
CHRISTIAN LIFE REPORT

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A student evaluation puzzled me.

"He told me I interpreted scripture wrong," the student wrote. "I just said what God told me in my quiet time."

I can't remember this incident, but I'm quite sure I've never blatantly told a student, nor a parishioner, that a Bible interpretation is wrong. I'm a Baptist and we believe in the "priesthood of the believer." This means people are free to interpret scripture as they choose under the guidance of God's spirit.

As educators, our job is to gently chide students to evaluate their knowledge and beliefs so that they may either strengthen their positions or alter them. But I and every teacher I know try to do this with gentleness.

The most sobering thing is that this student insisted she's right because God told her so!

A NASA engineer wrote a book listing 88 reasons why the rapture of the church would occur in 1988, and he said God told him this. Unless we missed it, this didn't happen. But God wasn't wrong. The engineer was wrong.

I know a pastor who gathered his deacons for a session to present bold programs for the future. As justification for these plans, he said "I prayed and God gave me this program." Interestingly, the Lord even alliterated the program points just as a Baptist preacher often does with his sermon outlines, like "power, peace and praise"!

Claiming the voice of God must never be done frivolously to bolster weak arguments or to stifle opposition.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah had a confrontation with the prophet Hananiah, as recorded in Jeremiah 28. The messages of these two men were diametrically opposed. Hananiah had a more patriotic message: Judah must be strong because God would bring deliverance from the Babylonian army.

Jeremiah told the king to submit to Babylon since they were God's instrument to punish his people.

As someone noted, if Hananiah had been correct, we'd be reading the book of Hananiah, not the book of Jeremiah.

This story teaches us to carefully evaluate the claims of divine inspiration.

The apostle Paul agreed in the New Testament when he insisted "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32). That is, if God has spoken, other spiritual people should attest to this, too--a divine system of "check and balances," if you will.

Being able to affirm the leadership of God is a wonderful thing, but this assertion must never be taken lightly.

It's better to say "I believe this is the will of God," than to say "God told me" unless we're stone-cold certain we heard his voice.

(Brooks is Professor of Communications at Judson College and a member of the Christian Life Commission)

*The articles in this issue were gathered from various sources
The opinions in the Christian Life Report are not necessarily the opinions of the Christian Life Commission*

Welcome Silence from the Gambling Crowd

by Bob Terry

Like other states across the nation, Alabama faces serious financial problems. Gov. Robert Bentley has been painfully honest about pending cuts in the education budget as well as in state services. It will take the best efforts of elected officials and civic and business leaders working together to address the myriad of financial challenges facing our state. Thankfully, this year, the gambling interests will not be around, attempting to pervert the public good into private gain. This year, the governor, Legislature and others can devote their attention to the real issues.

Remember 2009, when supporters of legalized gambling filibustered their own bill while trying to get enough votes for passage? That was not the only time the legislative process was stymied by the gambling crowd as it tried to force casino-style gambling on Alabama. Last year, then-Gov. Bob Riley stood in the gap, attempting to stop the expansion of gambling. Ultimately the primary gambling bill failed to come up for a vote in the House of Representatives when pro-gambling legislators fell a handful of commitments short of the number of votes needed for passage.

But 2011 is a different year. Many members of the gambling crowd are no longer in the Legislature. As of early March, not a single pro-gambling bill had even been filed for consideration. Perhaps that is because the "Big Daddies" of gambling are occupied, preparing to defend themselves against federal corruption and vote-buying charges.

Last year, Ronnie Gilley, owner of Country Crossing in Dothan and a defendant in the federal case, bragged after the primary elections that he would be back in business by mid-January. Gilley had closed his business rather than risk a raid by the Governor's Task Force on Illegal Gambling. Now accused of trying to bribe a co-defendant, he resides in the Montgomery County Jail, awaiting his federal trial.

Some of the gambling crowd have turned on one another. This once united political front now has an every-man-for-himself attitude as each man or woman has tried to distance himself or herself from the others by seeking a separate trial, lest the guilt of one taint them all. The court rejected those requests.

At least one hired gun for the gambling crowd, lobbyist Jarrod Massey, has already pleaded guilty to the federal charges and is now in jail.

At the March 2 Legislative Prayer Luncheon sponsored by the State Board of Missions, gambling was not mentioned except for a brief reference to the absence of the issue. Gov. Bentley won't have to address it, at least not this year. Alabama had to face the issue every single year during the Riley administration. What a difference.

Across Alabama, the gambling crowd is in full retreat. The city of Kimberly and Jefferson County recently won the right to destroy 189 electronic gambling machines seized from a building set up like a slot machine assembly line. The estimated cost of those machines and spare parts was almost \$1 million. It is no wonder that a few

days later, the major manufacturers of electronic gambling machines in Alabama accepted the "window of opportunity" offered by Attorney General Luther Strange to move the machines out of state without the threat of them being seized.

The three major manufacturers of gambling machines — International Gaming Technology, Bally Technologies and Multimedia Games — signed agreements to get their machines out of Alabama within 60 days. And the day before the announcement, reports surfaced of "several trucks" loading the machines from Country Crossing.

More than 12,000 electronic gambling machines were estimated to have operated in Alabama at some point in 2010. Reportedly VictoryLand in Shorter had the largest number with more than 6,000 active machines. Think of the investment these gambling giants made in the state. That is about \$65 million in machine costs. And the manufacturers not only leased the machines to the operators but they also got a part of the profit in return.

While electronic gambling was brought in to Alabama under the guise of raising money for charities, it has never been about that. It has always been about casino-style gambling and the vast amounts of money the gambling crowd attempts to fleece from state citizens. The only reason the manufacturers are leaving is because they recognize the future of gambling in Alabama has changed.

But there is more to do. Three Indian casinos continue to operate. Obviously they are concerned about their future because they have begun a public relations campaign, trying to get people to look at their few charitable deeds rather than the underbelly of gambling in Alabama. It is an old trick of those who want to deflect attention away from the vice of their conduct. Thankfully the attorney general is going after the Indian casinos by asking the National Indian Gaming Commission to ban slot machine-style electronic bingo machines on tribal lands in Alabama. Admittedly that is an uphill fight given the debate over the issue since the machines started showing up in the state in 2003 and 2004.

However, it should be remembered that prior to those first machines appearing in the state, bingo gambling on Indian lands — and everywhere else in Alabama — was done on paper. It was 2004 when then-Attorney General Troy King issued a finding that state law permitted both paper and electronic bingo in Macon County (where VictoryLand is located) and Greene County (the home of Greenetrack in Eutaw) and at the three Indian bingo sites that the plague of electronic gambling swarmed the state.

Attorney General King's views were not sustained when the Alabama Supreme Court later announced its definition of bingo. While the high court's definition had limited application because the ruling did not explicitly outlaw electronic bingo, there can be no doubt that state law does not allow the electronic gambling machines now being carted out of the state. More proof of this is the "deafening silence" that met Attorney General Strange's

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invitation to gambling machine manufacturers to settle the issue in state court.

Adding intrigue to the issue is a statement by the FBI supervisor of the current gambling corruption investigation. On March 1, FBI Special Agent Keith Baker said in court that the current case began in 2004 in a probe of Victor y Land owner Milton McGregor and Attorney General King. The timing may be completely coincidental, but it will be interesting to see how this case develops and if any connection is exposed.

Neither state nor federal law on Indian gambling changed between 2004 and 2011. The only change was Attorney General King's flawed finding. With that discredited, Indian gambling should be limited to what it was before that finding was released.

Alabama's major destination gambling sites are closed. We hope local law enforcement will be diligent to close down the mom and pop gambling sites that continue to flaunt state law in some places. There is no question now about whether electronic gambling is legal in the state. It is not.



Again we are thankful state leaders can focus their efforts on addressing our real challenges and not be distracted by side issues like electronic gambling. Solving the state's problems will take the best efforts of us all, and Alabama is worth our best efforts.

(Terry is editor of *The Alabama Baptist*)

Sermon on Mount's Teachings Challenging

by James Evans

I have been preaching from the Sermon on the Mount for the past few Sundays. This is always a challenge for me because the ideals expressed in Matthew 5-7 are so lofty. These chapters are the heart of the Gospel, the very center of the teachings of Jesus.

It's in these chapters that we hear the challenge to "love your neighbor as you love yourself." And even more dramatically, "love your enemy."

What in the world was Jesus thinking?

How do we love our enemy? And why would we want to? Why would we want to devote ourselves to the well-being of someone whose primary purpose in life is to end ours?

Of course, Jesus was speaking to a very specific context. The Roman Empire occupied Judea in the first century. There were many among the Jewish populace who thought the best way to deal with Rome was to fight them. Jesus knew that Judea was completely overmatched and that any conflict with the Romans would end in the destruction of his homeland. Which, of course, is exactly what happened about 40 years after his death.

The famous sayings we have from Jesus about "turning the other cheek" and "going the second mile" all have primary meaning in the context of Roman oppression. Only a Roman soldier could compel a Jewish peasant to carry his heavy backpack for one mile -- but only one mile. In the second mile, we find the Jewish peasant loving his enemy.

In the case of "turning the other cheek," the purpose is forcing your oppressor to treat you with dignity. Striking someone on the right cheek involved a backhand slap. Turning the other cheek means your oppressor must strike you straight on, as an equal.

Jesus was a genius in understanding how to undermine oppressive power.

The challenge for us who claim to be Jesus' followers today is to discover if these very specific teachings about how to deal with Rome have any relevance for us. Did Jesus have something eternal to teach us about the use of violence? Did his insight about where Judea was heading have any bearing on where we might be heading?

Obviously, we in America are not an oppressed people, although there are certain Christian groups who would take issue with that. As citizens of the United States, we enjoy unprecedented freedom, prosperity and power. In fact, some would argue that with our power we are more like Rome than Judea.

So how do we apply the teachings of Jesus? How do we turn the other cheek and go the second mile if we are now the ones who are in charge?

The church has struggled with this for a long time. In some cases, exulting in our military and economic prowess, some church leaders have condoned violence. And in a few rare instances there have been suggestions that we employ violence -- such as with Pat Robertson's absurd suggestion that we assassinate Hugo Chavez.

Those of us who take the teachings of Jesus seriously should take pause here. If his vision was truly eternal and not just limited to the particular conditions in first-century Judea, we may have a window into our future.

In a dark night struggle with armed soldiers, Jesus intervened in an effort on the part of his followers to retaliate.

"Those who live by the sword," he told them, "die by the sword."

(Evans is pastor of Auburn First Baptist Church)

Jesus Spoke on Ethics

by Darryl Wood

What do you read into the presence of Boy Scouts at the Governor's signing ceremony for the new Alabama ethics legislation? Perhaps that organization's squeaky clean reputation becomes the worthy goal for Alabama leaders. Or possibly those youngsters will be the long-term beneficiaries of tougher ethics laws.

The response of most Alabamians to these reforms? "It's about time." Ethics, a set of moral principles that establishes the rightness or wrongness of a person's actions or motives, should be held by all persons.

Even though I favor the ethics reform laws wholeheartedly, they fail to be the best solution to the moral problems of Alabama. The prime mover behind a person's ethics is what owns the heart. A state legal code cannot get the heart's attention for long.

People answer to a number of faulty prime movers. Some get so wrapped up in money that greed motivates them. Others crave power and will do anything to achieve it.

Popularity drives some folks. And vocational success dominates many. Attempts to satisfy those flawed prime movers results in short-circuited ethics.

One ethical system trumps those defective prime movers. Jesus Christ established that system. The Apostle Paul adopted those ethics for his life. "Whatever you do in word or deed do all in the name of the Lord Jesus." (*Colossians 3:17*)

When Christ guides your motives and actions, other prime movers lose their luster. As you submit to His authority, He indwells your heart and replaces those substandard motivators. The result? A new ethic.

With great appreciation for my Boy Scout heritage, Jesus can do things for you that the Boy Scouts cannot. So "Be Prepared" for a new year by making Christ the prime mover of your heart.

(Wood is pastor of Vincent First Baptist Church and a member of the Christian Life Commission)

FACTS & ISSUES

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HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Harmful use of alcohol has many implications on public health.

- * Nearly 4% of all deaths are related to alcohol. Most alcohol related deaths are caused by alcohol resulting from injuries, cancer, cardiovascular diseases and liver cirrhosis.
- * Globally, 6.2% of all male deaths are related to alcohol, compared to 1.1% of female deaths. One-in-five men in the Russian Federation and neighboring countries die due to alcohol-related causes.
- * Globally, 320,000 young people aged 15-29 years die annually, from alcohol-related causes, resulting in 9% of all deaths in that age group.

The American Issue, January-March 2011

ANTI-SMOKING EFFORTS WEAK

The Lung Association's report notes that 22.5 percent of Alabamians smoke. That's almost one in four, well above the national average of 19.5 percent. About 7,500 deaths per year in Alabama are attributed to smoking. As if that weren't appalling enough, many thousands more Alabamians each year suffer serious and debilitating disease as a result of smoking.

"Voices, Montgomery Advertiser, January 26, 2011

OLDER DRIVERS...are not causing more auto crashes, even though they are keeping their licenses longer? The rate of fatal crashes per licensed driver age 70 or older dropped by about 37% between 1997 and 2008 (latest data available).

Bottom Line Personal



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