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Churches Not Always Embraced Christmas

DECEMBER 23RD 2011 BY UNKNOWN

Churches Not Always Embraced Christmas

*By Stephen Wilson
Special To The ShowMe Times*

MAYFIELD, Ky. - Baptists of the South and the faith community of Southern Baptists after 1845 originally did not attach much significance to Christmas. The holiday is not recognized as a special day of worship in any of the historic Baptist confessions, allusions to it are rare in Baptist history volumes before the 1880s, and the holiday possessed an association with worldliness and even paganism in the minds of many Baptist ministers.

Nevertheless, according to Southern Christmas historian Emyl Jenkins, the people of the South had a long tradition of celebrating the holiday as a popular festival to honor the birth of Christ. At a time when Christmas was slow coming to New England (Boston did not celebrate Christmas until 1856), Southerners had made it a legal holiday in most states beginning with Alabama, Arkansas and Louisiana in the 1830s. Southern communities and families observed the holiday with great enthusiasm. Included in these celebrations were distinctive regional customs such as the popular consumption of pork (over poultry); the broader use of almost anything green in nature for decorations besides holly, evergreens, and mistletoe; discharges of firearms; fireworks; and bonfires. These celebratory activities took place alongside more thoughtful observances of the Lord's nativity.

It is probable that while most Baptists in the South before the Civil War largely downplayed the observance of Christmas in their churches, they participated in Christmas activities with their families and in their communities. These Baptists exercised their Christian liberty about special days that Paul cited in Romans 14:5-6 and found festive but temperate activities and customs to celebrate the birth of Christ.

After the Civil War, Southern Baptists began a slow process of incorporating Christmas themes and activities into their church programs and services. One reason for this was the growing popularity of Christmas during the Victorian Era. Churches sang carols, implemented Christmas-themed nativity plays and holiday events staged for and by children, and created a series of sermons based on the Matthew and Luke accounts of the birth and early childhood of Jesus as valid means for proclaiming the Gospel and teaching the doctrine of the incarnation to all ages of Believers.

For instance, in 1867 Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Basil Manly Jr. wrote a letter to his children relating how his church's Sunday School program celebrated the holiday with a decorated tree and the exchange of inexpensive gifts. Manly specifically stated that this custom had only taken place in his church after the Civil War, and the letter itself bore evidence of the growing tolerance for Christmas activities in church programs.

A second reason for the embrace of Christmas in Southern Baptist culture was the influence of missionary Charlotte Digges "Lottie" Moon. In 1887 she wrote a letter to the Foreign Mission Journal suggesting that Southern Baptist women set aside a

season of prayer and giving to international missions. She pleaded that the "week before Christmas" be chosen. "Is not the festive season when families and friends exchange gifts in memory of the Gift laid on the altar of the world for the redemption of human race, the most appropriate time to consecrate a portion from abounding riches ... to send forth the good tidings of great joy into all the earth?"

In Moon's famous letter she noted in passing that Christmas celebrations in Baptist life still largely unfolded among "families and friends," but that would soon change. In 1888 the newly founded Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) took up the challenge and began collecting a Christmastide offering through women in Southern Baptist churches. By 1889 the Annual Report of the convention reported that "Christmas envelopes" were distributed in the churches. The Foreign Mission Board in the Annual Report of 1890 acknowledged that it had published "Christmas literature."

In 1897 the convention thanked the WMU "for the sum of all these Christmas offerings." Over time the Southern Baptist embrace of a Christmastide offering to support missions made it respectable to incorporate additional Christmas themes in Southern Baptist churches.

After Lottie Moon's death, the WMU Christmas offering was renamed the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and the early 20th century Southern Baptist observance of Christmas in the churches included the promotion and support of foreign missions alongside overt and public activities that celebrated the birth of Christ. As the 20th century lengthened, Baptist churches joined other Christian faith groups in America that celebrated Christmas in the church services with special music, holiday events, Christmas-themed sermons that began after Thanksgiving, and the giving of gifts and candy to children in the Sunday School programs. Nevertheless, the centerpiece of Southern Baptist holiday activities remained the promotion of the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for the support of foreign missions.

By the late 20th century and early 21st century the Southern Baptist Convention and its churches had fully incorporated celebrations of the birth of Christ into its culture. Large suburban churches produced elaborate Christmas programs to honor the nativity and also proclaim the Gospel. In addition, many of these same large churches also began incorporating Advent season activities into church worship with the inclusion of Advent wreaths and candles, sermons preparing the local churches for the upcoming Christmas holiday, and events on Advent like "the hanging of the greens" in the church sanctuary.

In 2008 the annual Convention passed its first Christmas-themed resolution when Southern Baptists resolved to "affirm the use of the term Christmas" instead of referring to more generic terms for the season like "holiday" or "winter solstice" in public life. The opening line of the resolution that proclaimed that "Christmas celebrates one of the most holy events in Christian history" would have shocked Baptists in an earlier era who saw a disconnect between the Lord's nativity and the popular Christmas holiday. Baptists had experienced a gradual embrace of Christmas that first tolerated and later advocated many aspects of the holiday.

In 2011 one aspect of the Southern Baptist observance of Christmas has remained constant since the late 1880s -- the Christmas offering advanced by Lottie Moon for the proclamation of the Good News to the world at large. Support of the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering is one of the best ways that Southern Baptist Christians can support the nativity angels' vision for "peace on earth and good will toward men."

Stephen Wilson is the vice president for academic affairs at Mid-Continent University in Mayfield, Ky., and a member of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee.

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Nativity's Potential Removal Sparks Outcry

DECEMBER 09TH 2011 BY UNKNOWN

Nativity's Potential Removal Sparks Outcry

Special to the ShowMe Times

MALAKOFF, Texas -- For the sake of his three young sons and the daughter he and his wife will soon adopt from Africa, Pastor Nathan Lorick says he has drawn a line in the dirt of his East Texas community in defiance of an atheist group's demand that a nativity scene be removed from the lawn of the Henderson County Courthouse.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), at the behest of an anonymous Henderson County resident, sent a letter to county officials Dec. 1 stating the religious display was in violation of a United States Supreme Court decision and should be removed from county property. The Henderson County nativity sits amid a collection of Christmas-themed displays, including Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman, a group of carolers and assorted gnomes.

"What are Christians going to do about this?" the 30-year-old pastor of First Baptist Church Malakoff asked in a phone interview with the TEXAN hours before an appearance at dawn on the nationally broadcast "Fox & Friends" television program. "It's time for the silent majority to wake up, speak up and stand up."

A majority of Henderson County commissioners said they opposed moving the nativity

scene based on the FFRF complaint, according to the Malakoff News, reporting on a perspective shared by County Judge Richard Sanders. The county does not own the nativity scene nor the secular decorations, but allows a local group known as Light Up Athens to set them out on the courthouse lawn on the corner of Palestine and Corsicana streets in Athens.

While FFRF relied on a 1989 Supreme Court case argued by the ACLU as the basis for their complaint of an unconstitutional endorsement of religion, the group claimed the nativity scene on the courthouse lawn is the only seasonal display. Sanders said the county's attorney had reviewed pertinent cases and found Henderson County to be in compliance with federal law.

In the letter to the judge, FFRF argues, "When the county allows this manger scene to be created, which depicts the legendary birth of Jesus Christ, it places the imprimatur of the county government behind the Christian religious doctrine." The East Texas display is one of a dozen nativity scenes that the non-profit Wisconsin-based FFRF is working to eliminate.

Lorick is concerned at the ever-increasing secularization of America, noting that Christian symbols and speech are no longer a significant part of the fabric of the culture and often are marginalized or vilified.

That is not the America in which he wants to raise his children. Lorick and his wife, Jenna, have three sons ages 7, 4, and 2 years old. The couple is in the process of adopting a girl from Africa.

"My kids are young and it's worth fighting to restore the fundamental Christian beliefs we were founded on for my kids' future," he said.

After the Malakoff newspaper broke the story on its Facebook page Dec. 6, Todd Starnes of Fox News Radio, a former Baptist Press employee, spread the word nationally, talking with Lorick by phone. Lorick told Starnes he wants his children to grow up in the same country that had the religious freedom and opportunity to "worship Jesus as I did." That includes the soon-to-be daughter he and his wife are adopting.

"I want to teach her that this is a Christian society," he told the TEXAN.

Lorick also questioned how one local resident and an organization on the other side of the country can turn his county on its head -- a county, Lorick said, that is predominantly

evangelical. He feels a "moral, parental and spiritual responsibility" to stand against those who literally would take Christian expression out of the public square.

A Nativity Rally for Dec. 17 is being planned. Among those who joined Lorick in planning it are Robert Welch of Rock Hill Baptist in Brownsboro, Eric Graham of Sand Springs Baptist Church in Athens and Derek Rogers, a county resident who pastors the Cowboy Church of Corsicana. The group circulated a YouTube video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nW05U6L_MIY calling for Henderson County pastors to meet Dec. 9 at the Athens Sand Springs Baptist Church.

Speaking of himself and his peers, Lorick said, "There's a generation coming up that is willing to take a stand and fight against that and bring our nation back to the Christian principles on which it was founded."

In a Dec. 7 interview with KDFW-TV, FFRF founder Annie Laurie Gaylor said public displays of Christian symbols, such as the nativity scene, can be "intimidating" and send a message to non-Christians that they are not welcome in the county courthouse.

"The reason people come to us is because people are fearful of reprisals. They are fearful of stones being thrown through their window. They are fearful of losing their jobs, losing their friends, losing their clients because there is so much hostility if you speak up for separation of church and state," Gaylor told the Dallas station.

Lorick and others want nothing to do with the kind of visceral response FFRF's spokeswoman alleged.

"Disagreements should be spoken with love and respect," he said. It is his hope that what is said and done in response to the atheist group's demands will "go viral" in news and social media coverage and the entire situation can serve as a platform for the glory of God, he said.

Graham, the pastor of Sand Springs Baptist Church in Athens, said the incident has "awakened" Christians in the county. He also said believers should react with love.

"I know that this thing can be very ugly with people reacting with emotions of anger and outrage," Graham said. "We, however, are making a concerted effort to lead our people to act differently. In a time where Christians are known for what we are against, we want to show that we are for some things too. We are going to act with love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness and self-control instead of anger and bitterness. "However," Graham

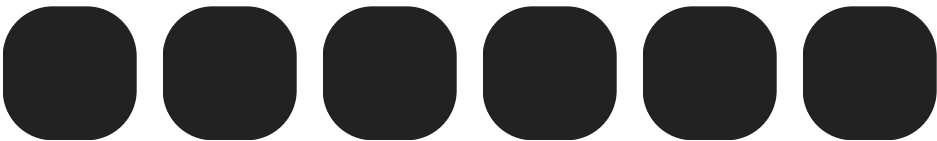
added, "we are also going to make it a point to say, 'We have backed up far enough.' Our nation was founded upon Christian principles and with the expressed purpose of Christian liberty. We have been given up those liberties with very little resistance, but it is now time for Christians to come together in unity and begin pushing back the powers of darkness with the light of Jesus Christ."

Photo Above: Thenativity scene on a courthouse lawn in Henderson County, Texas, could be taken down if an atheist group has its way. Screen capture courtesy WFAA-TV.

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Clinic's Care Includes 'The Best Medicine'

DECEMBER 06TH 2011 BY UNKNOWN

Clinic's Care Includes 'The Best Medicine'

EDITOR'S NOTE: IMB President Tom Elliff and his wife Jeannie visited the Horn of

Africa over Thanksgiving. This report is his response to the plight of people in the midst of famine.

HORN OF AFRICA (BP) -- The African air is hot and still, stirred only by people brushing silently by as they are invited into the clinic courtyard from the weary line gathered outside. My wife Jeannie and I are taken by the silence. People who are tired, hungry and ill are often very quiet, even the children and babies. They have long ago given up on mere pleading as an effective means for getting help.

The medical clinic "waiting room" is a wooden bench on a shaded porch. Patients are asked to sit, five at a time, while waiting for someone to inquire about their problems. Just being there, where someone cares, is medicine in itself -- and you get the feeling they'd love to linger. But the time is short, and the sun will soon make it too hot to continue.

Standing in the doorway, wiping perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand, is a Southern Baptist health care worker, one of six at the clinic today. She, along with a few nationals and volunteers from the States, will treat approximately 120 patients before the day is half done. This is the first of three similar clinics they conduct each week in a joint effort with Baptist Global Response in the Horn of Africa.

Toward noon I hear a sudden, excited "buzz" among the Christian workers who motion toward the bench and whisper "God has answered our prayers!"

Pausing for a moment, one of the workers draws me aside to tell me that only four days earlier the team began praying for an open door to the Muslim community in a village far from the clinic. "Look!" she exclaimed, "those are eight people from the very village we've been praying about. These people have walked all the way here and are our very first contacts."

I look again at the sad group sitting on the bench and clustered beside it. Little do they know that very soon the light of the Gospel will break across the landscape in that distant community ... the result of YOUR praying, YOUR giving and YOUR praying some more!

Soon they will receive what one Christian worker called "The Best Medicine." Very soon, many of them could join the multiplied thousands turning to Christ with hearts softened by the love of these Southern Baptists who minister in a very hard place.

This week is critical to our Southern Baptist ministries around the world. It's the week our

churches focus on prayer for our personnel and give to international missions through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, which keeps personnel on the field. But the world deserves more than a mere week of prayer and giving! And the commission of our Lord, "Go! Teach all nations!" demands more of us than ever before.

This past October the world's population exceeded 7 billion people, each of whom will be alive millions of years from now in heaven or hell. The Best Medicine is Jesus! Yet it is estimated that 1.7 billion people will die without ever hearing His name.

That is both unthinkable and unacceptable for Southern Baptists who eagerly and sacrificially seek to carry the Good News to the very ends of the earth.

As Jeannie and I sat on our bed that evening, we reflected on the importance of praying and giving and praying some more. We must both pray and give with sacrificial determination. But if we can continue wearing what we wear, living where we live, enjoying all that we have enjoyed and going anywhere we want to go ... then where is the sacrifice?

Sacrifice results in change, a present change in our lives with the anticipation of a future change in the lives of others. It will take sacrificial giving, praying and going if Southern Baptists are to effectively impact the world for Christ's sake.

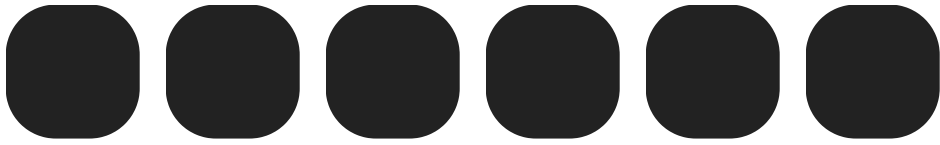
This year, let's pray and give and pray some more ... like people who take the Great Commission seriously. Let's do everything necessary to be His heart, His hands and His voice.

This year's Week of Prayer for International Missions in the Southern Baptist Convention is Dec. 4-11 with the theme of "His heart, His hands, His voice -- I am Southern Baptist missions" from Acts 1:8. Each year's Lottie Moon Christmas Offering supplements Cooperative Program giving to support Southern Baptists' 5,000 international missionaries' initiatives in sharing the Gospel. This year's offering goal is \$175 million. To find resources about the offering, go to imb.org/offering.

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Times In American History To Be Thankful

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Times In American History To Be Thankful

*By Stephen Wilson
Mid-Continent University
Special to SMT*

MAYFIELD, Ky. - On this Thanksgiving our formal prayers will almost certainly include a reference about "living in a free country." Indeed, we have much to be thankful for in this regard. Nevertheless, we often fail to recognize the Almighty's hand in American history. We have been impacted by God's special hand in promoting American exceptionalism. The American experience has been unique, and while we make no claims about God's future blessings on the United States, we can see His intervention at various junctures in our past to both ensure His will and promote blessings for the American people.

In fact, it is hard to choose just five junctures in American history for which Americans should be thankful, and many Christian historians of American history will certainly disagree about my choices. Yet, these junctures both molded the American experience and have given us long-term blessings. We can be very thankful that the Almighty was

present in all these junctures.

1. The founding and settlement of the American colonies by religious dissenters.

America's early social, political, economic, moral and religious roots owe much to the founding of many American colonies by religious dissenters. The dissenters themselves often disagreed with each other about many issues, but collectively they established the American Christian worldview that has persisted to our own era and helped mold the American character. This is especially true of the early American groups like the Pilgrims, Puritans, Pietists, Quakers and Baptists.

A partial list of the contributions of these religious dissenters to the American character would include: a recognition that God plays a central role in our lives; the relationship of faith to the exercise of government (The Mayflower Compact); a view that earthly society should reflect as much as possible an example for the rest of the world (Puritan John Winthrop's "City on a Hill"); the Puritan (or Protestant) work ethic; an economic consensus that God blesses thoughtful non-exploitive investment, saving, and business growth; a charitable concern for fellow citizens as a means of also worshipping God; a sense of duty and service to both God and fellow citizens; the promotion of temperance in daily living that avoids both extreme self-denial and self-indulgence and is good for both the individual and society; and the advocacy of religious liberty and the separation of church and state (for which Baptists played a very unique role).

While Christians in the United States today still hold to these principles, even non-Christians in America have been influenced by the legacy of the early American religious dissenters. Our gratitude for their influence is certainly worth remembering during this season of Thanksgiving.

2. The American Revolution and constitutional guarantees of freedom.

God's blessings for the American people had their origins in the creation of the republic. The United States began because of a long revolution. In 1776 it was not always clear that a country without a sovereign could succeed. Nevertheless, the determination of American military men and the help of the French played a decisive part in ensuring God's will for the independence of the American nation.

Yet, independence without a viable government with converse guarantees for the rights of its citizens would have been an unfulfilled experiment. In 1787 the country's survival was ensured by the creation of the American Constitution and a later addition of a Bill of

Rights. Steering a middle path between a strong monarchy and radical democracy, the Constitution championed divided government, checks and balances, and a means for the people to make changes in the government when new conditions arose. Furthermore, individual Americans were protected in their desire for free expression, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms, the right to a trial of a jury of their peers, and a host of other guarantees enshrined in the Bill of Rights. When our countrymen thank God for the privilege of being American, it is usually an aspect of this juncture in American history that they have in mind.

3. The preservation of the American state and the Civil War.

The American experiment and God's plans for the American nation could have been disrupted by the potential division of the country through the civil conflict of the early 1860s. Divided by lifestyle, economics, differing views of the role of government and the institution of slavery, the United States endured a brutal four-year war that took more than 600,000 lives. Abraham Lincoln's vision to eradicate a "house divided" by slavery was ultimately upheld by the North's victory in the Civil War. Although my own ancestors in the border state of Kentucky were generally pro-Confederate, and I was named for one of Lincoln's political opponents, even we Southerners recognize that the U.S. could not have been the "city on the hill" for the rest of the world without ending the institution of slavery and remaining a united entity.

The upgrade in industrial expansion in the 19th century, continued westward expansion, and the growing respect for the U.S. in world diplomatic circles would not have been accomplished without the Union victory in the Civil War.

4. The defeat of the Axis powers in World War II.

In the early 1940s 14 million men and 2 million women served in the American armed forces and thwarted the attempt by the Axis powers to impose their ideology on the rest of the world. Strongly supported by the American people at home, American military personnel carried out the Lord's will to defeat Hitler, Mussolini and their Japanese allies. The hard-pressed Allies would not have been able to defeat the Axis powers without the immense contribution of American military personnel and the incredible output of American industrial strength. Even Hitler was stunned by the monthly reports of tanks, planes, ships and artillery rolling off American assembly lines.

Something should be said here for the "greatest generation" that contributed to the defeat of the Axis powers. The young American men and women who had accomplished this

feat had not enjoyed all of America's promise and benefits. They were a generation that grew up during the Great Depression. They only knew hard times, and the America of prosperity had not been their experience. Conversely, they still loved their country, and they carried with them a sense of duty that was rooted in the values of the religious dissenters who came to these shores in the 17th and 18th centuries. Furthermore, their sense of duty did not end in 1945. For the next 40 years their sense of service was destined to produce yet another important juncture in American history for which we are thankful. The U.S. victory in the Second World War would engender additional blessings for the American people.

5. The great economic expansion of the late 20th century.

The "greatest generation" in 1945 had only known depression and war, but that soon changed. Beginning in the 1940s they married and had children (the "baby boom"); found good-paying jobs in industry, commerce and service sectors of the economy; pioneered the move to the rapidly growing suburban ring around our big cities; and provided the tax revenues to win the Cold War and fund America's growing welfare state. Successive generations of Americans also enjoyed the postwar prosperity established by the "greatest generation."

The economic expansion of the latter half of the 20th century was remarkable and unprecedented. By the early 21st century, the U.S. would produce an \$11 trillion dollar economy -- almost three times that of its nearest rival -- China. This entailed the greatest economic expansion in world history. The Almighty allowed Americans to experience His beneficence after years of depression and war. This economic expansion certainly experienced fluctuations in the 20th century, and yes, a dark underside always existed (wealth disparities, the genesis of a welfare state that looked unsustainable, a growing dependence on credit, a changing world economy by the late 20th century, etc.). But by any standard, Americans were greatly blessed in the latter half of the 20th century.

For those adult Americans today with full-time jobs, some features of the great economic expansion still continue. Even in the troubled economy of the early 21st century, most Americans enjoy a lifestyle that is still desired by most of the world's people. Our sense of gratitude to the Almighty for our relative prosperity should exist alongside our obligation to help other less fortunate peoples.

All in all, we Americans have much for which to be thankful, and we should be reminded of how the Lord blessed our nation at various points in our history. We pray that on this Thanksgiving, the blessings of God will continue.

Stephen Wilson is the vice president for academic affairs at Mid-Continent University in Mayfield, Ky., and a member of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee. He was asked to select five junctures in U.S. history that are cause for thanksgiving.

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Thankful, Yes! But To Whom?

NOVEMBER 22ND 2011 BY UNKNOWN

Thankful, Yes! But To Whom?

*By Jason Lee
Special to SMT*

FORT WORTH, Texas -- "Pass the turkey, please." You can hear the subtle scrape of the fork on the plate to get the last delicious bite of grandmother's dressing with giblet gravy. Can you picture the scene? Aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, parents and grandparents all gathered around a table crowded with various casseroles, another new sweet potato recipe,

cranberry sauce and of course, the majestic bird as the main attraction.

Just after everyone gathers at the table and way before the scramble for the best couch to nap on during the Cowboys game, someone announces, "Let's all say what we are thankful for." Sure, it is a great idea, but is it more than just a family tradition?

For the secular mind, the whole holiday makes no sense. Thanksgiving? Thanksgiving somehow implies that I am not in charge of my own destiny. Thanksgiving somehow implies that a higher power not only exists but is in some way personally interested and personally involved in my life. To the secular mind, the very notion of "thanksgiving" is repulsive and must be replaced. So, the movement to the title of "Turkey Day" is no real surprise. And in these economic times, one wonders whether the national celebration is for Thanksgiving or for the consumer spending on Black Friday. Since Christmas is really about the gifts, then why wouldn't Thanksgiving be about the department store sales and the electronic deals?

As Christians, we know intuitively that we should resist the secular revisions. However, is our list of what we are thankful for, enough to be a significant contrast with the contemporary climate? Does our thanksgiving actually confess a genuine hope in the Lord?

Believers recognize that we are not just thankful for the good things that we have but that we should direct our thanksgiving to God. If we do not add to whom we are thankful, then our thanksgiving becomes little more than a progress report or satisfaction quotient. So, it is not just that we are thankful for (i.e. happy with) our jobs, our homes or our health. We are thankful to God who is our provider, our protector and our sustainer.

But what if Grandpa's question is, "What are you thankful for?" Should I correct him and say that the real question is not "what I am thankful for" but "who I am thankful to"? No, don't do that or you may be dismissed from the table before the pumpkin pie. But it is not just that we remember that we should be thankful to God, but that we are also thankful for God (e.g. Psalms. 9:1-2). It is true that we are often overwhelmed by the gracious and loving acts of God including His good gifts of material provisions and life/health for us or our family. We are truly amazed at His provision of spiritual benefits such as forgiveness of sins, the fruit of the Spirit or a loving community of believers. However, we must never let our thanksgiving for the good provisions of God overshadow our thanks for God Himself. We need to thank Him because of His glorious nature. There would be no possibility of wonderful things such as love, mercy, truth, righteousness, beauty and life, except through God who IS these things. So, pass the rolls, but first remember to be

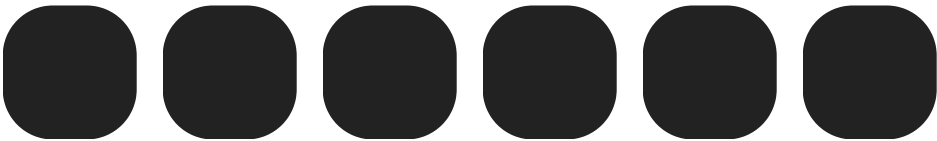
thankful to God, for God.

Jason Lee is associate professor of historical theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. This column first appeared at TheologicalMatters.com, a blog of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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