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Telling the story  
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# Discussing abortion with your pro-choice friends

by Lisa Misner

**SPRINGFIELD, IL** – Abortion is a difficult subject to discuss with a friend or family member who is pro-choice, when as a pro-life Christian you perceive that choice as ending the life of another. Here are a few strategies for having a productive conversation:

**Pray.** Ask God to give you wisdom as you speak. Jesus said we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:39).

**Stay calm.** Fear and anger often surround discussion that includes abortion. As Christians we know God does not bring fear (2 Timothy 1:7). Don't allow yourself to be swept into those feelings. Meet strong emotions with love. You may not change anyone's mind, but you may clear up some misconceptions.

**Be tactful.** One Lifeway study found 4-in-10 women were regular church attenders when they had abortion. Just 7% felt comfortable enough speaking with anyone in the church about it at the time. Many women are still dealing with the emotional and even physical effects years later. Once, a woman tearfully confessed to our Sunday school class she'd had an abortion as a teen. She still carried that hurt and grief with her.

**Remember the men.** Abortion is a woman's issue, but it's more than a woman's issue. Another Lifeway Research study found half of men whose partners had an abortion were church attenders when it took place. Have consideration for their feelings as well.

**Stay on topic.** If someone tries to divert the discussion, tell them they have a good point and you're willing to discuss it later, but continue as you were. The issue isn't if the Court will next overturn the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision on same-sex marriage as some contend. Justice Alito stated in the leaked Dobbs opinion that no other cases were included in the reasoning behind the purported decision.

**Emphasize all life is important.** Pro-choice people often express the belief that the "other side" only cares about abortion and nothing about the child who is abandoned or neglected. If you're pro-life then you care about all life—from newborns to the elderly. That means helping women and children in need whether it be through crisis pregnancy centers, adoption, food ministries, or other outreach. It also means caring for the elderly or those with health issues.

Our society thrives on keeping people afraid of what is going to happen next. But we can't witness based on fearful speculation. For all the branding and sloganeering, love does win. The love of Christ.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Misner is Social Media and Public Policy Manager for IBSA.

# A replant in Lenawee county

by Nathan Sharpe

**ADRIAN, MI** – The call on my life has always been to teach God's Holy Word. For many of those years it had been in a Christian school environment. Around 2018, I started to feel a strong Spirit-led desire to move into the pastorate. God provided a small church for me to step into. Over the years, the church had dwindled down to about 18 people.

I felt called to the church, but I did not feel that God was calling me to this church to close the doors. There was a future and a mission for this small congregation. I told the leadership team I would do it, but they had to be willing to make changes and step towards replanting the church. They expressed their desire to do so and they also believed that God was not saying it was time to close the church.

Shortly after my installment, COVID hit and sidelined our plans. Like most churches we went virtual for a while, but the school where we were meeting showed no signs of letting us back in the building. We started to look for other options. Finally a realtor we knew told us about a small church that was not officially on the market yet and we went to see it. This was definitely a move of God.

When we stepped into the building, I recognized the pastor and his wife. I attended high school with their daughter. We caught up a bit and viewed the church. It was perfect! It was a little big for a group of 18, but it would allow us to grow.

It was also right in the middle of a needy neighborhood. There would be plenty of opportunities to be the hands and feet of Jesus. We prayed and felt like God had led us there for a reason. We bought the building and the congregation was so excited. But God wasn't finished yet.

About 3 weeks after buying the building we got a call from the pastor who had previously owned the building. He asked to meet with us. I was a little concerned that something might be wrong with the closing so we set something up for that day. Little did we know the blessing that God would give us. The pastor explained that because they were closing the church that they could not keep the money that the church had in its coffers. He said they had prayed about how to disperse the money, and handed us an envelope with a check for half of what we paid for the building. We were flabbergasted! Tears started to flow over this amazing gift that God in his sovereignty had shown.

Over the course over the next few months God continued to show his blessing and communicate that the church, now known as Catalyst Church, has a future, and is part of his plan to reach Lenawee County and beyond.

He has shown his blessing and support through Josh Tovey and Matt Thompson of Redemption Church in Grandville, MI as they became our sending church. He has shown blessings through

the support of NAMB and the SEND Network. Over and over we have seen the Lord say, “You are not done yet. I have a mission for you!”

The church is growing both in number and in love for God and others. We know that God will continue to provide as we step towards his mission for us to show the change Jesus brings to our neighborhood and Lenawee County. May His name be praised!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nathan Sharpe is a church planter and Lead Pastor for Catalyst Church in Adrian, Michigan. He is a school teacher and coach at Lenawee Christian school.

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## **The Big One 2.0**

by Rick Bristol

**PETOSKEY, MI** – I find I am “the good kind” of sore, but what a blast I recently had in Petoskey. My church hosts a couple of Christ-based, scouting programs: Trail Life USA and American Heritage Girls.

We began this adventure in the Fall of 2020. We were a replant, starting at the end of 2017 and looking for ways to connect with our community and grow. We had only a handful of volunteers, and resources were extremely limited. When I pitched the scouting program to folks, I wanted to figure out some capstone event that would create stories for the kids, allow for mentoring opportunities, and still be something we could manage with our limited budget.

What could be easier and more economical than walking? This is how “The Big One” was born.

Before my time as a replanter, I served as a chaplain working with Marines. While the Marine Corps may have called them by different names, my time with them hiking and camping provided countless opportunities for Gospel conversations and showing Christ. I figured I could use what worked in that ministry context in my new context.

The NCT (North Country Trail) winds through our town and ultimately near my house. My plan with the Big One was simple. We’d hike 50 miles over five days along the NCT as soon as school was out. Basically, we’d all walk to my house from the church. As you might guess, ultimately, it was not that straightforward.

The kids got on board with the idea early as did a couple of parents.

Throughout the winter, we refined and developed the plan. A lot of little ones wanted to participate but were not able to walk the whole way. So we figured out potential drop-off and pick-up points along the way.

By this time, the planning process had moved beyond my knucklehead idea. Our Associate Pastor Dan Kucharczyk, his wife Angela, and some brilliant parents were the primary planners. Eventually, one parent suggested we could ferry all the kids back and forth to the church as a base camp during the event. So that is how we did it.

After the Big One 2021, I discovered we had not only created opportunities for Gospel conversations. We created a discipleship laboratory. A great deal of grace was required not only by the leaders and kids, but also the families.

I also know not all of the families are in the same place in their walk with Christ. Therefore, it was a living discipleship forge. I'd love to say we all acted perfect, but perhaps even better, we worked as people who needed grace, and tried to model it to their best.

Fast forward to this year and the Big One 2.0, and we have added to our scouting capstone (and family discipleship laboratory). We added canoeing, fishing, and disc golf to our hiking and other camp activities.

I am excited to report the same Grace Laboratory happened again. We had families attending various stages of their walks. As we spent four days living, working, and playing together, much of the public veneer vanished. When folks would come under stress or even into conflict, they revealed their source of strength.

We have families who have been hurt in other church contexts, and folks with no church background. Those who have heard us talk about grace would get to see if we live it. Again, Praise God! Having a family (several families actually) show dependence on Christ and modeling grace throughout these times can be worth more than many "amazing" sermons.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# BSCM provides resources to churches to prevent sexual abuse

by Mike Durbin

**PLYMOUTH, MI** – A dramatic wakeup call is taking place in Southern Baptist life. Guidepost Solutions conducted an independent investigation of the “Executive Committee’s Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and an Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee.” The report released shortly before the Annual Convention in June, shocked Southern Baptists. A collective sense of grieving and heartbrokenness permeated the Convention for abuse victims, and the way they were treated. The recommendations of the Sexual Abuse Task Force to address the situation were overwhelmingly approved. Chief among them was the plan to establish a website where “pastors and church leaders credibly accused sexual abusers will be listed.”

Click here for information from the task force:

<https://www.sataskforce.net/updates/guidepost-solutions-report-of-the-independent-investigation>

It’s a great start, but there is more to be done. Recommendations and resolutions at the Convention are important, but systematic change takes place in the local church. That’s why the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) is paying for up to **10 US OneVERIFY Background Checks through LifeWay and 10 Ministry Safe Sexual Abuse Awareness Trainings**. Our goal is to help every cooperating church provide safe environments for people to experience God, and grow in their relationship with Him.

The BSCM is setting the example by requiring all staff in the office and at Bambi to have Background Checks and Ministry Safe Training.

## About Ministry Safe

“MinistrySafe was founded by legal professionals and sexual abuse experts, Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris. Through their litigation practice representing victims of child sexual abuse, they recognized a vital need to equip churches and ministry programs to better protect children from sexual abuse. The risk is real, and it's preventable. Prevention starts with awareness” - [ministriesafe.com](http://ministriesafe.com)

**To equip those who work with children in your church with this Ministry Safe training, email [dan@bscm.org](mailto:dan@bscm.org) with the names (first and last name) and email addresses of those who need the training.** The person will receive an email link to the training. Upon completion, a Training Certificate will be generated. The cost of the training will be billed directly to the BSCM.

## About US One VERIFY Background Checks

"The [Lifeway One Source](#) program provides discounted prices on background checks for churches and religious organizations looking to protect their ministries. Screen your staff, volunteers, treasurers, teachers, bus drivers, camp counselors and more!"

Every church needs to create an account in the church's name to take advantage of this benefit with the BSCM. This will allow the church to have all records on file in a safe place. Once the account is created, it will be easier to request background checks. The church will have to pay for the background checks (only US One VERIFY) and request reimbursement from the BSCM.

### Background Check Process

Step-by-step process to obtain background checks of up to 10 potential staff members and volunteers. (Reimbursable by the BSCM)

- 1) Go to: <https://www.lifeway.com/en/services/church-administration/background-checks?intcmp=SRDR-background-checks>
- 2) Click the yellow "Register Now" button
- 3) Register your church (you will need to start with someone's name and email)
- 4) Once logged in, you will need to select "Acknowledged" after you read the "Notice To Users" and "Summary Of Rights"
- 5) Click "order packages" at the top banner
- 6) A blue banner will appear under that; select "Create a URL"
- 7) Under "Select a package": in the dropdown menu, select "US OneVERIFY" for \$12.00 (*This is the only type of background check that the BSCM will reimburse.*)
- 8) Under "Start your search": "Give this URL a name" NOTE: any name will do
- 9) Under "Define Payment": select "Our organization will pay"
- 10) Click "Create hosted URL" at the bottom
- 11) Copy the URL and send to ALL candidates
- 12) Initially, you (the church) will need to pay for the background checks (see step 15)
  - (a) If a credit card was not entered during registration, follow these steps
    - (i) Click "My Account"
    - (ii) Select "Account Settings"
    - (iii) Click "View Billing Info"
    - (iv) Click "Edit Billing Info"
    - (v) Enter credit card information

- 13) If candidate is using an APPLE device:
- (a) The first time an applicant clicks on the URL, it will go to a Review and Sign in page.
  - (b) Once there, enter an email address, select “No, I’m new here,” and create a password.
  - (c) A “Registration Failed” error will probably popup.
  - (d) If that happens, go back and click on the URL again to get to a new Review and Sign in page.
  - (e) Once there, enter the same email address, select “Yes, I have a password,” and enter the one that was just created.
- 14) Once the report is complete, the email that you used to create the account and the candidate will receive notice that the report is available for download
- 15) The email that you used to create the account will receive the background check results with all sensitive candidate information redacted such as social security number
- 16) Send a picture of the receipt for all background checks to [bookkeeper@bscm.org](mailto:bookkeeper@bscm.org) for reimbursement by the Baptist State Convention of Michigan.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mike Durbin is the State Evangelism Director for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before joining the state convention staff, Mike served as Church Planting Catalyst and Director of Missions in Metro Detroit since 2007. He also has served as a pastor and bi-vocational pastor in Michigan, as well as International Missionary to Brazil.

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## **You are what you eat**

by Tim Patterson

**PLYMOUTH, MI** – We had been collecting “coke” bottles for most of the day. Both of us had gone from house to house, and asked our neighbors if they had any lying around that they did not want. Some folks were very kind and generous while others just directed us back to the street from whence we had come.



There was one gentleman on “Avenue D” that had what seemed to be an inordinate passion for Dr. Pepper. He also knew that periodically Ricky Burrows and I would be coming by asking for pop bottle donations to our very worthy causes.

We always had a cause and as far as we were concerned, collecting enough money for the movies or for a box of “bee-bee’s” was as admirable as any foundation raising money for orphaned children.

On this day we had decided that we needed food supplies for our “fort”. It wasn’t much of a fort, just a few scraps of tin and some construction wire covered with a tarp I had borrowed from Dad’s shed. Yet we knew full well that any army must be well fed in order to do battle with the mass of marauders like wild savages, Nazi’s or motorcycle gangs. (There were thousands of them in our town!)

After several hours of collecting, we made our way to the local “Pick-Pac” convenience store, traded in our bottles, and purchased the needed provisions. We bought the largest jar of peanut butter that we could find and a loaf of bread.

Now, of course, we didn’t buy the expensive Jif, but some store brand that had about an inch of oil floating on top. This didn’t deter us, but merely gave us an opportunity to play in the pasty brown concoction until the oil was well mixed.

It was 4:00 p.m. when we finally made it back to the fort and that is when the feasting began. One after the other, Ricky and I ingested sandwich after sandwich. I think I ate four or five myself. When we could eat no more, all we could do was lay there like a couple of old hound dogs that just gorged themselves on fresh roadkill. We were full and miserable.

About that time, I heard my dad’s familiar whistle, and I knew it was time for supper. I slowly, but obediently got up, and headed for home.

When I walked in the back door, there spread out over the kitchen bar was a feast fit for a king. It was payday and Mom had prepared my favorite meal. Fried shrimp, french-fries and all the fixings. I could not believe my eyes, or my lack of appetite. I could not eat one bite of food. In fact, the smell even made me a bit nauseous. The infamous “spoiled appetite” had overcome me.

In the church today, many come to the “table” with a spoiled appetite and a miserable attitude. I cannot tell you the number of times I have heard church attendees say, “I just didn’t get anything out of the worship service today. The preaching was boring, and it didn’t feed me, the music was dead, and besides, no one talked to me.”

The problem is that the majority of those who voice those kinds of complaints, come to church with a “spoiled appetite” for truth and the things of God. Throughout the week they have gorged themselves with the garbage that can be found in social media and other media outlets,

and have had their minds and attitudes manipulated by spurious and spiritually poisoning opinions of those who have nothing better to do than spout their venomous hate. On social media, anyone can say anything about whatever or whomever they choose and do so with no accountability.

I have often wondered, who has that much time to spend on a social media account and still be productive in their vocation? I am thinking about one “poisonous pastor” who if he would spend the same amount of time sharing the Gospel in his community and ministering to his congregation as he spends on the internet, the vast majority of his town would be believers and his church would triple in size! (Of course, that is just my humble and accurate opinion.)

Scripture tells us that “Satan walks about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” I have often wondered where he wanders to and where his dwelling place may be. I believe I now know. Social media. This may not be the only place he dwells or his only roaming ground, but it is one where he does a great deal of damage and destruction.

If we as believers, fill our spiritual stomachs with the hateful, hurtful, and heinous foods of a messed-up media and then gather in God’s house to be fed, it is no wonder we can’t “stomach” the spiritual food we so desperately need. (Of course, the problem does not lie with us or our lack of discipline but with the pastor and the rest of those Christians!)

That is why so many among us who claim to be Christians today are spiritually malnourished, and dying a slow spiritual death. This week, carefully consider that with which you feed your soul. It may be titillating and tasty, but it could very well spoil your appetite and sour your spirit. We need all the holy nourishment we can get to be prepared for the real marauders we face and the spiritual battles we must fight.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tim Patterson is Executive Director/Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Elected unanimously in May of 2015, Patterson formerly served for 9 years as pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. He also served as trustee chair and national mobilizer for the North American Mission Board.

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## **Two busy pastors**

by Dr. Tony L. Lynn

**PLYMOUTH, MI** – There are two men who I appreciate and admire. They are two examples of mighty men who serve with intentional, radical actions that change communities and lives.

Pastor Billy Walker and Pastor Josh Tovey, on behalf of Michigan Baptists, let me say, “Thank you.”

Though you both have growing families and full-time church ministries, you are making time to mentor two new church planters, and to see that their new church plants in Flint and Holland receive the necessary care from your established congregations. Wow!

### **Pastor Billy Walker**

Pastor Billy and Laurie Walker of [Calvary Church](#), Southgate are busy with a variety of big efforts in their lives. They have launched into their respective ministries living meaningful lives. They lead a congregation in Southgate in a cool, renovated former public-school building with its modern colors, comfortable/chic furnishings and sleek lines that make people feel at home; but ministry there is not about the cool building, it’s about the people encountering others in their daily lives with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

On top of all of that, Pastor Billy and Laurie make time during the summer to lead a Christian camp in the upper peninsula of Michigan called [Hiawatha Youth Camp](#), which is just fifty miles from the Mackinac Bridge. Then to top it off, Pastor Billy has a Spanish-speaking congregation led by Pastor Gerardo Sanchez and his wife, Desiree, who use a portion of the building in Southgate for a worship service in Spanish while the children, who speak English, attend Bible study at their age-level with the other children. It is a genius and generous idea!

Pastor Billy and the congregation are always helping others in unique and bold ways, but this year they added a new initiative for Christ by helping launch a new church plant in Flint.

### **Pastor Josh Tovey**

Pastor Josh and Stephanie Tovey of [Redemption Church](#), Grandville are up to their eyeballs guiding three adopted siblings and loving every moment of the adventure. The Tovey family is unstoppable! Seven years ago, when they were called to plant a new church in Michigan, they continued even though Stephanie was battling repeated attacks from a persistent form of cancer.

However, here they are years later with a vibrant church plant and a family of five. If anyone ever could have said he was too busy to undertake something new, it could easily have been Pastor Josh, but he never offers an excuse. He is ever ready to charge forward to help others and to make Jesus Christ known.

In addition to enlarging their own family and their congregation, Pastor Josh has a voracious appetite for creating new churches through new men who are called to become church planters. That is why Pastor Josh has created a residency ministry at the church so that men can experience ministry partnership, for one or two years, to verify they are called to serve the Lord

through church leadership. Anyone who would make the cut to experience a residency with Pastor Josh and his team would be greatly benefited.

Pastor Josh and the church already helped start new churches in Adrian and Waterford, to name a couple of places, and now they're launching a new church in Holland.

### **Who Benefits?**

Every new Send Network church plant we start in Michigan must have a Southern Baptist sponsoring/sending church and pastor who stands-up for the new church planter, his family, and his endeavor. Pastor Billy and Pastor Josh are men who stand-up for the right thing.

### **Pastor/church planter Leo Robinson**

Pastor/church planter Leo Robinson of Flint and his wife, Mio, have known Pastor Billy and his family for years. Pastor Leo spoke repeatedly up north at Camp Hiawatha. This church planting partnership is going to increase the bonds of brotherhood and friendship between these men and their congregations. The impact of this partnership is going to reap eternal benefits.

### **Pastor/church planter Charles Kirby**

Pastor/church planter Charles Kirby of Holland and his wife, Kallie, have connected with Pastor Josh for years. They have shared life during their younger years. This connection on the western side of Michigan is going to increase the Gospel saturation among a people who can become complacent in the comfortable communities along the shorelines of Lake Michigan.

### **People without Christ**

Those who will benefit the most because of Pastor Billy Walker and Pastor Josh Tovey being sponsoring/sending churches are the lost in the areas of Flint and Holland who need to know Jesus Christ. As you are reading this article there are those who, at this very moment, do not understand that Jesus Christ is the promised one who leads to eternal life. However, because of the Lord's created connection between these four pastors, communities and lives are going to change.

If you are interested in doing something like Pastor Billy Walker or Pastor Josh Tovey, reach out to me and let's have a conversation: [tlynn@namb.net](mailto:tlynn@namb.net).

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Tony L. Lynn is the State Director of Missions for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as lead pastor for more than six years at Crosspoint Church in Monroe, Michigan. He and his wife, Jamie, also served with the International Mission Board in Africa and in Europe.

# Warning against adulterous activity

by Coye Bouyer

*My son, give attention to my wisdom, incline your ear to my understanding; That you may observe discretion and your lips may reserve knowledge. For the lips of an adulteress drip honey and smoother than oil is her speech; But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, her steps take hold of Sheol. She does not ponder the path of life; Her ways are unstable; she does not know it.*

Proverbs 5:1-6

**PLYMOUTH, MI** – The father initially addresses his son in a very typical fashion, ‘my son,’ and with familiar admonitions ‘pay attention,’ and, more specifically, ‘incline or turn your ear.’ The aim of the father’s admonition is stated in verse 2, “That his son may ‘keep, guard’ or ‘observe discretion. The Hebrew word used for discretion can mean ‘wise, prudential consideration,’ or ‘the ability to devise plans with the best way to carry them out.’

In connection with the instructions of verse 2, verse 3 reveals the father’s motivation for the father’s present instruction, and it’s in regard to the ‘pitfalls of adultery.’ This would imply that the son is either old enough to get married or possibly already married. His dad’s instruction is clear as he wants to educate his son on why he should stay away from the loose morals of an adulterous woman.

“For the lips of an adulteress drip honey...” Sexuality, whether we know it or not, takes place through dialogue. It has always been associated with speech, whether through courting, love songs, whispering sweet nothings in someone’s ear, or the subtle seduction in speech.

The Hebrew word for ‘drip,’ means ‘to fall drop by drop,’ and this is significant because it is linked together with the ‘honeycomb,’ describing the adulterous’ speech as the purest, sweetest taste of honey. So, the father wants his son to understand that the lips of an adulterer oozes seductive charm, as she gradually utters words of flattery and conversation that is capturing.

Furthermore, the father continues to describe her speech as smoother than oil. In ancient Israel oil was used for ceremonial purposes in religious observances, for the anointing of priests and kings or the body after a bath. Oil was also used for cooking, to light lamps, as medicine both internally and externally as it symbolized delight, gladness, and prosperity.

Thus, the father is trying to teach his son that the adulteress woman’s speech is lubricious and seductive as it draws her victim irresistibly towards her mystery and delight, she is believed to offer.

The writer says, ‘But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.’

Sharp as a two-edged sword symbolizes that an affair with her cuts on all sides, and if one chooses to take hold of this woman, destruction is inevitable. The father desperately wants his son to understand the outcome without having to experience it for himself. For, while many may assume that intimacy with her would be as satisfying as her sweet speech or as captivating as her conversation, an affair with her will NOT deliver real satisfaction but will cause bitterness and cut deeply into the life of the one who is with her.

Finally, the father wants his son to know that the adulterous woman has chosen to abandon God and His covenant for marriage, and actually wanders aimlessly in moral darkness, staggering about in her sin.

However, the son is not to have sympathy for her or even assume that she is the victim, for she is lacking in her inner conscience causing chaos for the one who falls for her subtle seductions and her invitation into sexual exploitation. She can no longer distinguish between right and wrong, she strays in regards to discretion causing death for her and even leads others to it, if one falls into adultery with her.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Bible does not hide from or obscure the power of the temptation to illicit sex. In language that is refreshingly clear and direct without itself indulging in titillation, the text warns the reader of the debacle that awaits him should he succumb in this area. To assume that nice, Christian young people do not struggle in these areas or to speak only in whispers and innuendo on the grounds that they are inappropriate for the Christian pulpit is no less than gross neglect of duty on the church's part.

It doesn't matter whether one is dealing with the ritual prostitution of a fertility cult, the ordinary prostitute on the street, sexual solicitation in a magazine, on television or the internet. When one is falling for the simple lure of extramarital sex, the temptations and dangers are the same.

The father knows all too well the sexual temptation(s) that awaits his son, not only as a single man, but even as a married one. Thus, the father attempts to warn his son against the deceitful and destructive outcomes of adultery; a conversation every father needs to have with his son, and one in which the church must preach to God's sheep.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Pastor Coye L. Bouyer is the founding pastor of Kingdom Life Church in Lansing, MI where he has served since March of 2010. Pastor Bouyer recently stepped into the Diversity Ambassador role for the BSCM and firmly believes that he was not only called to Preach the Gospel as part of the process of reconciliation of man to God, but also using any platform as a bridge of reconciliation of man to man, and even more so amongst the brethren. Pastor Bouyer and his lovely wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1) have been married four over 20 years and have four children; Sierra, Seth, Cayla and Coye II.

# Freedom in Christ

by Karen Blanchard

**SHELBY TOWNSHIP, MI** – At a young age I learned to be a rule follower. Being a rule follower isn't a bad thing; it is actually a great thing! Rule followers typically do well in school, become upstanding citizens, and live in a way to not cause problems or step outside set boundaries. However, somewhere along the way I began to equate being a rule follower to my relationship with Jesus.

As far back as I can remember, I would strive to be a certain type of person so that God would be proud of me. I always thought I had to do everything right to be in "right standing" with God. I viewed my relationship with him to be contingent on my behavior and what I did. This began a life of striving for perfection and pleasing people.

**In Galatians 5:1 Paul writes,**

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery.*

As I began to grow in my walk with God, he showed me clearly the yokes of slavery in my life.

**Perfectionism was the first yoke of slavery in my life.** This is still a constant struggle for me. I am the type of person that when I do something, I want to do it with excellence. The Lord revealed to me that if I am striving for perfection to prove something to someone or to bring glory to myself, then that is the wrong heart behind excellence. I have learned to give myself a lot of grace in this area. I am not always going to be perfect, because I am not perfect (none of us are!).

**In 2 Corinthians 12:9 Jesus responds to Paul and says,**

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

**Paul responds in verses 10-11 and says,**

*"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

It is in our weakness, that we allow God to shine through us. If we are constantly striving for perfection, then we will never embrace our weakness; we will never see a need for God and see him work in a way in our lives that we know it was God and not us!

**Another yoke of slavery God revealed in my life was people pleasing.** From early on, I learned how to make people happy and lived by the opinions of others. I thought by fulfilling the expectations of others, they would accept me. Several years ago, I journeyed down this road with the Lord. He continues to show me that my acceptance is found in Him and Him alone.

Now I walk in this freedom! I don't let the opinions and expectations of people weigh me down any longer. The decisions I make aren't based on the opinions of man, but rather, what I know God is calling me to do. In Christ, I have all I need. If someone doesn't approve of what I do, it no longer bothers me, because I know who I am in Christ and what he has called me to do.

**Proverbs 29: 25 tells us,**

*Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.*

When we value the opinion of man over the opinion of God, we care more about what others think than what God thinks. This mindset will keep you in bondage and you will never experience the freedom God wants to give you in Him.

My husband is a pastor and we planted our current church, which means we started our church. If you have ever been part of a church plant, you know Sunday mornings are crazy and there are always things to do!

One Sunday a few years ago, my husband Scott was running around during the worship taking care of many things. I remember thinking, he should not be doing these things...he should be worshipping! The next Sunday I told Scott to meet me in the front row at the beginning of worship and that I wanted to worship with him. Honestly, before that Sunday, I am not sure the last time we worshiped together. That worship moment for us was special, and we vowed to continue to meet on the front row and worship together.

I share this story because people can look at me as the pastor's wife and make many assumptions as to why I sit on the front row. I don't allow those assumptions to bother me because I know why I am there. I also know who I am worshipping. When I worship on Sunday mornings, I don't let the fear of man hold me back; I am in the moment with my Savior. This is freedom in Christ!

I pray as you continue your journey, that you realize Christ is ALL you need. Ask God to reveal to you the "yokes of slavery" in your life that are keeping you from experiencing the freedom God wants to give you!

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Karen is married to Scott Blanchard, pastor of Lakepointe Church, and moved from Florida to Michigan in the summer of 2009 to plant Lakepointe Church in Shelby Township. She enjoys mentoring and discipling women and also leads women's life groups through her church. She is passionate about helping women find their purpose in who God created them to be. She is on staff at Lakepointe Church and loves being part of what God is doing in the Metro Detroit area!

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# Biblical hospitality: practices of grace

by Austin Collins

**JACKSONVILLE, FL** – Practicing hospitality is a way to share God’s grace and bless others. But practicing hospitality requires just that – practice. If hospitality isn’t part of your thought patterns or family’s regular routines, then knowing where to start or how to do it might feel overwhelming.

Biblical hospitality presents two challenges to us. First, hospitality in the Bible is *a command*. It’s not optional. Almost every instance of the word “hospitality” in the New Testament is connected to an imperative (Cf. Hebrews 13:2, 1 Peter 4:9). Second, hospitality is *active*. Romans 12:13 says we are to “*seek to show hospitality*.” We can’t just idly sit around and wait for opportunities for hospitality to come upon us, though they might. We are to be looking out for occasions to open our homes and our hearts to others.

It’s one thing to understand that hospitality is an active state of living we are commanded to carry out, but it’s an entirely different thing to practically obey and apply in our lives. With that in mind, I want to provide you with some real-world examples and advice on getting started on *living a lifestyle of hospitality*.

## Attitudes of Your Heart

- To practice hospitality, **you must make time for it**. If hospitality isn’t part of your natural family rhythms, stepping into it will take purposeful planning. To follow this biblical command, you might have to cut out other activities in your life or block out extra time for grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning. But the joy of going deep into the lives of other Christians will far outweigh any opportunity cost we might be paying.
- **Not all entertaining is hospitality, and not all of hospitality is simply entertaining**. Hospitality is about caring for your guests, getting to know them, and pointing them to Jesus. You can do this over watching sports or playing board games together, but you could also simply share a meal, talk, and pray with them about an issue they’re facing.
- Perhaps most important of all is to **show hospitality without grumbling or complaining** (1 Peter 4:9). Peter wouldn’t have felt the need to point this out if we didn’t have a sinful propensity in our hearts to gripe about others even in the middle of trying to care for them. When you commit to showing hospitality, you’re going to encounter things that might tempt you to complain – someone tracked mud into the house, kids spilled juice on the carpet, your guests stayed a little longer than you’d planned. But God wants the attitudes of our hearts to reflect the openness of our homes.

**Going deeper:** The best way to grow in showing hospitality is through **intentionality**. My wife and I sit down every couple of weeks after the kids go to bed and plan out the next few weeks' schedule and meals. We always discuss who we can be showing hospitality to. We intentionally schedule at least one or two times per month to try and have families over for a dinner or just to hang out. Rather than letting hospitality always come to us, we carve out time to host others in our home and build our schedules for the week around it.

### **Ambience of Your Home**

- **Relax, enjoy the time, and get to know your guest.** Remember the words of Jesus as you are serving: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42). Martha was an incredible host, but she missed the most important thing – fellowship with her guest. Food and fun will come and go, but relationships with other Christians are eternal.
- **Stay off your phone!** Resist the urge to show them the latest funny video that came across your feed. Don't Google the year that movie came out. It's just not as important as staying engaged in the conversation at hand. Opening the door to phones during table fellowship is the easiest way to shut the door to the heart.
- **Be clean, but it's okay if your house feels "lived-in."** When we anticipate hosting someone, we do clean the house – dusting, vacuuming, wiping down the bathroom. But we don't try to make our house something it's not.

**Going deeper:** Buy your furniture (or even a future home) **with hospitality in mind**. We recently needed to purchase a new couch for our den. Since our small house doesn't have a guest room, we made the conscious decision to purchase a sleeper sofa so we could comfortably host folks overnight. Plus, the upholstery is interchangeable and cheap, so when the inevitable stains of daily life start to happen, we can change it out easily. It might not be the most stylish or luxurious couch, but it serves us well in caring for others.

### **Actions You Can Take**

- **Budget for hospitality each month.** Know that it will cost you something and anticipate the expense. Shop the sales and the Buy-One-Get-One's at the supermarket. Get a membership to a warehouse store like Costco or Sam's to make bulk purchases on things you know you'll need to host.

- If you're new to regularly hosting in your home, **start slow**. Just do something simple like pizza and chips & salsa. As great as *food* can be, your guests are there for *fellowship*.
- **Consider a repeated, staple meal** that's easy to make like a crockpot lasagna. In the flurry of prepping your home for guests, having a meal that's easy to cook will cut down on stress and help prevent mistakes. Or find a recipe that you can **prep the night before** and freeze overnight. When it's time for guests to arrive, pop it into the oven!
- One thing we've learned over the years of regularly hosting folks in our home is that **it takes longer than you think to prep**, so give yourself extra time to cook and tidy up.
- Have something on hand for last minute. **Stock your pantry and freezer with a few items that have long shelf-lives** – tea, frozen cookie dough, individually bagged snacks. That way, you'll always be ready to host at a moment's notice.
- **Think of the whole family**. If you've got older kids, but plan on hosting families with younger kids, get out your kids' old toys and books from the attic for the littles.

**Going deeper:** You never know when the Lord might be calling you to host for whatever reason. One way to be prepared is to **prep three “hospitality baskets” – bathroom, guest room, and snacks**. The bathroom basket can include basic toiletries, rags, and towels. The guest room basket can have sheets, an index card with the WiFi password, phone chargers, a Bible, and other useful items. The snack basket, of course, contains bagged snacks like chips, crackers, mints, gum, candy, and water bottles. You could store each of these baskets in storage bins in your closet to have ready to pull out when you need it.

Wherever you are on the journey of growing in hospitality, I want to challenge you to take your next step in the next month. If you've not hosted another family in a long time (or perhaps ever), create some space in your calendar and invite someone over for dinner or even just coffee and dessert. If you're a pro at hosting, help another family take their first steps into hospitality. No matter where you are, the grace we can share with others by practicing biblical hospitality is always worth it.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Austin Collins (M.Div., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the Serve Pastor at First Baptist Church Jacksonville. Prior to joining First Baptist in 2018, he held roles in student ministry, as a worship pastor, and as the research assistant at the Institute for Biblical Worship. He is also a certified biblical counselor with the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors. Austin is passionate about turning strangers into servants and loves helping guests and church members take their next step of faith, whatever it is.

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# Jesus saves! From, for and through

by David Thompson

**NASHVILLE, TN** – What does it really mean when people say that *Jesus saves*? Once upon a time there was a general understanding and cultural acceptance to the saying. Now, not so much. This month's article seeks to inspire you by hopefully grasping a new appreciation for what it means to be *saved*.

I used to think that being *saved* implied I was indeed saved **from** something like Hell or Sin or Evil. That was when I was a new believer. Much later I began to see that I was saved **for** something — like for my mission or purpose or to fulfill my calling.

After forty literal wilderness years of knowing and following Christ, I have come to believe that Jesus *saves* me **through** something.

To be born physically, one travels through a birth canal — in a normal delivery! To be born from above, one travels **through** what some call the Christian life. Being *saved from* something and **for** something is still true — but it is equally a reality that we are being *saved through* it.

When we get this — a metamorphosis can occur:

## **1. We need never fear.**

Plato said, “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark.... The real tragedy is a man who is afraid of the light”. Why are you ever afraid if God is saving you?

## **2. We can attempt the impossible and not worry about falling.**

“Not failure, but low aim is the crime....in great attempts, it is glorious even to fail”. If Bruce Lee taught this, how much more should a child of the living God?

## **3. Live today to the fullest with zero thought of the sorrows of yesterday and the fears of tomorrow.**

Arnold H. Glasow states, “Live in the present and make it so beautiful it's worth remembering”.

Question — when was the last time you did something extraordinary and magnanimous? God has your back and is indeed all you will ever need. Dare to be bold and courageous. No Person is being *saved* through this life just to be boring and stale and lifeless.

## **4. We have a high degree of joyful anticipation.**

Terry Pratchett said, "The meaning of life is to find your gift — to find your gift is happiness. Do you really believe Jesus is saving you through this sin cursed, hell bound world — and He that he is now hiding the best from you? Jesus wants His abundant life for you! (that does not imply no suffering ever)... it does imply joy and peace every step of the way.

#### **5. We can allow Jesus to be in charge.**

"You have two choices: to control your mind — or let your mind control you," wrote Paulo Coelho. The greatest thing a Christ follower can do is to completely surrender one's mind to the leadership of the One who is *saving* them **through** it.

#### **6. We can know that daily surrender means we can never ever give up.**

Alva Myerdol believes, "It is not worthy of a human being to give up". How much more for the One born from above, sealed by the Spirit, accepted in the beloved, washed in the blood, carried by Grace, and being *saved* **through** it all!

Even Robert Frost had it right "The best way out — is always through ", he said. Frost was spot on! Jesus knows what He is doing in your life.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. David L. Thompson holds an undergraduate degree from Belmont University in Psychology and Religion, a graduate degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Education, and a doctorate in Counseling and Pastoral Psychology. He has served as a chairman of the Church Planting Group and Executive Committee Chair at the North American Mission Board for 10 years. He has been a Police Chaplain since 1991 and served as a Corporate Chaplain to the Coca Cola Bottling Company in Nashville, Tennessee where he resides with his wife. He has six children and five grandsons.

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## **First-Person: "Adventure bro"? Actually, hero—the true story of John Chau**

by Todd Nettleton

*Editor's Note: June 29 has been set aside as Day of the Christian Martyr. [For more information, visit Voice of the Martyrs.](#)*

John Chau's murder by tribesmen on North Sentinel Island in 2018 drew worldwide media attention, most of it critical if not downright mocking. The young Christian missionary was called a fool, a colonialist and an adventure bro. He was mocked in memes and ridiculed by comedians for cheap laughs.

And the criticism didn't come only from unbelievers. Christians piled on, too, passing on the memes and arguing that John's approach to fulfilling the Great Commission was outmoded and wrong.

Jim Elliott, who was killed in 1956 while trying to share the gospel with members of the Huaorani people in Ecuador, famously said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." So John Chau was no fool. Nor was he a colonialist, adventure bro or unprepared, amateurish missionary.

John Chau was a hero.

The funny thing is that the false story so many heard after his death was the one John *wanted* us to hear. He had left a breadcrumb trail on Instagram and other social media that led away from the truth of his dangerous mission. He wasn't out for "credit" and didn't worry about being misunderstood. He cared only about the mission to which God had called him — taking the gospel to the Sentinelese people. John had counted the cost and found it worthwhile.

"You guys might think I'm crazy in all this," he wrote the night before his death, "but I think it's worth it to declare Jesus to these people."

Trusting the promise of Revelation 7:9–10, John knew there would be Sentinelese people gathered around the throne of Christ for all eternity. If his mission were cut short by a Sentinelese arrow, disease or anything else, he knew someone else would take up the call to share Christ with the Sentinelese.

[The Voice of the Martyrs](#) is honoring John's inspiring example on this year's [Day of the Christian Martyr](#). While writing an article about John for the June issue of VOM's magazine, I read many previous articles about his life, mission and death. I spoke with his friends and with [leaders of the mission](#) that commissioned and sent him to North Sentinel Island. I watched video of a memorial service for John as well as a video he had recorded for a supporting church just months before his death.

I don't think the criticism would bother John. And he might find it humorous that the most sympathetic article appeared in [GQ](#), a magazine in whose pages he probably never imagined his name and picture appearing.

What *would* bother him, I think, is how quick Christians were to criticize. Many adopted the narrative that he was unprepared and foolhardy; he woke up one morning, got on a boat for

North Sentinel Island and got himself killed. “What was he thinking?” seemed as common a sentiment among Christians as non-Christians.

John prepared for nine years to go to North Sentinel Island. Every decision he made was with the goal of reaching the island, learning the language, serving the Sentinelese and eventually being able to tell them about God’s love for them in sending His Son to die on a cross for their sins.

John’s story challenges Christians to look in a mirror and ask some uncomfortable questions. Was there an expiration date on Jesus’ call to “go into all the world” (Matthew 28:18–20)? Is there some sort of exclusion clause for places governments don’t want us to go or where the inhabitants have previously attacked and killed visitors? Does God still call people to dangerous places? Would He ever ask us to do something that might cost us our lives?

And, if I call myself a follower of Christ, what part am I supposed to play in going into all the world?

In John’s final hours, he wrote letters to his family and Christian friends. He encouraged them to forgive the Sentinelese if he were murdered and told them he wanted his body left on the island (it was). For the witnesses he knew would inevitably follow in his footsteps, he prayed that God would “give them a double anointing and bless them mightily.” He also left a challenge: “I pray that you will never love anything in this world more than you love Christ.” John Chau’s life and death are proof that he lived up to that challenge. May his example inspire us to do likewise.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Todd Nettleton is the host of [The Voice of the Martyrs Radio](#) and the author of [When Faith Is Forbidden: 40 Days on the Frontlines with Persecuted Christians](#), a 2022 Christian Book Award winner. He has interviewed hundreds of Christians who have been persecuted for their faith and Christian witness during 24 years serving at The Voice of the Martyrs.

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## **Unify Project allows SBC to set Gospel-based racial unity example**

by Diana Chandler

**NEW ORLEANS, LA (BP)** – Fred Luter, the lone African American to have served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, sees great opportunity in the Unify Project, a new national

grassroots racial unity initiative he's leading with former SBC President Ed Litton and Dallas-area pastor Tony Evans.

"It would allow us to show that it is possible, according to the Scripture, for brothers and sisters to come together — of different backgrounds, ethnicities and cultures — and be the church that Jesus died for," said Luter, senior pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans. "He died for everyone."

Luter, Litton and Evans announced the Unify Project at the 2022 SBC Annual Meeting in Anaheim with plans to launch the pastor-driven program in the fall, backed by a diverse core steering committee.

Litton, pastor of Redemption Church in Mobile, Ala., said the initiative extends beyond Black and white cultural groups.

"It's important to stress too, because we have received some questions about this, that this isn't just an African American (and) Anglo American experience," Litton said, but includes Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans and "all sorts of divisions racially in our culture."

Evans, senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas and a noted author, theologian and radio host, will help lead the Unify Project in concert with The Urban Alternative, a ministry he co-founded in 1981 with his late wife Lois.

Within a short time following the [announcement](#) in Anaheim, Litton said, the initiative drew more than 2,000 requests for information on the program (available by texting Unify to 63566), and more than 1,000 requests for information registered at [Unifysbc.org](https://unifysbc.org).

"I think it expresses what has been a deep current within the SBC for the last five years, and that is people see this. They have a desire for it, but they lack a plan and a strategy," Litton said. "And one of the things we set out to do was to say, let's not talk about, let's not over-debate the subject as it is in our culture. Let's just see what the Gospel tells us to do. What does the Gospel expect the Lord's church to do?"

Luter describes Unify as an opportunity for the SBC to lead in unity at a particularly divisive time in the U.S.

"This is one that every one of us who are real true believers in Jesus Christ can come together and support. It would be great that the Southern Baptist Convention would be known for a convention that comes together to unify people, and not to divide people," Luter said. That's what I hope would happen. Because this racial issue is something that's happening across the country."



The program will allow pastors to build meaningful cross-cultural relationships that could impact the nation, Luter said.

Litton saw the fruits of such a program in Mobile through The Pledge Group, which he helped launch with an ecumenical Christian group of pastors and leaders in the city after the murder of George Floyd. The Mobile group has seen positive progress in confessing hidden racism and building Gospel-unified cross-cultural relationships, Litton said in a video shared in the SBC annual meeting.

Evans had laid the fault of racial disunity at the doors of the church.

“When it comes to our racial divide, it was the failure of the pulpit and the failure of the church, which has put us in this ignominious situation today,” Evans said in Anaheim. “And we are told in 2 Chronicles (Chapter 15) that only when they came together in unity did God bring them rest, verse 15 says, to the distress that was in the land.

“The political, the social, the racial, the class distress that we are facing, that has helped to be caused by the church, can only be properly dissolved by the church,” Evans said. “If God can’t get the church right, the culture can never become right.”

Luter encourages pastors to register for the program and lead their churches in building cross-cultural relationships.

“In 2012 (the first year Luter was elected SBC president) that was one of the main things we tried to encourage,” he said of the SBC. “And unfortunately, it comes and goes, comes and goes, comes and goes. But we’ve never really put any teeth to it, never really put any boots to the ground. So I think I would encourage pastors, listen, it’s time to stop talking this unification thing and let’s start walking it. And this is a way that we can make it happen.”

Details of the Unify Project are available at [unifysbc.org](http://unifysbc.org), and by texting Unify to 63566.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

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# Churches give thanks for Supreme Court decision, recommit to protect life

by Timothy Cockes

**CONCORD, TN (BP)** – On the Sunday after the Supreme Court’s [historic overturning](#) of the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision on Friday (June 24), Southern Baptists across the country took time both to rejoice in the ruling and to discuss how Christians should respond.

Many Southern Baptist leaders not only celebrated the Court’s decision, which returns the policy issues regarding abortion back to the state level but also took time to discuss ways to minister to women who may be considering an abortion.

One such example came from First Baptist Concord in Knoxville, Tenn., [which hosted a panel discussion](#) on Sunday about the decision featuring several pro-life advocates.

Among the panelists were John Mark Harrison, pastor of First Baptist Concord, Chris Johnson, vice president of church partnerships and government affairs for Lifeline Children’s Services, and Elizabeth Graham, vice president of operations and life initiatives for the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC).

Harrison opened the panel by explaining the importance of the conversation.

“What I want to do in this moment is move us past the politics of this, and talk about how we should respond as a church and as individual Christians,” Harrison said. “This is a very important moment for us not to miss personally and as a local church.”

Graham then spent time addressing the ERLC’s role in advocating for pro-life issues, and how local churches can think of addresses these issues in their local communities.

“As a part of the Southern Baptist Convention’s ethics and public policy arm, we get to advocate for policies that protect and defend life as well as speak on behalf of churches and then speak back to churches,” Graham said.

“I think of a church congregation’s role in this in the same way as a baby dedication. When someone has a baby and wants to dedicate that child to Christ, this is a life-long journey that the church is taking. We should think about serving vulnerable moms and moms in crisis in the same way,” Graham said.

“This is not just like a single decision of we want to see this baby rescued. We do want to see this baby rescued, but we want to provide a continuum of care. We want to bring Mom into the church, share the Gospel with her, and walk alongside her in very this difficult journey,” Graham told the congregation.

Johnson spoke about his work with Lifeline, a Christian foster care and adoption agency, and said Christians have a big responsibility to step up in this area.

“We know that this decision is going to affect the foster care system and there are going to be more children who are susceptible to coming into care,” he said.

“Of those children who are lingering in care, if someone doesn’t step in and welcome them into their family those young people are going to eventually age out of the foster care system.

“Those young people are then going to be more susceptible to homelessness, incarceration, trafficking and all of these things that really put them back in that cycle of being a part of unplanned pregnancies. Church, we can make a difference, and we must make an impact here.”

First Baptist Concord was not the only church to speak on the historic Supreme Court decision.

J.D. Greear, former president of the SBC and pastor of The Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, N.C., [spoke about the ruling during The Summit’s Sunday service](#).

“This past Friday was a day that I thought I might not see in my lifetime,” Greear said during the service.

He told Spectrum News 1 RDU that conversations with his congregation have reflected gratefulness, but also awareness to the difficulty of the topic.

“In the conversations I’ve had, people have been grateful for the Supreme Court recognizing the mistake from 1973 of saying this (right to abortion) was included in the constitution,” Greear said in the Spectrum News interview. “They’re grateful that this has been turned back over to the people to decide.

“We also recognize that for many women in our congregation and in our community, this is a part of their story and it’s very difficult to talk about. We want them to know that this is a safe place for them to be able to tell their story here. We also want to work in the societal factors that create that situation where someone would feel like that’s their only alternative.”

Bart Barber, SBC president and pastor of First Baptist Church of Farmersville in Texas, [focused his church’s opening prayer time on the news of the decision](#).

Three areas of prayer Barber said he wanted to concentrate on were rejoicing, mourning and commitment.

Rejoicing over the news of the decision and that lives that will be saved, mourning for the continued death toll from abortions and for women who have previously had an abortion as

well as a commitment to the work that's left to be done by both his local body and all believers, he told the congregation.

"We're just thankful anytime that anybody gets to live, and this decision is something many of us have prayed for a long time for," said Barber.

"There are people who conceive in all manner of difficult moments in their life, and we want to be a church that's there to point people to God's love and also to demonstrate God's love in what we do. We commit to ourselves to continue to help people who are around us."

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Timothy Cockes is a Baptist Press staff writer.

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## **Supreme Court supports coach's right to pray on field**

by Tom Strode

**WASHINGTON, D.C. (BP)** – The U.S. Supreme Court delivered what most religious liberty advocates declared an important victory in ruling Monday (June 27) the post-game, midfield prayer of a high school football coach did not violate the First Amendment's ban on government establishment of religion.

In a 6-3 opinion, the justices decided the Bremerton (Wash.) School District actually violated the First Amendment rights of Joseph Kennedy by removing him as a coach because of its concerns his practice infringed on the Establishment Clause. In doing so, the majority acknowledged it no longer abides by a more than 50-year-old standard in church-state cases known as the Lemon test.

"[A] government entity sought to punish an individual for engaging in a brief, quiet, personal religious observance doubly protected by the Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses of the First Amendment," Associate Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote in the court's opinion. "And the only meaningful justification the government offered for its reprisal rested on a mistaken view that it had a duty to ferret out and suppress religious observances even as it allows comparable secular speech.

"The Constitution neither mandates nor tolerates that kind of discrimination."

Joining Gorsuch in the majority were Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett. Associate Justice Sonia

Sotomayor wrote a dissenting opinion that was endorsed by Associate Justices Stephen Breyer and Elena Kagan.

Brent Leatherwood, acting president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), applauded the decision.

“As any Christian knows, our faith is deeply personal and rightly shapes every aspect of our lives,” Leatherwood said in an ERLC news release. “We live out our faith in any number of ways, both privately and publicly.

“Today’s case centered on the latter and the Supreme Court rightly determined that an individual employed by a school does not forfeit his or her constitutional right to free expression simply by entering ‘the schoolhouse gate’ or, as it were in this case, the field of play.”

The ERLC joined in three friend-of-the court briefs in support of Kennedy, two urging the Supreme Court to review rulings by the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and one in March calling for the justices to reverse the lower court. “The Establishment Clause, as properly interpreted, does not override the government’s duty to accommodate the free exercise of religion on a nondiscriminatory basis,” the most recent brief said.

The Ninth Circuit Court in San Francisco twice ruled against Kennedy, who was ultimately joined by some players and others in the on-field prayers. In a 2021 opinion, a three-judge panel of the Ninth Circuit Court said the school district would have violated the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause had it permitted Kennedy to continue to engage in his on-field, religious exercise after games.

In [the court’s opinion](#), Gorsuch said, “Respect for religious expressions is indispensable to life in a free and diverse Republic – whether those expressions take place in a sanctuary or on a field, and whether they manifest through the spoken word or a bowed head.”

The school district sought to “generate conflict between an individual’s rights under the Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses and its own Establishment Clause duties. . . . Not only does the District fail to offer a sound reason to prefer one constitutional guarantee over another. It cannot even show that they are at odds,” he wrote.

“In truth, there is no conflict between” the Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses on one hand and the Establishment Clause on the other, according to Gorsuch’s majority opinion. Leatherwood said the ruling reaffirms the following “aspect of constitutional law: our First Amendment rights travel together. We, and many others, have long held that religious liberty is our nation’s first freedom and that it bolsters and strengthens other foundational rights.”

“The Court today strengthened this perspective by writing that the clauses of free expression, establishment and free speech are all complementary,” he said. “If it were not already clear enough, this Court views religious liberty as a bedrock right in our free republic.”

The oft-criticized Lemon test became a subject of discussion during April’s arguments in the case, Kennedy v. Bremerton School District. The Lemon test was based on a standard offered in the 1971 Lemon v. Kurtzman opinion, which said a law must have a secular purpose, not primarily promote or restrict religion and “not foster an excessive entanglement with religion” to avoid a violation of the Establishment Clause.

In Monday’s opinion, Gorsuch said the school district and the Ninth Circuit Court overlooked that Lemon’s “ahistorical approach to the Establishment Clause became so ‘apparent’ [citing an earlier decision] that this Court long ago abandoned Lemon and its [government] endorsement [of religion] test offshoot.”

The Supreme Court has explained the Lemon and endorsement tests “‘invited chaos’ in lower courts, led to ‘differing results’ in materially identical cases, and created a ‘minefield’ for legislators,” Gorsuch wrote, again quoting a previous opinion. Instead, the high court has emphasized an “analysis focused on original meaning and history” has “long represented” its Establishment Clause doctrine, he wrote.

In her dissent, Sotomayor said the court’s opinion “is no victory for religious liberty.” “It elevates one individual’s interest in personal religious exercise, in the exact time and place of that individual’s choosing, over society’s interest in protecting the separation between church and state, eroding the protections for religious liberty for all,” she wrote.

The high court “now goes much further” than its recent church-state opinions, “overruling Lemon entirely and in all contexts,” Sotomayor wrote. “It is wrong to do so.”

Becket, a religious freedom advocacy organization, tweeted, “We are thrilled that the Supreme Court recognized the importance of religious expression and finally buried the Lemon test that restricted religious expression.

“Religion should not be scrubbed from the public square just because it makes a few people uncomfortable. And a person’s faith – like Coach Kennedy’s – shouldn’t be forced to stay private.”

John Bursch, senior counsel for Alliance Defending Freedom, said in a written statement the high court was right to reverse the Ninth Circuit’s decision “that wrongly reasoned that Coach Kennedy’s personal, on-field prayers were not his own, but the government’s. American citizens don’t give up the right to prayerfully practice their faith during working hours when they accept a job with a public employer.”

Advocates for a strict separation between church and state decried the opinion.

Holly Hollman, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said the decision “undermines religious freedom in public schools by holding that school officials must accommodate a public school teacher’s religious exercise at a school event.”

The court “pays lip service to religious freedom but throws out any concern about avoiding government pressure on students,” she said in a written release.

In 2008, Kennedy – an assistant coach with the Bremerton (Wash.) High School varsity team – began the practice of walking to the 50-yard line after each game, kneeling and briefly praying, thanking God for the players. Players eventually began joining him, and Kennedy, who was also head coach of the junior varsity team, continued to pray at midfield following games for the next seven years. He also reportedly gave motivational speeches to players on both teams who gathered around him.

During the 2015 season, the school district superintendent sent a letter to Kennedy telling him to refrain from the post-game prayers and from religious expression in his motivational talks to players. The superintendent said Kennedy’s practices likely violated the Establishment Clause. After abiding by the mandate for a few weeks, Kennedy returned to his former practice of praying at midfield and was joined by others.

The school district placed Kennedy on administrative leave as a result. The athletic director recommended the school not rehire him in 2016, and Kennedy declined to apply for a coaching position when a new varsity head coach was hired for the next season.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tom Strode is Washington bureau chief for Baptist Press.

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## **SATF shares expectations for implementation task force**

by Diana Chandler

**NASHVILLE, TN (BP)** – The work of a yet-to-be-appointed Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force (ARITF) is likely to take years, with an initial report ordered to be given at the 2023 Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting in New Orleans next June.

Marshall Blalock, vice chairman of the Sex Abuse Task Force (SATF) that recommended the new group, said guidelines are in place to allow as long as three years for some of the work.

“We anticipated it would take the implementation task force at least one year, maybe two years, and on the outside maybe three years,” Blalock said. “We’re hoping this next year is extremely productive and that (SBC) president (Bart) Barber is able to have a task force that’s ready to go to work and understands its responsibilities and can see some of these things move at a good pace.”

Barber expects to name the members of the task force by the end of July after a debriefing by the SATF, he tweeted from his Farmersville, Texas, farm June 22.

“After that’s all finished, then I’m going to be moving forward quickly to name the members of this task force and get them started. I expect that I’ll have that done before the end of July, because it’s just going to take some time to process through what the task force tells me and to turn that into recommendations for people to serve,” Barber said. “Pray for me, because this is going to be one of the most important things I do this year.”

The new implementation task force, as approved by messengers, is authorized to work for one year, with the term renewable annually as needed.

“We originally were thinking that it was going to take longer than a year because we’ve had nine months, and we just got started in some respects. But we don’t know how long it will take,” said Blalock, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Charleston, S.C. “And one of the good things that we’ve already learned is that many of our state conventions are already acting on some of the (challenges and requests) we have made. And the local church and the local associations and the local Baptist conventions, that is the state convention, (have) a more grassroots ability to help affect things at the local level.”

The SATF hopes, Blalock said, that local associations, churches and state conventions will help create a culture that enables people to prevent sex abuse, policies that prevent the crime, a system that provides care and help for abuse survivors, and a society where sex abuse is no longer tolerated.

“We hope that happens at a grassroots level,” he said. “There’s no way to know how long that part will take, but what we’re seeing so far is really good progress.”

The implementation task force is charged with work the SATF clearly delineated in its two recommendations [approved by messengers to the 2022 SBC Annual Meeting in Anaheim](#), with the added stipulation that the new task force adheres to “best practices in keeping with Southern Baptist church polity.”

The implementation task force is to:

- Study the Guidepost recommendations for feasibility and bring an initial report to the 2023 annual meeting on which reforms could be adopted by the convention and how they should be implemented, including Guidepost’s



recommendations for a survivor care fund and a memorial, auditing the Caring Well curriculum, and the possible creation of a permanent committee or entity.

- Assist SBC entities in studying the recommendations from Guidepost and provide advice on voluntary implementation of reforms relevant to each entity's ministry assignment.
- Serve as a resource in abuse prevention, crisis response, and survivor care to Baptist bodies who voluntarily seek assistance. Such assistance may include providing a list of recommended independent, qualified firms for training and inquiries and will include assisting state conventions with any of the recommendations each chooses, as the state conventions request.
- In consultation with the Credentials Committee, revise the evaluation and submission process for complaints of noncooperation due to sexual abuse and publish those revisions. For example, when a church acts in a manner that is inconsistent with the Convention's beliefs regarding sexual abuse, such as showing an unwillingness to cooperate in an inquiry of an accused individual, then the church shall be submitted to the SBC Credentials Committee for consideration in accordance with SBC bylaw 8.
- Work with the SBC Executive Committee and Credentials Committee to select an independent, qualified firm or firms to assist the Credentials Committee by providing factual findings for complaints of noncooperation due to sexual abuse. The (Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force) will report back any actions to the 2023 annual meeting regarding this selection. This expense shall be funded by the sexual abuse reform allocation.

In addition, messengers ordered the implementation task force to, in coordination with the SBC Executive Committee, create a Ministry Check website to publicize, and a process to maintain, a record of "pastors, denominational workers, ministry employees, and volunteers who have at any time been credibly accused of sexual abuse and who have been or are associated with a cooperating Southern Baptist church or entity."

The implementation task force will work with the Credentials Committee to choose an independent firm to maintain the website, with website guidelines approved by messengers. The implementation task force will monitor the website annually for compliance with guidelines.

The SATF made its recommendations after receiving [Guidepost Solutions' report of its independent investigation](#) of the Executive Committee's handling of sex abuse complaints spanning 2000-2021. Guidepost, in its lengthy report following a months-long investigation, [recommended several changes to the SBC](#). The implementation task force might not recommend to 2023 messengers all of the recommendations Guidepost Solutions included in its report, Blalock said.

“Guidepost sent us a long list of recommendations, some of which probably don’t work out with the way we govern ourselves as Baptists,” Blalock said. “But there may be some information there that the new reform implementation group finds and says this is a step we believe is right to take and they may bring those recommendations to New Orleans in 2023.

“We didn’t give them any particular priorities, we just said look at all of these and then see what can be done next year, if anything needs to be done next year,” Blalock said. “What we hope happens is the two recommendations that we’ve got in place now, that they can make sure that those actually become reality. We voted on it. We all agreed to it. Now, that group’s got to help find the right people to put it in place and help work with the Executive Committee to see that it’s done.”

The implementation task force’s work will be extensive and would benefit from a full-time staff person devoted to the task, Blalock said, emphasizing one of several proposals the SATF made as “requests” accompanying the report’s two recommendations approved by 2022 SBC Annual Meeting messengers.

“That’s one of the requests we made, that the Executive Committee would actually hire someone, that that is their main focus at least for the next two or three years. And someone who’s trained in understanding trauma of sex abuse and who understands the legal realities of it, understands the process of how to help prevent it,” Blalock said. “That’s someone on the staff at the EC who’s able to sort of guide that effort and work with the Credentials Committee as a staff helper.”

The SATF made several requests of state conventions, SBC entities, and other related Baptist bodies, forming them as suggestions since the bodies are ruled by individual boards of trustees rather than SBC messengers.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

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## **SBC President Bart Barber Responds to SCOTUS Dobbs Ruling**

“State-by-state, mother-by-mother, heart-by-heart we will continue our sacred work,”  
says Barber

**FARMERSVILLE, TX** – Bart Barber, pastor and newly elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, America’s largest Protestant denomination, provided comments today in response to the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in the abortion case, *Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization*:

“Southern Baptists rejoice at the ruling that the United States Supreme Court has delivered today in *Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization*.

Since 1980, the Southern Baptist Convention has passed more than 20 resolutions on the question of abortion. We have consistently held these principles:

- That from the moment of conception until the moment of natural death all human beings are made in the image of God.
- That every human being is valuable and deserves to be loved and protected, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, socio-economic status, disability, intelligence, or utility to society.
- That elective abortion should be prohibited by law except in cases wherein the life of the mother is endangered by carrying the baby to term.
- That expectant mothers facing difficult circumstances deserve the love and support of the church, the community, and society.

These principles have motivated both our consistent support of the pro- life movement and our consistent support of crisis pregnancy centers, ministries to low-income families, foster-care and adoption agencies, and other ministries of mercy to people in need.

As we stated just days ago in a [resolution](#) at our 2022 Annual Meeting, in a post-*Roe* United States, “We commit to stand with and pray for abortion-vulnerable women, to eliminate any perceived need for the horror of abortion, and to oppose Planned Parenthood and other predatory organizations or institutions who exploit vulnerable women for profit.” State-by-state, mother-by-mother, heart-by-heart, we will continue our sacred work toward this goal.”

Barber was elected President of the Southern Baptist Convention June 14 in Anaheim, CA. More information about Barber can be found [here](#).

*The Southern Baptist Convention is America’s largest Protestant denomination, with nearly 14 million members and a network of over 50,000 cooperating congregations.*

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