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“Read the Eternities”:

The Alabama Baptist and Its Legacy of Influence

First, I would like to say thanks for all those who have served the cause of *The Alabama Baptist* history. It is remarkable that so many people have provided the institution with this historical memory: the editors certainly — and each one has been committed to this history — Bob Terry, Jennifer Rash, and staff with our newest history; of course, people like Wayne Flynt, Liz Wells, Jack Brymer, Cynthia Wise; and a myriad of others, including Jennifer Taylor and Rachel Cohen at the Special Collections at Samford. All have served a worthy cause. To state the obvious, the historical archive of *The Alabama Baptist* may be its greatest legacy. The very sources of most Alabama Baptist history from Hosea Holcombe to Wayne Flynt are those issues of the paper.

Henry David Thoreau bemoaned the fact that we squander so much of our human capital in newspapers and their transitory, trivial news. He sought relief in a higher, transcendental ideas: “Read not the *Times*,” he said, if you see the pun. “Read the Eternities.”¹ I’m confident that *The Alabama Baptist*, with its mission to advance the Kingdom, has fulfilled its prophetic role, sorting through culture, politics, and human history to point us toward God’s eternal Truth.

My charge was to highlight the times in which *The Alabama Baptist* had an impact on the state convention, the Southern Baptist Convention, and in the state of Alabama. As a lawyer would do before trial, let’s stipulate a few truths: Merely engaging the secular world and its issues is not making an impact. Espousing causes is not necessarily making an impact. Eloquently and *frequently* espousing progressive causes or conservative causes is not making an

impact. The “impact” sometimes shows up far later than the cause. Furthermore, influence and impact occur more deeply down the scale, not necessarily national or state. True to one of its earlier names, *The Family Visitor*, the felt impact of *The Alabama Baptist* has surely been seen in Alabama Baptist churches and homes, where editor after editor has done his most profound work. Riding the arc of history is treacherous, and *The Alabama Baptist* has frequently been on the wrong side of history. Yet *The Alabama Baptist*, through its editorial voices, has consistently left its signature on this state and on these conventions in every era.

The Alabama Baptist has left an indelible mark on the Alabama Baptist State Convention, the Southern Baptist Convention, and on the state of Alabama. For most of its history, it has had one of the highest readership of state papers and of state Baptist papers. In stature, it has long been comparable to papers like *Montgomery Advertiser* and *Birmingham News* as a beacon of influence, and its print edition has survived many of them.² From the beginning, it has been far more than a pious source of devotional literature; in fact, it has had an activist, even audacious editorial history, aggressively engaging the secular world, and not just on “Baptist” issues like drinking and gambling.

Of course, many of these engagements were needless and futile and later exposed *The Alabama Baptist* to vicious judgments of history, particularly in matters of race. So vigorously did Editor Samuel Henderson promote Confederate causes, defend slavery, and rail against abolitionists that federal forces closed *The South Western Baptist* in 1865 and ordered Henderson never to publish again in Alabama.³ It was not the first nor the last time *The Alabama Baptist* was on the wrong side of history. In April 1865, the paper — then under the banner of *The Christian Index* — published a letter to General Sherman:

Dear General Sherman: “Get out of the way: remove your army from South Carolina and the adjoining states; and let the railroads alone. So be kind enough to

stop your foolishness and go home. You are not wanted in the Confederacy — you are considered a nuisance. But the truth is you are troublesome, and we want to get rid of you.⁴

There was no answer from Sherman, and boldness in the service of a lost cause is no virtue. As the Arabic proverb says, “Sometimes the wind ignores the wishes of the sails.”

Still, before, during, and after the Civil War, *The Alabama Baptist* editors carried out the righteous causes of its original charter: discussing doctrine, defending the principles of Regular Baptist churches, exposing heresy, sustaining morality, rebuking sin “whether ... in high places or low,” distributing Christian literature, promoting Christian education, informing readers about missions, and advocated “total abstinence” from the use of alcohol. It even had a regular farm column with the latest news about soil chemistry, crops, and livestock,” all for six dollars a year.⁵ Even in these early years, as Flynt says, “Next to the colleges, no institution was more important to the emerging denomination than *The Alabama Baptist*.”⁶

E.T. Winkler, editor of the newly re-established *The Alabama Baptist* from 1873 to 1881, certainly made a difference, dedicating himself to the moral and spiritual welfare of blacks and to racial reconciliation after the war. He shared these views widely across the country, in sermons and as corresponding editor on many Baptist papers, north and south, and also as the president of the Home Mission Board.⁷

After the Civil War, before the paper was purchased by the convention, it was more of a mainstream paper dedicated to public issues such as agrarian reform, public schools, immigration (Catholic immigration in particular), race, women’s roles within the denomination (the officers of the first WMU central committee were appointed by the ABSC in 1889), prison conditions, and of course prohibition. *The Alabama Baptist* regularly called on the legislature to appropriate more money for schools, praised the AEA, and endorsed tougher certification standards for

teachers.⁸ As China became the largest Christian mission field, Flynt says, “*The Alabama Baptist* consistently advocated a tolerant position toward Chinese immigrants in the United States.”⁹

Ministers throughout Alabama charged into partisan politics. So much of Baptist life was devoted to politics that by 1892, Rev. Charles B. Carter wrote a front-page article in the paper deploring ministerial involvement in politics. He estimated 80 percent of the ministers who were running for office or editing Populist papers were Baptists. “Could you not find souls worth saving?” he wrote.¹⁰

The Alabama Baptist was influential during these years in pointing the convention toward modernity. As Wayne Flynt has pointed out, the paper became the vehicle in the late 1800s toward integrating women into the convention, recognizing their massive but unseen contributions to Baptist life. In 1887, a year before the WMU was founded in Richmond, Virginia, two women debated in the paper whether women should be able to start missions societies in the paper.¹¹ By 1890, women were given a regular column in the paper, just three years before holding their first state WMU meeting in Greenville.¹²

Winkler, Henderson, and other Alabama Baptist leaders such as Benjamin F. Riley prepared the convention for the changing Alabama landscape of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. But the first great hero is surely Frank Willis Barnett, a charismatic Renaissance man, who emerges as a larger than life figure on becoming editor in 1902. Perhaps because he ushered in a new century, one is tempted to say the modern *Alabama Baptist* began with his purchase of the *Baptist Evangel*, *The Baptist Herald*, and the *Southern Baptist* and his merging these papers into *The Southern and Alabama Baptist* (it was changed back to *The Alabama Baptist* in 1904). Even though the paper was privately owned, Barnett used the paper to advance all the institutions and causes of the convention. But we know Barnett primarily for

bringing the Social Gospel movement front and center to Alabama Baptists and the world. He was a “doer” who exercised his considerable gifts as pastor, lawyer, civic leader, editorial writer for not only *The Baptist* but also for *The Birmingham Age-Herald* to lead reform in Alabama. In symbolic terms, what Barnett was writing was not *The Alabama Baptist*, but the gospel of James.

The moral climate of Barnett’s Birmingham had sunk to an astounding low: Birmingham had more murders than the United Kingdom with 40 million people.¹³ His famous Feb. 6, 1907, front page story “The Child and the Mill” framed by two large, dramatic pictures of children in cotton mills symbolized the Barnett era, which was a virtual check-box of social gospel causes: child labor, legalized gambling, convict-lease system, which provided cheap labor for farms, mines, lumberyards, threatening to stop publishing patent medicine advertisements that did not meet the new standards of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906; reform and regulation of the movie industry; supported organizing anti-cigarette leagues in Alabama, especially in school districts.¹⁴ He was also the coordinator of the Alabama Council for Defense during the war, which coordinated the war service of more than a dozen agencies. Like so many other *Alabama Baptist* editors, he opened up the pages of the paper to promote these causes, such as Jane Addams’ settlement house movement.¹⁵

I tried to take many of these editorial causes and document their impact by finding when legislation was passed. I am not drawing a direct cause and effect. Of course, Barnett was one of a chorus of advocates, but he was counted as a leading “thought leader” in practically all. The truth is that major legislative changes on these causes took place during his tenure. His famous Feb. 9, 1907, cover and editorial plea reached fruition in Aug. 9 of the same year, when The Acts of Alabama record that child labor laws, with ages tied to working hours and conditions.¹⁶ Reform of the convict-lease system was slower in coming. Although mine explosions and other

disasters brought about some change in 1911 and 1912, Alabama was the last state to abolish the convict-lease system in 1928.¹⁷ Anti-cigarette legislation varied across the states, but in 1909, the Women's Christian Temperance Union sponsored the first national petition to outlaw cigarettes and encouraged the passage of anti-cigarette laws in states.¹⁸

Barnett did not neglect traditional "Baptist" causes. The liquor question was the most mentioned subject in the paper from 1890 to 1920, and *The Alabama Baptist* endorsed Prohibition candidates.¹⁹ He was one of the anti-saloon leaders supporting George Ward, who wanted to take the "social element" (gambling, prostitution) out of the saloons and centralize a kind of "red light district." Although Birmingham voters rejected these reforms initially, they were passed in 1911 and later replaced by Prohibition.²⁰ Congress proposed the 18th Amendment under his editorial tenure. As the Southern Baptist Convention annual described it, "December 17, 1917, will go down in history as one of the most eventful days in the annals of America. On that day at five o'clock P.M., by a vote of 282 to 128, the House of Representatives of the Congress of the United States adopted a resolution proposing to the several states for their action a Prohibition Amendment to the Constitution of the U.S. of A."²¹

One can only imagine the undocumented influence of Barnett. For instance, it is impossible to believe that Hugo Black did not know Barnett. Black taught the Baraca Sunday School class at First Baptist Church during Barnett's tenure at *The Alabama Baptist*, and while Barnett was a member of the church. Black was a police court judge and later the chief prosecutor for Jefferson County in 1914. He knew well the horrific child labor laws and the convict-lease system in particular,²² and he vigorously prosecuted Birmingham's prohibition law.²³ It is hardly speculation to say that Black, later a powerful U.S. Supreme Court justice

known for fiercely protecting individual rights, would have been influenced by the notions of social Christianity and the heady reform days in Birmingham working alongside Barnett.²⁴

His was an equally strong voice for convention causes during this time, when church attendance grew by 200 percent in Birmingham.²⁵ As the 175th history acknowledges, he tirelessly promoted the missionary zeal in China.²⁶ Both he and later L.L. Gwaltney supported the idea of the indigenous church.²⁷ In 1911, he promoted the Men and Religion Forward Movement, one of the major interdenominational laymen's movements of the early century. As Elizabeth Wells has said, "Barnett said much more than just 'Don't'; he encouraged youth to become involved in missions and social ministries."²⁸ Barnett also established the financial stability and journalistic integrity of *The Alabama Baptist* by setting a subscription rate and insisting that his Christian readers actually pay their subscriptions and through his leadership within the Birmingham press and denominational press.

Ultimately, even though Barnett believed "in a Christianity that will make man march up to the polls and vote for the right,"²⁹ the social gospel, according to Barnett, was never meant to replace salvation. The church, Barnett wrote, must not be converted into "a mere place of amusement" with swimming pools, gymnasiums, and other athletic and educational programs" because they would then devote more time to "filling a man's dinner-pail than to filling his soul."³⁰ He attached a warning label that social service could not replace personal salvation. Only Christ could redeem society one regenerated soul at a time.³¹

L.L. Gwaltney, editor from 1919 to 1950, picked up the mantle of the social gospel from Barnett as he presided over perhaps "the greatest generation" of Southern Baptists in the forties and fifties. "In 1940, one in seven Alabamians was a Baptist," Flynt has pointed out, "A decade later, the ratio was one in six, and by 1970, one in four."³² To illustrate the cyclical nature of the

paper's history, in the winter of 1918, almost precisely 100 years ago, an influenza epidemic ravaged Florence, Alabama, so that Gwaltney (and later Hudson Baggett), as pastor of First Baptist Church, could not answer all the calls on him for funeral services. A year later, memories of the epidemic made him do something that he and his wife had not wanted to do: leave the pastorate and become editor of *The Alabama Baptist*.

Gwaltney's influence on the state of Alabama, on the state convention, and on the national convention, was wide and deep. A Baptist Shakespeare might have said he doth bestride the narrow world like a Collossus.³³ He was called "the Dean of Southern Baptist editors," a "statesman," "an Alabama Baptist institution,"; another editor said, "[A]s a writer of short, pungent editorials he probably has no equal among Southern Baptists, if elsewhere. His service with the *Alabama Baptist* has been faithful and fruitful. He and the *Alabama Baptist* are an Alabama institution. By his pen he has molded the Baptist life in that state and his influence reaches far beyond its confines."³⁴ He was a writer of over 4,000,000 words for *The Alabama Baptist*, 7,000 editorials, author of eight books, and had five of his editorials placed in the *Congressional Record*.³⁵

Gwaltney's genius was reconciling, publicly and privately, the contradictions in his political and theological perspectives. He was a scholar and advocated free thought, yet condemned the higher criticism. He had pacifist leanings in the 1930s, but when World War II started, he sought victory and even retribution. He believed in theistic evolution, and as Wayne Flynt says, "he lived to tell about it."³⁶ Gwaltney found a way to be "soft on creationism" but remain "a tiger on demon rum."³⁷ Historians have called him "a liberal editor," supporting FDR, Truman, women suffrage, trust busting, but he espoused anti-Catholic, and to some, anti-Semitic views, and Flynt has said he was never able to transcend his attitudes on race.³⁸ Yet, for *Alabama Baptist* readers,

Gwaltney's political and theological opinions were absorbed by his personal integrity and his pastoral demeanor, nurtured by thousands of visits in Baptist homes throughout Alabama.

He continued the social gospel of Barnett, beginning of course with the gateway issue of Prohibition, which played out on his watch. Don't believe that Gwaltney's voice was merely one of millions of the religious faithful. After the 1904 organization of the Anti-Saloon League in Birmingham launched Alabama's new era of prohibition politics, W.B. Crumpton passed the torch to Gwaltney, who was equally aggressive in the organization of the Alabama Temperance Alliance, where he was organizer and president.³⁹ But he was not a one-trick/one-issue Baptist. Another editor said he was a "courageous fighter for civic righteousness."⁴⁰ Two successive editors had now turned the pages of their journal into a forum where they advocated control of trusts, immigrants, abolition of convict lease system, child labor, and capital punishment. According to Flynt, Gwaltney's first pastorate at Prattville Baptist Church and his later pastorate at Greenville in 1910 crystallized his philosophy of social service because of its congregation of businessman, farmers, and workingmen from Continental Gin Company and the city's cotton mills, as well as many indigent widows who depended on the church's widows' fund.⁴¹

Gwaltney's influence is measured not so much by legislative anointing of his agenda, but by the actions of the churches. Flynt cites, for instance, Gwaltney's influence on Southside Baptist Church's decision to adopt Charles Spurgeon's institutional church with baths, gyms, reading rooms. Later, the church had an industrial school and Goodwill Center.⁴²

Gwaltney's signature may be found throughout the state convention, where he was president 1935–36. At a time when smaller, rural associations felt shut out from the executive board, Gwaltney fought for wider representation on the denominational policy making body of the state convention.⁴³ He first proposed the idea of an Alabama Baptist Foundation on Nov. 21,

1940, and became part of the committee to draft charter, Constitution, and by-laws, after resolution was presented to the convention in 1937.⁴⁴ He was also instrumental in the convention's adoption of the Minister's Retirement Plan.⁴⁵ Serving through a world war and a Great Depression, Gwaltney was an invaluable steward of convention institutions, starting with *The Alabama Baptist*, whose circulation grew from 3,000 to 45,000 under Gwaltney.⁴⁶ Gwaltney wrote an editorial entitled, "Let's Not Miss the Bus," which appeared in *The Alabama Baptist* on Oct. 28, 1943, and also called for a conference that agreed that the 1943 Convention should project a program to pay the debts on its institutions and agencies during 1944.⁴⁷ Hamilton Reid, the director of the campaign, states that early in 1945, all AB institutions and agencies — particularly the debt-strapped colleges — were totally free of debt for the first time in many years.⁴⁸

In charting Gwaltney's denominational influence, it is worth noting that L.L. Gwaltney's *Alabama Baptist* tenure in 1919 began in the same year that the SBC projected the Seventy-five Million Campaign with the full approval of the Alabama Convention. As Hamilton Reid says, "[A] major portion of the responsibility for the promotion of the campaign was placed on the state papers."⁴⁹ Papers were asked to put forth special effort to increase circulation. When Cooperative Program was established in 1925, Gwaltney was a tireless propagandist.⁵⁰ Always a watchman for educational institutions, Gwaltney was made a trustee of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary 12 years after he graduated in 1908 and served for 25 years. Editors Macon and Baggett after him were long-time trustees of the seminary, a sometimes overlooked influence of the paper.

One finds Gwaltney's unmistakable footprints in doctrinal matters. The author of the book *The Lord's Supper* says "the liberal editor L.L. Gwaltney" was noted for working to

overthrow the doctrine of closed communion for Southern Baptists in the 1940s, correctly recognizing that Baptists were moving toward open communion. Open communion spread after 1940s. In this reform, Gwaltney was paired with Southern Seminary President Duke McCall and a young Southwestern Seminary student named Bill Moyers, who found the practice of close communion to be “repulsive.”⁵¹

More than any other *Alabama Baptist* editor, Gwaltney embraced an internationalist perspective. The two world wars, naturally, framed that perspective. Gwaltney, according to Flynt, was a pacifist in the interlude between the wars.⁵² Another author explains,

Accepting the predominant view of American reformist intellectuals that the "Great War" largely had been the product of scheming corporations bent on self-aggrandizement, Gwaltney criticized the conformist nature of the church. By refusing to denounce war, the church had compromised its legitimate complaints about all other evils because war was the chief sin of modern civilization. Gwaltney consistently championed arms reductions and deplored nationalism. (5) Gwaltney chose Mohandas K. Gandhi as the model for Christians because of the Indian leader's campaign of civil disobedience against British imperialism. Americans had neglected the Sermon on the Mount and adopted the spirit of modern militarism, and there were "no Christian nations in the world except in name." Gandhi, by contrast, was more Christ-like in "outlook, in his method of overcoming evil, in his relationship with men," than were Christians.⁵³

He praised the United Nations charter as the “highest hope for the human race,”⁵⁴ but once Gwaltney saw German aggression in 1940, however, he adopted a more militant Baptist mainstream approach:

Praising President Franklin D. Roosevelt for his preparedness program and support of Britain, Gwaltney called 1940 a bad year for pacifism. U.S. isolationists could not protect America from a world on fire, and, although prayer might affect the outcome of the war, Christianity would not restrain Hitler.⁵⁵

According to one historian, he was “succumbing to war hysteria.”⁵⁶ Whatever the inconsistencies from a 2018 perspective, Gwaltney’s words had power. His readers in Alabama and across the SBC looked to his interpretation of world events.⁵⁷

Yes, we are reminded that Gwaltney defended the Klan.⁵⁸ But historians have added another chapter to the story that shows a better picture of his character. The 1926 senatorial election resulted in one of the biggest upsets in Alabama political history, the election of Hugo Black, a short-lived *member* of the Klan before becoming one of the most liberal Supreme Court justices. That election proved to be the Klan's watershed. After the election, the Big Mule/Black Belt alliance launched a campaign to destroy the Ku Klux Klan's newfound political power. Using their allies on the editorial pages of the state's leading print publications, such as the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the *Birmingham-Age Herald*, and the *Alabama Baptist*, condemning the Klan's vigilante tactics and lawlessness as a threat to social and political reform.⁵⁹

At the core of Gwaltney's "powerful and prophetic leadership"⁶⁰ was the personal trust he earned from Alabama Baptists, his personal investment in their lives and churches, his energy, his "pronounced sense of fairness, as Leon Macon has said,⁶¹ his wisdom, and his absolute integrity. Like Barnett, Gwaltney never sacrificed doctrinal integrity, nor did he sacrifice his faith in the ordinary reader. John Buchanan, the pastor of Southside Baptist Church, has stood the test of time: L.L. Gwaltney "had made the greatest contribution to the whole of Alabama Baptists of any man among us."⁶²

But as with Gwaltney, legacies are complicated. All of the bold headlines of these editors' achievements had footnotes in smaller type. If I told you that the next editor, who served the paper from 1950 to 1965, was a fierce defender of the separation of church and state, even opposing federal funds going to the Gadsden Baptist hospital, who opposed religious teaching and even Christmas programs in public schools, who opposed voluntary social security for ministers, who opposed a national department of religion, who urged Christians not to be defensive over the discoveries of modern scientists, who criticized the church for opposing

evolution and putting the whole scientific community against it, who welcomed the Department of Negro Work in the Southern Baptist Convention and the integration of Southern Baptist seminaries, and pleaded with his readers to obey the law and accept the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling — you might wonder how did he survive so long, and what witness protection program was he using?

This was Leon Macon. He built up the paper. He promoted the idea of churches subscribing to the paper and by 1955 had persuaded 1,400 of the 2,700 churches to participate, with circulation going to 75,000. After two so-called liberal editors, Macon's conservatism was a stark contrast, yet it matched that of his constituency. To me, of all the editors, Macon drew the shortest straw of history. He had the toughest challenge of navigating the paper through the Civil Rights movement in the Fifties and Sixties, an era of powerful cultural change with an entrenched segregationist majority in the South. He deserves a tolerant treatment for merely dealing with the figure of George Wallace, the election of JFK, for navigating years like 1963 where American history was centered in the crucible of Birmingham and Alabama. Macon bravely took on these challenges. His rock-ribbed consistency in matters of Scripture and politics, his hewing the stone of orthodoxy,⁶³ his courage in resisting change represented the attitude of most Baptists, but it left him more exposed to the judgment of history. Nevertheless, of all the editors, he saw himself as Isaiah's watchman, or as some would put it, watchdog.

Macon has been called "probably the most highly-placed devotee of segregation in the entire SBC."⁶⁴ In truth, on the subject of race, he was a "gradualist" and thus operated in the mainstream of Southern Baptist views, including even Barnett and Gwaltney, and was more moderate than W.A. Criswell. We now know that he was little different than A.C. Lee, the real-life Atticus Finch, who is probably the South's second greatest hero. Macon's first editorials on

race relations in Aug. 10, 1950, praised the Alabama convention's decision to form a Department of Negro work, and secondly, the Southern Baptist seminaries' decision to integrate in 1951.⁶⁵ Macon praised these two accomplishments in his first editorial on racial relations Aug. 10, 1950 and in Aug. 5, 1952. Furthermore, in keeping with his views on a strict separation of church and state, he appealed for acceptance of *Brown*, "to work along quietly and sympathetically to carry out the Supreme Court decision in a manner that will result in happiness and peace among the people."⁶⁶

His views on race were fixed, but Macon sometimes was hard to peg politically. He endorsed the abolition of capital punishment, cessation of H-Bomb tests, and restriction of immigration.⁶⁷ Macon saw no conflict between scholarship in the area of science and religion.⁶⁸ His second book *Salvation in a Scientific Age* was a series of sermons that urged Christians not to be defensive over the discoveries of modern scientists. He regretted that the church had set itself against the entire scientific field on the subject of evolution, calling on Christians "to make religious truth as vivid as the scientists are making physical truth."⁶⁹ Macon did not even dismiss the Social Gospel entirely, believing in its goals but not in substitution for the true work of the church.⁷⁰ He had no use for the higher criticism but gave us one of the most memorable lines in describing it: "The Kingdom of God cannot be fully expressed in syntax."⁷¹

According to Wayne Flynt, Macon's editorials made a clear difference on state issues. They might even be called progressive. He led Baptist activism to pass some reform proposals: a 1956 bond issue to provide more money for overcrowded mental institutions and a 1957 increase in state funding for public schools; and a 1961 bond issue to improve conditions in Alabama prisons, such as separating youthful offenders. Macon was most consistent of all Baptist leaders on church-state issues, writing some 300 editorials on the subject. He attacked a proposed

amendment to the Constitution in 1955 recognizing the authority and law of Jesus Christ over the nation.⁷² In the end, it is unfair to judge Macon solely on position on race by a 2018 standard. On so many important political and religious issues of the time, Macon's editorials palpably impacted the state and the denomination.

I have some bias in pronouncing on the editorship of Hudson Baggett, 1966–1994, so I will rely on Wayne Flynt, a friend and critic of my father's points — gentle criticism but certainly fair. Flynt said, “the paper's board tried a series of prospective editors. They chose Hudson Baggett, a witty, down-to-earth Samford University religion professor, as the new editor in June 1966. ... He pledged to be balanced in his news coverage, to neither attack the denomination nor be its parrot. He opened the paper to a wider range of opinion and controversy and added a popular letters-to-the-editor section. His simple, noncontroversial editorials were short on substance but long on common sense and folk wisdom, reflecting his belief that most people were bothered more by “the jolts and tensions of daily existence” than by the “jots and tittles of theology.” A skilled storyteller, Baptist helped hold the denomination together. Though a theological moderate and denominational loyalist, he was counted a friend by virtually all camps in the increasingly fractured convention.”⁷³

Flynt calls him a “tolerant conservative” who steered the denomination in a centrist course away from extremes. To do so, he was a “mediating force” on the issues that divided the convention, such as the inerrancy controversy. He was a reason for the state denomination's relative harmony and followed a course of balance and fairness. His goal was to hold the denomination together.

I think that gets it about right. His influence — “making a difference” — was seen within the convention largely. But before we think about that as being provincial on the scale of

American history, let's acknowledge that Southern Baptists are the largest protestant denomination (as they are in Alabama), and that Hudson Baggett served the paper during one of the most tumultuous times in the denomination's history. I was there as well and saw the passions, vitriol, viciousness at the national level and state level. I've seen the letters; in fact, I was the target of some of them and made his life harder. To say that my father helped steer the ship of Alabama Baptists toward a stable convention, "keeping the state one of the most tranquil during escalating denominational strife."⁷⁴ is undoubtedly an achievement. Contrast the experiences in other states.

To the charge that my father's editorials were bland and tepid, I might say "guilty," but they had a devotional quality that resonated with his readers. Furthermore, I can't think of many political or denominational issues that he did not editorialize on. His major editorial contribution may have been opening *The Alabama Baptist* to its readers in the "Letters to the Editor." It would not be a fatal legacy for any editor to say that readers go first to the opinions page and then to the editorial page. In fact, they are inseparable in many ways, and in some cases, identical. He was deeply committed to freedom of the press and the diversity of viewpoints. Over and over, he repeated the familiar phrase that he envisioned *The Alabama Baptist* as a voice and as an echo of Alabama Baptist opinion.

Readers certainly began to debate sanctity of life issues in the years before and after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. Abortion was first mentioned in *The Alabama Baptist* in the April 30, 1970 issue.⁷⁵ Wayne Flynt has pointed out that never before had Baptists exerted so much denominational energy debating intensely personal and family issues:

Topics such as human sexuality, in-vitro fertilization, abortion, and homosexuality either appeared for the first time in the Alabama Baptist or received extensive discussion. Broader issues such as marriage, divorce, and the role of women in church and society also received unprecedented coverage. Entire

series of articles in the Alabama Baptist dealt with marriage and the family. Divorce (which earlier had been treated as a problem that only occasionally affected Baptists directly) became a primary concern of the church. Denomination-sponsored family life conferences and the Christian Life Commission deplored the denomination's lack of such a ministry.⁷⁶

Like all the editors, Baggett maintained the historical memory of the paper with, among other things, the *Sesqui Sentinel* of 1973. I'm very proud of his stewardship of the paper, growing circulation through church subscriptions, moving the offices strategically to Homewood, soliciting convention support, and providing for the future. In this, he followed a long tradition of editors, his predecessors and successor.

During a time in which the Democratic presidential ticket was headed by two Southern Baptists for the first time in history (1992), my father was certainly no progressive. A World War II Purple Heart veteran, he opposed Jimmy Carter's presidential pardons to those who opposed the Vietnam War. But Flynt gives him credit for seeing the "new political realities" in 1970 when he warned those who adhered to rigid separation of church and state that the federal government was no longer remote from people's lives. Baggett endorsed Supreme Court rulings striking down capital punishment, (along with George Bagley) endorsed a judicial reform package advocated by chief judge Howell Heflin, and he opposed attempts by state legislators to weaken the state ethics law. Baggett insisted that the public education system was vital for the future of the state's children. "Private schools have a place in our society, but they cannot substitute for the public school system. At this time, our public schools need the help and understanding of parents and church officials. The school situation provides a good opportunity to teach children Christian attitudes in our homes, churches and schools."⁷⁷

Like practically every Southerner of my generation, I wish my father had been more progressive on matters of race. On a personal note, I was a teenager when Herbert Gilmore led a

walkout of 270 members of the First Baptist Church of Birmingham in 1970 when the church refused to accept black members. *The Alabama Baptist* published a story on the church split and a follow-up article by Gilmore's opponents, but my father declined to publish an article analyzing the affair. In the midst of a church's turmoil, the paper printed a statement from First Baptist Church of Birmingham, Dr. Herbert Gilmore's response, and Baggett acknowledged his admiration for Gilmore.⁷⁸ The editorial page of *The Alabama Baptist* was silent — "silent as tombstones" was one of my father's favorite metaphors. Flynt says Gilmore felt deserted by him and also other Baptist leaders. But I grew into adulthood thinking of Herbert Gilmore as a great, exiled hero, a great intellectual Baptist preacher. Later, my father and I, on our annual vacations to the Smokies, would seek him out. I remember finding him as a hotel clerk in Gatlinburg. He lived in the area and preached at various small churches.

Ultimately, I believe my father answered the challenge given by Harold Martin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper editor, in dedicating the Homewood building on June 25, 1976:

[A newspaper] must be willing to take a stand on issues confronting its readers. It must analyze, praise, criticize, persuade, and use every means at its disposal to help Christians make sound decisions based on their commitment to God and to warn against any ideology that would either intentionally or unintentionally have a destructive effect on their witness to Jesus Christ — be it popular or an unpopular cause.

Like L.L. Gwaltney, his most closely-related spiritual kin, Hudson Baggett knew that at the heart of effective journalism is presenting oneself as the family visitor.

The Alabama Baptist under Bob Terry has made a difference at every level. He has created an award-winning paper that has an influential voice in the religious press. He has an impressive record of probing, insightful interpretations of political issues within Alabama, and also with the state and national conventions. He has sustained the editorial legacies before him:

vigorously engaging and debating secular issues as they affect the church; promoting peace and unity within the denomination, but critiquing leadership when necessary; using the paper as a ministry; maintaining doctrinal integrity; boldly and courageously afflicting the comfortable while comforting the afflicted.

First, he has made it a paper of journalistic integrity, voted the top regional Christian publication many times over. Bob's careful attention to journalistic quality was actually well-established at *The Word and Way* in Missouri. *The Alabama Baptist* has been a voice responsive to contemporary issues, but as his 2007 series on Calvinism shows, also a vehicle of understanding for church issues. Unlike so many religious publications, the paper has an intelligent, thoughtful, consistent, respected, and certainly in some cases a prophetic voice.

Under Bob Terry, *The Alabama Baptist* has echoed the legacy of Frank Willis Barnett on issues like legalized gambling. Perhaps one of its most proudest moments occurred in the debate over Governor Siegelman's proposed lottery during his first campaign. You probably remember: Siegelman virtually ran on this one issue. He won popular support. The anti-lottery forces (wrongly identified as being just "Baptists") were a clear underdog. *The Alabama Baptist*, under Editor Terry's leadership, began its own campaign of a principled opposition to a public policy that most Baptists saw as ruinous to our state. A lot of Baptist leaders felt the effort was futile and "token," but the paper surged ahead, "pumping, pumping, pumping" the issue.

In the final vote, with 96 percent of the precincts reporting, 645,997 people, or 54 percent, voted against the lottery, and 543,321 people, or 46 percent, supported it. The *New York Times* in an Oct. 13, 1999, article, laid out the massive support for the lottery, but said, "A poll in late August showed that 61 percent of those surveyed were ready to vote for the lottery, but later surveys showed that number shrinking after ministers began organizing against it."

The Rev. Joe Bob Mizzell, director of Christian ethics for the Alabama Baptist Convention at that time, said no issue had united so many ministers from differing denominations.” At the heart of that opposition was the reporting of *The Alabama Baptist*.

Equally noteworthy was the longer, related fight against video gambling and electronic bingo, started shortly after the lottery vote. Throughout the early years of the 2000s, it appeared Alabama Baptists — again spearheaded by *The Alabama Baptist* — would again sway the power brokers. Even though Governor Bentley decided that each county would interpret the law in 2015, *The Alabama Baptist* left its mark in history as the gambling battle rages on more than 100 years after Frank Barnett.

Terry has spoken out courageously on a number of other important issues, issues that still face us head-on. He spoke against the Alabama law that criminalized “Good Samaritans” who help immigrants by giving them a ride, a meal, inviting them to worship, or even performing marriages or baptisms, saying the state was trying to prescribe their Christian ministry.

On a denominational level, *The Alabama Baptist* has championed convention causes, but Terry has not been afraid to speak critically and constructively. He made a difference in challenging the major impetus in the SBC toward a proposed “50–50” Great Commission Resurgence, which passed nationally, and which some states adopted. *The Alabama Baptist*, along with Dr. Lance and other state leaders, helped solidify the state cooperative missions effort, arguing for a more reasoned, step-by-step direction. These efforts ultimately proved more healthy and productive, in contrast to the divisiveness in other state conventions, such as Florida.

In these ways, on these crucial, historical issues, *The Alabama Baptist* made a difference, provided light and heat, the place for the debate, for enlightenment, for clarification, for the truth

to be revealed. Editor Terry has enhanced and broadened the paper's Watchman legacy as a moral conscience. The paper has been a "herald of light, a preacher of power."

As Thoreau's neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, expressed it, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within us out into the world, miracles happen." I believe our work will help Alabama Baptists "read the Eternities," to point to the greater truths of God's will for us and the miracles He has in store for our generation, that we will see through the transitory issues and politics of the world to the eternal Truth that will set us free. A better literary analogy for the paper might be Harper Lee's recent (or old) novel *Go Set a Watchman* (2015). *The Alabama Baptist* has been like the Watchman of Isaiah, who posts himself on a long vigil to warn and prophesy, as a discernor of the truth and "the conscience of the convention."⁷⁹

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*.

² The Alabama Baptist is an entity of the Alabama Baptist State Convention and is mailed into more than 65,000 homes, with a total readership of about 200,000. These figures give it the highest circulation of any Baptist state paper, and among the highest of Alabama papers. More than 1,500 subscribers read its digital edition each week, and many more engage the conversation on social media.

³ Elizabeth Crabtree, *Sesqui Sentinel*, 1973, p. 35.

⁴ *The Christian Index*, February 16, 1865.

⁵ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (Tuscaloosa: UA Press, 1998): p. 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Darlene Yarbrough, *Sesqui Sentinel*, 52.

⁸ Flynt, 228.

⁹ Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 199.

¹⁰ *The Alabama Baptist*, March 17, 1892.

¹¹ Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 173.

¹² Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 173.

¹³ *The Alabama Baptist*, October 12 1904

¹⁴ "Alabama Baptists and the Second World War." *The Free Library*. 2001 Baptist History and Heritage Society 01 Mar. 2018 <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Alabama+Baptists+and+the+Second+World+War.-a094160976>

¹⁵ Flynt, 275.

¹⁶ The Acts of Alabama, 1907, p. 762.

¹⁷ Mary Ellen Curtin, "Convict Lease System." in *The Encyclopedia of Alabama*.

<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1836>

¹⁸ Lee J. Alston, et al. "Social reformers and regulation: the prohibition of cigarettes in the United States and Canada" in *Explorations in Economic History* 39 (2002) 425–445: 436.

¹⁹ *Sesqui Sentinel*, 65.

²⁰ Carl V. Harris, "Reforms in Government Control of Negroes in Birmingham, Alabama, 1890-1920" in *Black Southerners and the Law, 1865-1900*: 565.
edited by Donald G. Nieman

²¹ *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*, 1917, 51.

²² *Justice Hugo Black and Modern America*, ed. Tony Freyer. Tuscaloosa, UA Press, 1990, p. 20.

²³ Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton, *Hugo Black: The Alabama Years* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1972): 43.

²⁴ Freyer 20. Black, for instance was President of the Alabama Anti-Convict Lease Association.

²⁵ Wayne Flynt, pp. 260, "The Divided Religious Mind of Birmingham" (257-277) in Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, *From Civil War to Civil Rights*: 270.

²⁶ *The Alabama Baptist: Celebrating 175 Years of Informing, Inspiring and Connecting Baptists*, 45.

²⁷ Samuel Paul Garner, *Taking Christianity to China: Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1850–1950* (Tuscaloosa: UA Press, 1976): 135.

²⁸ Elizabeth Wells, unpublished manuscript.

²⁹ *The Alabama Baptist*, November 8, 1905; Flynt, 271.

³⁰ Flynt, 274.

³¹ Flynt, 274.

³² Flynt, Wayne. "Southern Baptists in Alabama," in *The Encyclopedia of Alabama*.

<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1836>

³³ Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2.

³⁴ Dr. L.L Gwaltney: A Review, p. 19.

³⁵ One of the wartime editorials is "A Bold Guess at a Huge Problem," placed in Congressional Record (Senate) by Senator Lister Hill, June 1943, p. 5185.

³⁶ Flynt, 263.

³⁷ Flynt, 269-70.

³⁸ Flynt, 392.

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- ³⁹ Dr. L.L. Gwaltney: A Review, p. 19.
- ⁴⁰ *Tennessee Baptist and Reflector*, March 30, 1939.
- ⁴¹ Flynt, 263.
- ⁴² Wayne Flynt, "The Divided Religious Mind of Birmingham" in Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, *From Civil War to Civil Rights*, 257-277: 267.
- ⁴³ J.O. Colley, Dr. L.L. Gwaltney: A Review, p. 21.
- ⁴⁴ Celebrating 75 Years of God's Presence in Creating the Legacy of The Baptist Foundation of Alabama November 1940 - November 2015
- ⁴⁵ J.O. Colley, Dr. L.L. Gwaltney: A Review, p. 21.
- ⁴⁶ J.O. Colley, Dr. L.L. Gwaltney: A Review, p. 25.
- ⁴⁷ Reid, 352.
- ⁴⁸ Reid, 353.
- ⁴⁹ Avery Hamilton Reid, *Baptists in Alabama: Their Organization and Witness* (The Alabama Baptist State Convention): 234.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, Matthew R Crawford, *The Lord's Supper by The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ Until He Comes* (NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, 2011): 309. Shreiner cites correspondence from Gwaltney to Ellis A. Fuller, President of SBTS from 1942-1950, 15 March 1948, in Fuller Papers, box 17, SBTS.
- ⁵² Flynt, 401.
- ⁵³ *Alabama Baptists and The Second World War*, Free Library, 6.
- ⁵⁴ Flynt, 447.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ Dr. L.L. Gwaltney: A Review, p. 46.
- ⁵⁸ Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949*: 104.
- ⁵⁹ Keith S. Hebert, Ku Klux Klan in Alabama from 1915-1930, *Encyclopedia of Alabama*. Published February 22, 2012, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-3221>
- ⁶⁰ Flynt, 417.
- ⁶¹ Dr. L.L. Gwaltney: A Review, p. 17.
- ⁶² Dr. L.L. Gwaltney: A Review, p. 52.
- ⁶³ Cynthia A. Wise, "Aspects of the Social Thought of Leon Macon, Editor of the TAB 1950-1964," Master's Thesis, Samford University, July 24, 1970: 21.
- ⁶⁴ David L. Chappell, *A stone of hope : prophetic religion and the death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005): 247.
- ⁶⁵ Wise, 53.
- ⁶⁶ *The Alabama Baptist*, June 17 1954. Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995*: 114.
- ⁶⁷ Wise, 49.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ *The Alabama Baptist*, May 8, 1958.
- ⁷⁰ Wise, 34. *The Alabama Baptist*, February 6, 1958.
- ⁷¹ Wise, 34.
- ⁷² Flynt, 482.
- ⁷³ Flynt, 606.
- ⁷⁴ Flynt, 546.
- ⁷⁵ Flynt, 534.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ *The Alabama Baptist*, September 3 1970.
- ⁷⁸ Elizabeth Wells, unpublished manuscript.
- ⁷⁹ James F. Sulzby, Jr., *Sesqui Sentinel*, *The Alabama Baptist*, vol. 138, December 6, 1973: 25.