandra, have two children and seven grandchildren.

MONTGOMERY ASSOCIATION

► **Billy Dickey**, who served as pastor of discipleship and senior adults of **Eastmont Baptist Church, Montgomery**, retired April 30 after 16 years of service. He began at Eastmont in 2007 as missions and evangelism minister, and he led more than 21 international missions trips.



DICKEY

He plans to continue as director of Alabama Raceway Ministry, which has eight ministry sites in and around Talladega Superspeedway.

He retired from Steris Corporation in 2007 with more than 26 years as a production machinist.

He and his wife, Debbie, have three children and 10 grandchildren.

► **Brooke Mills** is the new director of international ministries for **Montgomery Baptist Association** and headmaster of the MBA Conversational English school. She has worked with the governor's office as disaster preparedness and response director and community preparedness and response director and currently works as a grant manager with United Way of Alabama.

Mills holds a bachelor's degree in business administration from Troy University and has completed independent coursework for the Emergency Management Institute.

She and her husband, Chris, have two children. He is a student missions mobilizer in the collegiate and student ministries office of the State Board of Missions.

► **Susan West** is retiring as **Montgomery Baptist Association's** director of Conversational English after serving there 12 years.

West holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood education from Troy State University and a master's degree in early childhood education from Auburn University at Montgomery.



WEST

She previously served through First Baptist Church Montgomery in the ESL Cafe and the church's ministry to internationals, and she was a tutor for Korean students.

Prior to that, West was a kindergarten/first grade teacher in Elmore County and a teacher in Covington County.

She and her husband, Tommy, have three children and six grandchildren.

MORGAN ASSOCIATION

► **Elizabeth Carter** has retired as pastoral care and missions associate of **First Baptist Church Decatur**.

She will remain on staff as a part-time pastoral care associate. Carter began her service in 1984 as assistant minister of music. She served as pastoral care and missions associate when the church wasn't meeting in person during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously she served as assistant minister of music of Farmdale Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky from 1980 to 1983.

She holds a bachelor of music degree in pipe organ performance from Grand Rapids Baptist Bible College in Michigan (now Cornerstone University) and a master's degree in organ pedagogy from Southern Seminary.

She has two children.



CARTER

WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION

► **Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, Millry**, will celebrate homecoming June 4. Singing starts at 10:30 a.m. with worship at 11. Ernest Tucker, who is a former pastor of the church, will deliver the message. Lunch is at noon. Singing will follow lunch.



MILLS

Does your association or church have a new staff member, an upcoming event or other news you would like to announce?

Email news@thealabamabaptist.org or go to tabonline.org/news and fill out the form. Submit events at least three weeks prior to the date.

Next-gen resource aims to help young believers

If you were to take a snapshot of today's children and students, a simple two-part question could serve as the outline: "Who am I, and where do I belong?"

"The next generation is growing up with a foundationally secular worldview that tells them the meaning of life is found in discovering themselves," said Chuck Peters, director of kids for Lifeway Christian Resources. "The pressure to do this has resulted in unprecedented levels of anxiety, loneliness and a desperate need to belong."

Concerning picture

Peters and his colleagues at Lifeway Research have been studying statistics and trends related to today's kids and youth and comparing the findings to research on past generations dating back to the 1920s.

The data paints a concerning picture, one Peters details in the book, "Flip the Script: Disrupting Tradition for the Sake of the Next Generation."

Peters and co-authors Jana Magruder and Stephanie Salvatore note that in each succeeding generation, the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian and attend church regularly has dropped at an accelerated pace.

Atheism and agnosticism are on the rise in younger generations, while Americans' confidence in the church has fallen to a record low.

Despite these trends, Peters believes the church is poised to reach the next

generation if it is willing to picture a new approach to ministering to children and youth.

Relationships

The authors of "Flip the Script" describe the traditional ministry model as a content-first strategy that consists of teaching the

Bible (hearing), presenting the gospel (believing) and encouraging evangelism (sharing).

The authors insist that sound doctrine and gospel clarity

are essential to Christian ministry. However, meeting young people where they are is critical to engaging them in issues of faith.

"A content-first strategy

assumes prior knowledge and a readiness to learn, something that doesn't apply to kids and youth who are unfamiliar with Christianity and leery of church and the Bible," said Peters.

Instead, he suggests a relationship-first starting point, moving from "hear" to "here" in five stages:

▶ **Listening** — Engage kids and students with fun experiences that foster a sense of belonging and open ears to hear spiritual truths.

▶ **Understanding** — Present foundational truths about who God is and what He is like.

▶ **Believing** — Offer the gospel in context framed around content kids and students are studying.

▶ **Growing** — Help students nurture an identity based on God's character.

▶ **Reaching** — Give kids and students opportunities to go, serve and tell.

Children become open to learning about who God is when they feel a sense of belonging, Peters said.

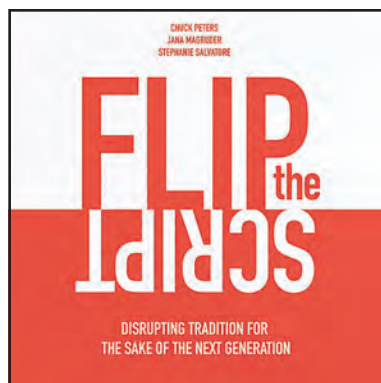
"When kids and students base their identities in who God is, they love God and want others to know Him."

State of confusion

Peters acknowledges the next generation is in a state of confusion with more questions than answers. But as he pictures the future, he envisions the church helping write a new outline.

"Church leaders face a challenging but amazing opportunity to reach the next generation," he said.

"In the midst of an anxious, lonely and perplexed culture, we can demonstrate the power of biblical relationships, present the gospel and offer the only satisfying solution to the hunger for true identity — Jesus Christ." (Lifeway)



BIRMINGHAM

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Photo courtesy of Roger Willmore

Children participate in the Calhoun Baptist Association Bible Drill competition held April 16 at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Alexandria. Among other skills, Bible Drill requires students to memorize verses and passages from Scripture.

‘FOR GOD’S GLORY’

Bible Drill helps students practice persistence in knowing, applying Scripture

(continued from page 1)
 story of Abraham’s faith in Genesis 22 and the importance of picking up your cross and following Jesus, as He spoke about in Matthew 16:24–25.

Ava shared a personal story describing the cost of losing a friend because she decided to stand on God’s Word rather than to conform to her friend’s acceptance of the LGBTQ+ lifestyle.

“I told her that though I don’t agree with [the choice], I still have love for [the individuals],” Ava explained in her speech.

Ava said her advice to other teenagers facing the same dilemma is to “pray about it because God is going to lead you where you need to be.”

“It is better to listen to God rather than to listen to peers,” she said. “Peers might go for the revengeful answer more than the peaceful.”

Tammy Coulter said she admires her daughter’s persistence in trusting Christ in spite of her physical challenges.

Used by God

“After going through surgeries and going through physical therapy and the clinical trial, she could have gone a different way, and I am so proud of her. She could have given up on God, but she has allowed Him to use [her condition] for God’s glory,” Coulter said.

Now, Ava is helping younger students in Bible Drill, as well as serving in the nursery at her church.

A homeschooled student, she is also active in theater and yearbook at Lion’s Gate Christian Co-op.

Even after all these years, she still loves training for Bible Drill.

“I love everything about Drill,” she said. “My teacher is amazing, and I don’t know what I would do without her. I love the challenge.”

Belinda Stroud, children’s ministry specialist for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions who provides leadership for Bible Drill and Speakers Tournament, said

Ava is an “inspiration” to those who have watched her grow up participating in Bible Drill over the past eight years.

“It has been such a privilege,” Stroud said. “She has not allowed her physical limitations to limit her learning God’s Word.”

“She has memorized many verses and passages and, I believe, has learned

in that process how to apply them to her life,” Stroud said.

For more information about Bible Drill and Speakers Tournament, visit kidzlinkal.org/bible-drill.

“That was evident as she presented her speech this spring at our competitions. I look forward to seeing how God continues to use her.”

Book available

In 2022, Tammy Coulter wrote about Ava and the family’s medical journey in “She Is My Child: What My Daughter’s Medical Journey Taught Me About Faith, My Heavenly Father and Flying Standby.” The book is available at online book retailers.

BIBLE DRILL AND SPEAKERS TOURNAMENT WINNERS



Photo courtesy of Belinda Stroud

Samuel Hopkins, Speakers Tournament 1st place; and Ava Coulter, Speakers Tournament 2nd place.



Photo courtesy of Belinda Stroud

(L to r) Samuel Hopkins, Speakers Tournament winner, Whitesburg Baptist Church in Huntsville; Jonas Browder, Youth Bible Drill winner, East Centre Baptist Church; Madisen Holder, High School Bible Drill winner, FBC Centre.

Clifton shares revitalization vision with Alabama pastors

By Michael J. Brooks
The Alabama Baptist

Mark Clifton insists that churches under 200 in attendance for Sunday morning worship aren't small but "normative."

"The median attendance in North American Protestant churches is 67," he said. "A Southern Baptist church with 200 or less on Sunday is in the 90th percentile in our denomination. God has a plan for every church, and every church is called by Him to make a large footprint in its community."

Clifton, senior director of replanting for North American Mission Board, addressed church leaders at the Birmingham Metro Baptist Association conference center May 11.

He spoke at a breakfast earlier in the day to leaders interested in partnering with other congregations in adoption, and then he spoke to pastors and other staff at a lunch meeting about the characteristics of effective replanters and revitalizers.

Future-focused outlook

To keep a future-focused outlook on church outreach, Clifton said pastors and church leaders should go to the nearest McDonald's after worship and observe what the neighborhood looks like.

"What frequently happens is that the church doesn't mirror its community, such as in age or ethnic-

ity or expectations," he said. "A renewed church is a platform to display God's grace ... and a lighthouse of hope in its neighborhood."

Clifton suggested the revitalizing pastor has several characteristics.

"The pastor is a shepherd because he loves the people, not necessarily so he can lead them," he said. "This means we love and pray for those who oppose us. We live out the fruit of the Holy Spirit."

Renewed ministry

"But the shepherd doesn't lead in a circle," Clifton said. "He uses the credibility he's gained through genuine love for the people to help the church catch a vision for renewed ministry."

Pastors must grow in leadership skills, Clifton said.

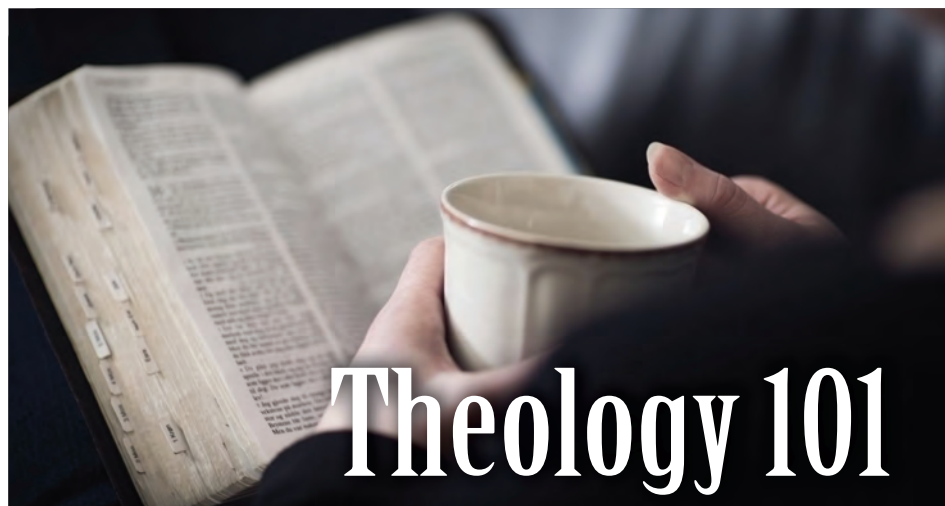
"We have resources today that help us learn to do anything, so we mustn't believe we can't grow in people and leadership skills," he said. "Every pastor can learn to be a better pastor."

Clifton served as revitalization pastor for Linwood Baptist Church in Linwood, Kansas, for several years, but the church recently named a full-time pastor. Clifton is now transitional pastor for Spring Valley Baptist Church in Raytown, Missouri. "I love the local church, and I do my work for NAMB to support myself so I can do what I really love on Sundays," he said.



Photo courtesy of Toni Wall

Mark Clifton, senior director of replanting for North American Mission Board, addresses church leaders at the Birmingham Metro Baptist Association conference center May 11.



BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Christ's Ascension

Jesus Returns to Heaven

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
The Alabama Baptist

Though Christmas and Easter always get full attention and emphasis in church worship and Christian thinking, Christ's ascension can pass almost without notice.

The Gospels reveal that the ascension of Christ occurred 40 days following His resurrection. That made Thursday the day of His departure back to heaven.

Since a weekday like Thursday is not a regular churchgoing day of the week, Christians historically have recognized the following Sunday as Ascension Sunday.

In the coming weeks, we will focus on that very significant event that climaxed Christ's earthly mission.

'I go to prepare a place'

If we read the New Testament through an "ascension lens," we might be surprised at the numerous references and allusions made to the ascension of Christ.

Jesus alluded to His ascension the night before His crucifixion when He declared to the disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). Shortly following those words, Jesus spoke about the one who believes in Him being able to do greater works, saying, "Greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father" (14:12).

On the day of His resurrection, Jesus referred to His ascension when instructing Mary Magdalene to stop joyously clinging to Him, saying, "I have not yet ascended to My Father" (20:17).

Paul reminded Timothy of the "mystery of godliness" with a series of summary statements about Christ: "God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:16).

'At the right hand of God'

Hebrews 4:14 encourages us to steadfastness of faith and refers to the ascension: "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession."

At the end of a difficult and much-debated passage about "spirits in prison," Peter wrote a clear and ringing affirmation about the ascension and preeminence of Jesus by declaring that He "has gone into heaven, and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him" (1 Pet. 3:22).

This sampling of ascension references can serve to whet our spiritual appetites for further thinking about the doctrinal significance of the ascension of Christ.

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.



Dealing with cybercrime

‘Shock, sadness and anger’: No church ‘immune to the risks of fraud’

By David Roach
The Alabama Baptist

Cybercrime has hit Southern Baptists hard over the past year.

The Florida Baptist Convention announced in May it was “the victim of a highly sophisticated cybercrime which used fraudulent emails.”

Florida Baptist leaders said the convention is working with authorities to recover \$700,000 that was stolen through “cybertargeting.”

The theft was reportedly related to the convention’s Send Network Florida account in partnership with the North American Mission Board.

“Our convention staff and state board of missions is distraught over this loss of financial resources,” Florida Baptist leaders said in a statement. “It is our desire in all that we do to bring glory to our Lord and Savior and to continue earning the trust of the churches we serve when we distribute the sacrificial resources given through tithes and offerings.”

Cybercrime happens at churches too.

Elkin Valley Baptist Church in Elkin, North Carolina, was hit to the tune of nearly \$800,000 in November, when fraudsters tricked the church into paying them the money due a construction company for work on a new worship center.

Preventive policies needed

Those instances of fraud underscore the need for every church to institute preventive policies, as well as procedures to follow if cybercrime does occur.

The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability covered both those topics in an April webinar titled “Fraud Case Studies and Controls to Protect Your Organization.”



Unsplash.com

“There truly is no ministry that is immune to the risks of fraud,” said webinar presenter Nathan Salsbery, an executive vice president with the accounting firm CapinCrouse LLP.

He said that even Jesus’ ministry was a victim of fraud by Judas, who stole from the ministry’s treasury, according to John 12:6.

“If Jesus can be stolen from in His ministry purse, any of our ministries can be,” he said.

Research confirms that claim. Nearly a third (30%) of all U.S. churches have experienced fraud, according to a 2021 survey by Church Law & Tax.

Of the fraud cases, 42% involved “inappropriate expenses or inappropriate expense reimbursements.” Nearly 30% involved stealing contributions, while 12% were payroll fraud and inaccurate timesheets.

With so much fraud among ministries, must churches resign themselves to be sitting ducks? Absolutely not, say Salsbery and his

webinar co-presenter Kenneth Tan, a partner at CapinCrouse.

Every church and ministry should educate its leaders at least annually on the risk of fraud, according to the webinar. Such education should include how to submit a tip about potential fraud, red flags of fraud and the need to review credit card statements monthly.

‘Trust but verify’

Churches should establish a “clear segregation of duties” when it comes to finances, Tan added. Even small churches should not have only one person handling all financial administration. Thorough outsourcing some processes and sharing others among employees and committees, churches can increase their level of security.

“Trust but verify,” Tan said. Trust “plays a big role in an organization,” but “we want to make sure we can hold each other accountable and help try and prevent that type of temptation from coming in.”

Fraud occurs when opportunity, incentive and rationalization occur at the same time. Ministries must work hard to decrease opportunity and incentive, Salsbery said, and know even church employees are prone to rationalizing financial crime.

Rationalizing

“Nobody wants to feel like they’re a fraudster,” he said. People rationalize their theft by thinking, “I’m not going to steal the money; I’m just going to borrow it,” or, “I haven’t had a raise for three years, so I’m just going to take a little money that really is kind of owed to me.”

If fraud does occur, a church should communicate quickly with “whoever needs to know,” Salsbery said. That should include leadership and possibly legal counsel. At times, it is wise to press charges against the criminal.

“If you don’t [press charges], there is the risk of an individual who commits fraud at one ministry getting terminated, and then they are hired a couple of weeks later by another ministry,” Salsbery said, “and they might be tempted to do the same thing.”

While fraud can be devastating, it does not stop God’s work at a church or ministry.

Back in North Carolina, Elkin Valley has received financial support from dozens of donors as well as the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. Pastor Johnny Blevins said he is encouraged.

“It’s kind of like a grief situation,” Blevins said. “You go through the shock, the sadness and the anger, and we’ve been through all of that. But as people of faith, we’ll trust God through this and keep moving.”

UPCOMING EVENTS

sponsored by the State Board of Missions



Photo by Bethany Kelley

Fortify event to help teen guys strengthen faith

The world can be tough on teen guys. But they can find help at Fortify, a one-day event aimed at shoring up their faith.

Fortify, set for Aug. 26 at Westwood Baptist Church in Alabaster, seeks to strengthen guys in 7th–12th grades with hard-hitting biblical teaching.

The goal is to reveal their Christ-centered identity in response to the confusing messages of today's culture.

The speaker will be Jason Cook, senior pastor of Fellowship Bible Church near Atlanta.

The cost is \$20. For more information or to register, visit alabamamen.org/fortify.



COOK

To register, visit alabamamen.org/fortify or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



To register, visit alsbom.org/churchadmin or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



Church Administrative Guidelines workshop

It's important for a church to know the need for and benefit of proper legal and operating documents. Church Administrative Guidelines covers the process for developing your church's articles of incorporation, church constitution,

bylaws, policies and procedures.

This workshop will be held June 20, 10 a.m.–3 p.m., at the SBOM Office Facility in Prattville. The cost is \$15 and includes lunch.

To register, visit alsbom.org/churchadmin.

TAB CLASSIFIEDS

Place a classified ad below for \$1 per word. For more information call 205-870-4720, ext. 200, or email ads@thealabamabaptist.org. To place an online classified ad for \$9.99/month, visit thealabamabaptist.org/classifieds.

CHURCH POSITIONS

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR
Paden Baptist Church, 900 Padenreich Ave., Gadsden, Alabama, is prayerfully seeking resumés for bivocational pastor. Please send resumés to church address, ATTN: Pastor Search Committee or to: padenbaptistchurch@yahoo.com.

WORSHIP LEADER/CHOIR DIRECTOR

Calvary Baptist Church in Fayette, Alabama, has an opening for a worship leader/choir director. Duties include leading congregational singing on Sunday morning, choir specials and children's music. Send resumé to: hthigpen@hotmail.com.

PART-TIME MINISTER OF MUSIC

Westwood Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama, is eagerly seeking a part-time minister of music. Contact Pastor Steve Potts: 205-798-3341, email: stevepotts@westwoodbc.net.

MINISTER OF STUDENTS & RECREATION

Heritage Baptist Montgomery is receiving resumés for minister of students and recreation. This team member will develop and implement discipleship strategies for 6th grade through college as well as manage the daily operation of our fitness center/recreation ministry. Full time with insurance and retirement benefits. Send resumés to: Jennifer Foster at jennifer@hbcm.net.

MINISTER TO CHILDREN

NorthPark Baptist Church in Trussville, Alabama, is looking for a full-time minister to children. The minister will lead programming and events for children, mentor young families, and train and oversee volunteer children's ministry workers. Email your resumé and questions to team@NPonline.org.

OTHER POSITIONS

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

North Shelby Baptist is currently seeking a full-time administrative assistant, to provide general administrative and office support. Two to three years administrative experience is required as well as proficiency in Microsoft Office Suite products. In depth database entry and membership management experience preferred. The ability to be accurate, detailed and multi-task are necessary. Web-

site maintenance, social media knowledge and understanding of the Baptist Church a plus. Please email resumé to: finance@northshelbybaptist.org.

FINANCIAL CLERK

Financial clerk needed. Part time average of 15 hours weekly. Payables, payroll, contribution entry, etc. Send resumés to: tplant@sbcandalusia.com.

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MINISTRIES

POTTER'S HOUSE MINISTRIES

Make a lasting impact. Support Potter's House Ministries. Help us start Christian children's homes for abandoned children in Romania. Donate today — pottershouseministries.org for more information.

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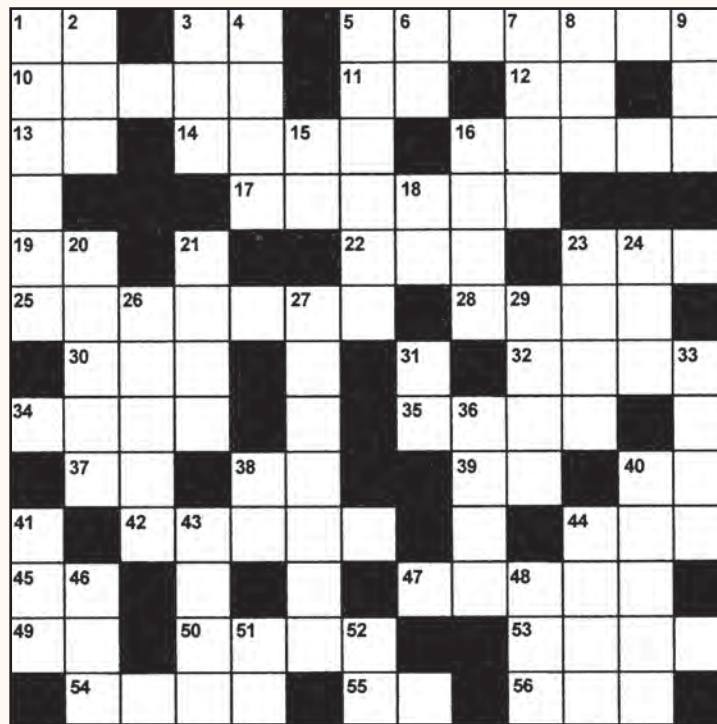
Hosted Church is a premium one-stop shop for your church or nonprofit to quickly get your website up and running without sacrificing quality and functionality. Hosted Church is an extension of The Alabama Baptist and The Baptist Paper and is dedicated to helping small to medium churches. Contact us at hostedchurch.com.

CHRISTIAN Crossword



ACROSS

1. River in northern Italy.
3. Before Christ. (abbr.)
5. The ____ of the loaves. (Mark 6:52)
10. ____ unto God thanksgiving. (Ps. 50:14)
11. Glory be to God ____ high.
12. Musical note.
13. ____ it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it. (Acts 5:39)
14. To patch a hole in a sock.
16. The lowest point.
17. The ____ of Jesus was there. (John 2:1)
19. Have mercy ____ me. (Matt. 15:22)
22. To hurry away.
23. ____ meal; a cereal.
25. Let all the ____ be gathered together. (Isa. 43:9)
28. The quick and the _____. (1 Pet. 4:5)
30. Let your moderation be known unto all _____. (Phil. 4:5)
32. A type of bomb.
34. In order; picked up.
35. They shall walk every one in his _____. (Joel 2:8)
37. Senior. (abbr.)
38. _____, so would we have it. (Ps. 35:25)
39. Bachelor of science. (abbr.)
40. Television. (abbr.)
42. Paul stood on the _____s, and beckoned. (Acts 21:40)
44. That they may be one, as we _____. (John 17:11)
45. Ye shall be _____ gods. (Gen. 3:5)
47. The fruit of righteousness is sown in _____. (James 3:18)
49. 3.14159265.
50. A wise man.
53. Persia is now known as ____.
54. The time is now _____.



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23. If a man ... swear an _____. (Num. 30:2)
 24. Why make ye this _____, and weep? (Mark 5:39)
 26. Began to wash his feet with _____. (Luke 7:38)
 27. Say _____ to any man. (Mark 1:44)
 29. Ingests.
 31. When the sun was _____. (Matt. 13:6)
 33. In him we live, and _____. (Acts 17:28)
 36. He is _____ also to save. (Heb. 7:25)
 38. Support group for problem drinkers.
 40. Power to _____ on ... scorpions. (Luke 10:19)
 41. A little rest.
 43. He will turn and _____ thee like a ball. (Isa. 22:18)
 44. Men, within ... an half _____ of land. (1 Sam. 14:14)
 46. To drink slowly.
 48. The way of an eagle in the _____. (Prov. 30:19)
 51. Evil unto him that was _____ peace. (Ps. 7:4)
 52. Children of Gad called the altar _____.
 - (Josh. 22:34)
- DOWN**
1. The _____ of asps is under their lips. (Rom. 3:13)
 2. Not on.
 3. I have made my _____ in the darkness. (Job 17:13)
 4. To study for a test at the last minute.
 5. There are 12 in a year.
 6. I am _____ the Father. (John 14:10)
 7. The promise is ... to all that are _____ off. (Acts 2:39)
 8. A man who is a heel is called a _____.
 9. Give _____ to my words, O Lord. (Ps. 5:1)
 15. Nickname for Rosemary.
 16. I am rich, and ... have _____ of nothing. (Rev. 3:17)
 18. Hello!
 20. Whose _____ are in the book of life. (Phil. 4:3)
 21. To give clues.

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

Called Conference Aug. 5 at Samford

For a teenager or young adult, the call to ministry can seem like the most complex decision to wade through. That's why the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions created the Called conference.

The conference, which will be held Aug. 5 at Samford University, is a one-day event designed to help young men and women, high school through college, who are considering the life-changing call to ministry.

The speaker will be Jamie Dew, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Ryan John Band will be the worship leader. There will be breakout sessions led by ministry leaders from fields including age-

To register, visit alabamamen.org/called or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.

graded ministry, missions, church planting, discipleship and more. The cost for the conference is \$30. Lunch will be provided. For more information or to register, visit alabamamen.org/called.



Photo courtesy of Mitchell Bruce

Attending the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans?

Stop by the State Board of Missions booth right behind Lifeway in the SBC exhibit hall for a visit and join the celebration as we commemorate 200 years of Alabama Baptist missions and ministry!



SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For June 4

Explore the Bible

By Jay T. Robertson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Mobile



PREPARES Jeremiah 1:4–19

Jeremiah was from Anathoth, a town near Jerusalem in the territory of Benjamin. He has often been called the “Weeping Prophet” because of his personal anguish over the coming captivity.

God required Jeremiah to remain unmarried and childless. His prophetic call came around 627 B.C., when he was still young (v. 6).

His message of coming judgment isolated him and exposed him to danger. For 40 years he proclaimed the Word of the Lord in Judah and remained there even after Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. According to chapter 43, he was forced to go to Egypt and probably died there.

Created (4–10)

The Lord created and called Jeremiah to be His prophet. Before Jeremiah was even born, God’s “sonogram” revealed a person who was called for a specific purpose.

We learn important truths in verses 4–5. God is the Lord of life. He created Jeremiah in his mother’s womb. A fetus is a person created in the image of God, not tissue.

God is sovereign and gracious. The fact that God did all of this before Jeremiah was conceived demonstrates His grace and not that Jeremiah did anything to deserve it.

Jeremiah had two main objections to becoming a prophet. He told the Lord he had a lack of eloquence and a lack of experience. God did not rebuke Jeremiah but instead gave him three reasons he should obey the divine call on his life. God assured Jeremiah that He would guide him where He wanted him to go, give him the message to speak to the people and be with him and protect him.

The Lord then reached out and touched Jeremiah’s mouth. He assured Jeremiah that he would serve

as His prophet to proclaim both judgment and hope to his sinful people. He will be used both to tear down and to build.

Watched (11–16)

The Lord revealed two visions to Jeremiah. The first vision was of an almond tree. This word picture in verses 11–12 is a play on words.

The Hebrew word for “almond” sounds identical to the word for “watch.” God is taking specific care over His Word to accomplish it.

Jeremiah can speak with confidence. What God says will be accomplished. Every time Jeremiah would see an almond tree, it would remind him that God always keeps His Word.

The second vision was of a boiling pot tilted from the north to the south about to be poured out.

God was revealing to Jeremiah that he was going to use an enemy invasion from the north and would inflict pain like the pain of a scalding pot.

While Babylon was east of Judah, in order to avoid traveling through the Arabian desert, the Babylonians would attack Judah from the north by way of Syria.

God was going to send judgment on His people because they had broken the covenant when they worshipped other gods they had made with their own hands. Sin is serious, and we need to remember that every sin will be pardoned in Christ or punished in hell.

Charged (17–19)

It was time for Jeremiah to obey the Lord and proclaim His Word. God told him not to be intimidated by the people. The kings, officials, priests and the people of Judah would oppose him, but they would never prevail over him because the Lord would rescue him.

**“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you.”**

Jeremiah 1:5

Bible Studies for Life

Roy Ciampa, Ph.D.
Armstrong Chair of Religion, Samford University



JETHRO AND MOSES Exodus 18:9–11, 14–21

Moses was in an untenable situation and needed help from a wise mentor. Jethro was a good listener whose heart was responsive to the news of God’s great work on Israel’s behalf.

Acknowledge where you see the hand of God at work. (9–11)

Although he was a priest of Midian, Jethro came to recognize that there was no god like the Lord (Yahweh), who had redeemed His people from all of their enemies.

Moses’s testimony of all God had done for His people opened Jethro’s heart to the truth about the God of Israel.

Jethro’s affirmation that God was powerfully at work through Moses reminds us of the importance of acknowledging God’s work not only in and through us, but in and through those around us.

Offer constructive criticism. (14–18)

Only a special person will take the important risk of offering constructive criticism in the most helpful way possible. Surely Jethro wasn’t the first person to perceive that what Moses was doing was unsustainable.

Moses might have thought that he alone could do what needed to be done and failed to recognize the opportunity to delegate much of the work to capable people around him.

You may also find yourself in a situation where people around you have wisdom they could share if they felt you were truly open to hearing it from them.

The people “stood around Moses from morning until evening,” waiting for their cases to be adjudicated.

Notice all the first-person references: “They come to me;” “I make a decision;” “I teach them” (vv. 15–16). Jethro shares the hard truth:

“You will certainly wear out.”

Moses’s father-in-law did not offer uninformed advice. Jethro didn’t say anything until after he “saw everything [Moses] was doing.” And even then, he wisely began not with suggestions or advice, but with questions.

Starting with thoughtful questions allows for the possibility that there is a good reason for something that seems wrong. Jethro doesn’t understand why Moses is

**“Now I know that
the Lord is greater
than all gods
because in this affair
they dealt arrogantly
with the people.”**

Exodus 18:11

trying to judge all the people by himself, so he asks Moses what is going on and why he is doing things the way he is.

This gives Moses the opportunity to explain his concern about giving direction that is truly informed by “God’s statutes and laws.”

Jethro advises a different approach but also makes clear that his ultimate concern was for Moses himself and for those whom Moses cared so much about. Jethro was able to tell Moses, “You will certainly wear out both yourself and these people who are with you, because the task is too heavy for you. You can’t do it alone.”

Encourage with sound counsel. (19–21)

Jethro offered sound counsel and also reminded Moses to rely on God. He encouraged Moses to find men of integrity who could take on all but the most difficult cases.

Moses would continue to be the primary leader and the teacher of God’s laws and expectations. However, by establishing a scalable strategy and large-scale delegation, Moses found a way for multiple qualified leaders to be part of the system in a way that would keep any of them from being completely overwhelmed, including himself.

That kind of counsel and encouragement can lead someone from deep discouragement to dramatic relief.

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Michael Foust

The Alabama Baptist

'Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.' maintains spirit of original story

I've lost count of how many family-friendly stories Hollywood has ruined with its 21st-century "updates" and "modernizations."

Netflix added same-sex content to "Anne with an E." It added a transgender storyline to The Baby-Sitters Club. More recently, the BBC turned Marie Antoinette into a lesbian for a dramatic series, despite zero evidence that she was one. (Even mainstream historians are up in arms over that one.)

Sometimes, though, Hollywood gets it mostly right, such as in the new film "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret." It's based on a 1970 book by author Judy Blume that itself was controversial when it was released due to its frank discussion of female puberty and religion. In some locations, the book was even banned.

Girl-centric plot

The film tells the story of a distraught sixth grade girl named Margaret who moves from the comfortable confines of New York City to a strange New Jersey neighborhood where she must make new friends at a new school. Her first friend is Nancy, a friendly-yet-blunt girl her age who invites Margaret over for a swim but immediately notices



"Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret."

Photo courtesy of Lionsgate

Margaret's lack of growth. ("You're still flat.")

Soon, though, Nancy welcomes Margaret into her secret all-girls club where the four members agree to a few quirky requirements (they can't wear socks) and a few more personal ones too.

Although none of the girls has fully entered puberty, all of them are longing for that day.

The backdrop to the film is Margaret's confusion about religion. Although her mother is Christian and her father is Jewish, neither are practicing members of their faith.

The plot grows more complex when Margaret's well-meaning teacher urges her to write a paper about religion. (He did this only after she told him she hated religious holidays.)

Margaret visits a Jewish service with her grandmother. She attends a Christian worship service with

a classmate. Neither service helps her decide.

Despite Margaret's confusion about religion, she embraces prayer. We see her praying in her room. We hear her praying silently around her friends.

For her first prayer, she asks God to keep her in New York. ("I've heard a lot of great things about You," she prays. "I don't want to move. I've never lived anywhere but the city.")

For her second prayer, she requests God's guidance at school and for God to start growing her body.

Usually, her prayers begin with a variation of the film's title. ("Are you there God? It's me, Margaret.") I counted at least 10 prayers throughout the film.

The movie nicely captures the awkwardness of a girl's tween years without swerving into 21st-century controversies.



No one changes genders. No one discusses same-sex attractions. (Margaret likes a boy named "Moose.") Even though the film contains candid discussion about female puberty, it maintains an innocent look and feel that's missing from most modern entertainment.

PG-13 rating

Even so, the film contains PG-13 content. Curious about their future physical appearance, the girls look at a Playboy magazine. (We don't see what they see). We watch them look at a drawing of the male anatomy. (We do see that.)

We hear about a girl who let a boy "feel her up." We watch Margaret and a boy enter a closet, where he gives her a brief kiss on the lips.

We also watch Margaret's grandparents argue over religion. (The argument briefly causes her to abandon her search for God.)

Then there's the constant discussion of puberty. It's definitely a female-centric flick.

The movie isn't fully family-friendly but its promotion of prayer and avoidance of controversial subjects is something we can embrace.

"Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret." is rated PG-13 for thematic material involving sexual education and some suggestive material. Coarse language: single misuse of "God" (2), OMG (5), GD (1), h-ll (1).

EDITOR'S NOTE

Reviews of films, books, music or other media that appear in TAB are intended to help readers evaluate current media for themselves, their children and grandchildren in order to decide whether to watch, read or listen. Reviews are not an endorsement by the writer or TAB Media.

MEET THE REVIEWER

Michael Foust covers the intersection of faith and entertainment as a media reviewer for The Alabama Baptist. He also is the husband of an amazing wife and the father of four young children.

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