



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

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Christian Index staffer tapped as new editor of Baptists Today

By Bob Allen

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Baptist journalist John Pierce has been named executive editor of the moderate newspaper Baptists Today, according to a story on the publication's Web site.

The independent paper's board of directors elected Pierce, who currently is managing editor of the Georgia Baptist newspaper The Christian Index, at a called meeting Dec. 3, according to the report. He will start his new job Feb. 1.

Pierce, 43, is a former campus minister who has worked for the Georgia Baptist Convention's news journal since 1994. He has won awards for feature writing and for editing the E-Street Journal, a magazine published by The Christian Index.

James McAfee, an Atlanta businessman who chairs Baptists Today's board of directors, said, "We are enormously excited that a journalist and committed churchman of John's caliber will lead Baptists Today into the next century."

Pierce's election fills a void created in October, when the paper's previous editor, Bob Ballance, resigned abruptly. Ballance later told a reporter he left because of "a radical difference" with directors over the paper's future.

In public statements, Baptists Today's directors have said they intend to move the paper, founded in 1983 during the throes of controversy between moderates and conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention, beyond denominational politics. Recently the paper has moved toward a focus on resources for local churches and stories featuring prominent Baptists.

In his statement, McAfee said that Pierce and the board share a "similar" vision.

"We want Baptists Today to play an important role in celebrating, informing and encouraging Baptist lay people and their congregations," McAfee said. "John Pierce's experience and vision is a great match for us at this important time. We firmly believe that the best days of Baptists Today are just before us."

Directors have also employed an Atlanta marketing firm for a reported \$350,000 for a campaign aimed at more than doubling the publication's circulation.

They also entered into a partnership with Smyth and Helwys Publishing in Macon, Ga., for production and business management that included relocating the newspaper's offices from Atlanta to Macon.

Pierce is the second person to move from The Christian Index to Baptists Today. Jack Harwell took early retirement as editor of the Index to edit the paper then known as SBC Today in 1988. Following Harwell's 1997 retirement from Baptists Today, the paper restructured its board, adopted a new mission statement and other changes, and set out to find a new editor.

Ballance, at the time a pastor in Texas, took the job but kept it only a year. During his stay, circulation reportedly grew from a low of 6,900 to about 9,000.

Marketing goals reportedly call for having 20,000 subscribers and annual revenues of \$150,000 by December 2000. Directors say achieving those goals would enable the paper -- which currently is subsidized by donors including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- to become self-sustaining.

Pierce said Baptists Today "faces a future that is both challenging and ripe with potential."

"Certainly there is a viable, perhaps even crucial, place among the large and loose assortment of Baptist people for a common source of communication; specifically one that honestly considers issues and ideas that Baptists consider to be important," he said.

"Baptists Today is a good place to hammer out what it means to be a Baptist and to better equip individuals and congregations for more effective ministry. I share the board's vision for Baptists Today becoming that kind of informative and helpful resource for laity and clergy alike," he added.

Pierce's boss at the Georgia Baptist paper said he hates to see him go.

"While we are not surprised that another newspaper has tapped him as editor, we are feeling a great loss at the Index," said Editor William Neal. "Johnny Pierce has been a major contributor to the success of this newspaper over the past five years. He is an excellent writer and an intelligent, visionary leader who will do well wherever he serves."

A native of Ringgold, Ga., Pierce holds a doctor-of-ministry degree from Columbia Theological Seminary, a master of divinity from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and a B.A. from Berry College.

Before working at The Christian Index, he was Baptist campus minister in Georgia 13 years at Southern Tech and Kennesaw colleges and later Georgia Tech University.

Pierce and his wife, Teresa, have two daughters: Meredith, 6, and Abigail, 1.

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Seminary distributes critical material after complaints by Texas layman

By Ken Camp

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Complaints by a Texas layman prompted administrators at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to provide for classroom distribution materials sharply criticizing the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

The seminary administration gave the materials to three professors to distribute after a Texas Baptist official gave guest lectures in their classes.

Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, spoke in five classes on the Fort Worth campus on "Keeping Your Church Out of Court."

In the presentation, Strickland described views about both appropriate and improper political involvement on the part of churches.

In at least some of the classes, he cited First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls as a case study -- specifically its dispute with the local city council over two library books with homosexual themes.

The congregation's pastor, Robert Jeffress, led opposition to the books, "Daddy's Roommate" and "Heather Has Two Mommies" being offered at the library. He protested by borrowing and then refusing to return the books, choosing instead to pay a \$54 fine.

The church's deacons passed a resolution supporting the pastor and urging the city council to order the library to remove any pro-homosexual books from its shelves. The library replaced the copies held by Jeffress but moved the titles from the children's section to the juvenile area.

Jeffress spoke about the issue from the pulpit. On one occasion, he called on church members to share their moral convictions with elected officials and to "vote out the infidels" if they refused to honor biblical principles.

Strickland said he used the Wichita Falls church as an example of acceptable political involvement, since it involved speaking to a moral issue and not endorsing particular candidates for office.

"I agreed with the stand the pastor took and offered my opinion that his response did not violate IRS guidelines," Strickland said in an interview.

A member of the church, however, who also has been a frequent critic of Texas Baptist leaders, told seminary administrators that a student reported to him Strickland was openly critical of the church and its political action. Bill Streich then asked the seminary to distribute material produced by a conservative organization he represents, the Texas Baptist Laymen's Association, in the classes where Strickland spoke.

Seminary President Ken Hemphill said the seminary granted Streich's request out of a desire to give students access to "both sides of the dialogue" on critical issues.

"We believe open discussion of critical matters such as these are appropriate and necessary in the academic community," Hemphill said.

Bill Tolar, acting dean of the school of theology, gave Streich's materials to professors Bill Goff, Jeph Holloway and Doug Dickens to distribute to their students. Tolar said Goff had already approached him and offered to allow the church an opportunity to respond to any perceived misunderstanding.

Tolar said he did not coerce the professors to distribute the literature. He added that he wanted to correct any misunderstanding about statements regarding a local church, and he believed the material was from the church -- not an individual.

"I simply said to somebody that if we have any misinformation about a great church, we will try to correct it, but I've never tried to force a professor in all my years as an administrator," he said.

Among the materials given to students was criticism of Strickland and former Baptist Joint Committee head James Dunn for their association with Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. By linking with the group, Streich charged, "They stand with humanists, homosexual activists, Unitarians and abortionists."

The material, based on research by a conservative group in Missouri, is similar to material critical of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the BGCT that has been widely distributed. Leaders of those groups have said it is dubious and amounts to guilt by association.

Tolar said he didn't know what was in the material when he asked professors to hand it out.

"I didn't look at it. I didn't read it," Tolar said, noting that he thought it was a clarification of the church's position. "I got blindsided by the whole thing."

Dickens confirmed that Strickland made no derogatory comments about the Wichita Falls church in his class.

"On the contrary, Strickland was very affirming of First Baptist, Wichita Falls," he said. Dickens said Strickland specifically commended the pastor for the manner in which he stayed within the boundaries of acceptable political activity.

Goff said Strickland's presentation was "innocent," including his mention of the Wichita Falls situation. "The illustration he used was not derogatory but illustrative of the issues that arose last year," Goff said. "I did not think the presentation was ill-intentioned."

Jeph Holloway, an ethics professor, was absent the day Strickland spoke to his class. But before he distributed the Streich materials, he said students told him that neither the church nor the Baptist Joint Committee was mentioned.

"I find this amazing," Strickland said. "The class presentations were purely to give information to students about legal issues they will face in their churches. It was then used to distribute information that is basically an irresponsible hatchet job."

Streich was reportedly out of his office and unavailable for comment.

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Book offers new clues about Bethlehem Star

By Kelly Turner

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. (ABP) -- It's a question that has intrigued scientists and theologians for centuries: what was the Star of Bethlehem?

Modern astronomers have offered a number of possible explanations for the celestial event the Bible says heralded Christ's birth.

A new book, however, suggests the answer to the mystery may lie not in the heavens but in beliefs of ancient astrology.

Astronomer Michael Molnar says his theory is bolstered by an ancient coin he bought for his collection at a coin show in New York for \$50. The coin, originally from Antioch, the ancient capital of Syria, depicts the astrological figure Aries the Ram looking back at a star.

In his research, Molnar found that Aries first appeared on coins from Antioch when the Romans annexed Judea, an event mentioned in the Gospel of Luke. At the time of Christ's birth, he says, Aries was a symbol for the Jews. Ancient astrologers also believed that a new king would be born when the moon passed in front of Jupiter, creating an eclipse.

Curious about whether the coin might commemorate an astrological event, Molnar used computer models to determine that an eclipse of Jupiter in Aries occurred "in the east" on April 17, 6 B.C. -- a year that many Bible scholars believe is about the time Jesus was born.

While the event would not have been as spectacular from an astronomical perspective as other theories such as an exploding star, a comet or an alignment of planets, Molnar says it would have been sensational for astrologers in the first century.

The "magi" -- people who were regarded in the ancient Near East to be healers, interpreters of omens and dreams and able to predict the future by using astrology -- would have viewed the occurrence as portending the birth of a divine king, Molnar says.

Molnar first presented his theory several years ago in "Sky and Telescope" magazine, and now has compiled his research into a book, "The Star of Bethlehem: The Story of the Magi," published by Rutgers

University Press. In the book, he discusses how his research coincides with the writings of ancient Roman astrologers about the position of the planets during the time of Christ's birth.

"We can be assured that the extraordinary conditions of April 17, 6 B.C., were as real and dramatic as any blazing comet or exploding supernova," writes Molnar. "Unlike those spectacular but terribly foreboding or meaningless apparitions, the portent formed in Aries by Jupiter and other celestial bodies conveyed a joyous, wondrous message about a regal and divine birth in the kingdom of Herod the Great. Now we can look at the star above a creche at Christmas and know that there was indeed a Star of Bethlehem."

While Molnar says he conducted his research and writing in a "religiously neutral" fashion, his conclusions lend credence to the account of Christ's birth in Matthew. The Bible's reporting the star being seen "in the east" and that it "went before and stood over" are astrological terms, he says.

He says his findings do not prove that Jesus was born on April 17, 6 B.C., when the star appeared. That is up for Bible scholars to decide, he says.

Ironically, Molnar says the subject was not one that he was initially curious about.

"I was not originally interested in analyzing the Star of Bethlehem," Molnar said in a telephone interview from his home near Piscataway, N. J. "But once I came across the coin and started piecing some of the information together, I felt obligated to pursue it."

Molnar's book has been well received among Christians who say it backs up the Bible with scientific evidence. His conclusions have also drawn enthusiastic support in academic circles.

Owen Gingerich, an astronomer at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, called Molnar's book "the most original and important contribution of the entire 20th century on the thorny question of how events recorded [in Bethlehem] should be interpreted."

Bradley Schaefer, a professor of astronomy at Yale University, said Molnar's book "... finally gives a confident answer to a question that has fascinated all Christians through the ages."

Even experts not familiar with Molnar and his theories say he may be onto something. Bill Adams, a physicist at Baylor University, said if Molnar's research is indeed accurate, it could lend credence to ancient astrologers' writings about the celestial events surrounding Christ's birth.

A planet, said Adams, would have been visible for the many months it took the three Wise Men to travel to Bethlehem. "If [Jupiter] was in the constellation [Aries], it would certainly have been there for some time," Adams said.

Still, others believe Molnar's theory is just one in a sea of hypotheses about what took place in the skies the night Christ was born.

Dudley Shapere, professor of philosophy and history of science at Wake Forest University, said he has heard speculation that Jupiter may have been present during that time. But he adds that many scientists believe the planet was part of a cluster of planets that would have drifted apart after a few days. So that cluster, though probably quite luminous, would not have remained in the sky long enough for the three Wise Men to follow it during a journey that lasted many weeks, Shapere said.

Moreover, Shapere believes astrologers of the time knew enough about Jupiter that, if it actually was the star of Bethlehem, they would have referred to the planet specifically.

"I'm very skeptical [of Molnar's theory]," he said. "If there was anything in the sky at the time and they were really 'wise men,' then they would have known it was Jupiter and they would have known it was a wandering planet."

Molnar doesn't deny that Jupiter may have been part of a cluster. He said Saturn was also present in the constellation. But based on the writings of the ancient astrologers, the celestial conditions on April 17, 6 B.C., he said, forecast "the birth of a king or super-king, a divine and immortal person."

"Now, how many divine and immortal people do you know who were born around that time?" he asked with a chuckle.

John Killinger, the author of several dozen theological books and a former professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School, said while Molnar's theory is intriguing, it really shouldn't affect Christians' basic convictions about Christ. While some are comforted by findings that support their beliefs, Killinger said the spirit of Christmas -- its origins, traditions and, most importantly, its message -- should be enough to withstand any scientific theories.

"If your faith depends on getting some literal evidence somewhere, well then great," he said. "But others couldn't care less. It's not going to enhance the beauty of the [Christmas] story one bit."

Molnar maintains his book is not an attempt to prove the divinity of Jesus but rather provides a modern interpretation of events written about more than 2,000 years ago. Still, he doesn't discourage how his research is analyzed.

"I've had hundreds of people who have written me, called me [and] e-mailed me about how this has reaffirmed their faith," he said. "And I'm very gratified that it did."

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-- Kelly Turner is a free-lance writer in Jacksonville, Fla.

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