

Periodic check-ups aid financial health

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Periodic check-ups aid financial health

Many financial ailments can be avoided with periodic check-ups. Sherre Stephens, a certified employee benefits specialist and director of executive and institutional benefit design for [GuideStone Financial Resources](#) of the Southern Baptist Convention, prescribes a six-point self-examination:

- **Maximize retirement plan deferrals.**

“Deferrals to your employer’s retirement plan reduce current federal income tax liability and enhance your retirement savings,” she wrote in a recent column distributed by GuideStone.

Sherre Stephens

“If your employer offers a match, don’t pass up this benefit. The 2006 basic limit is \$15,000—\$20,000 if you are age 50 or older.”

Keep tabs on credit scores, adviser says

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Keep tabs on credit scores, adviser says

Numbers unknown by most people may affect their ability to secure a loan, buy an insurance policy or even get a job.

Three credit bureaus track consumers' credit histories, and that information is used to calculate and report a person's credit score.

"Many businesses use your [credit score](#) as a way to assess your ability to handle your financial responsibilities," said Don McLeod, a certified financial planner and area director in retirement solutions and services with [GuideStone Financial Resources](#), a Southern Baptist agency.

Don McLeod

"Think of your credit score as your financial GPA," McLeod wrote in a recent column distributed by GuideStone. "Your score could range from 300 to 850. Of course, the higher, the better." McLeod offers three suggestions about how a person can keep tabs on his or her credit score:



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Good stewardship demands proper estate planning

October 16, 2006

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Good stewardship demands proper estate planning

By Ken Camp

Managing Editor

Christians who die without making a will demonstrate poor stewardship, said Bill Arnold, president of the [Texas Baptist Missions Foundation](#).

“If you die without a will, I guarantee your family will not rise up and call you blessed,” said Arnold, a certified financial planner. “The state of Texas has a will for you. But you probably won’t like it.”

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Lease-to-own program enables home ownership

October 16, 2006

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Lease-to-own program enables home ownership

By Barbara Bedrick

Texas Baptist Communications

DALLAS—By Christmas, some Texas families may celebrate the season by making plans to move into a new home, thanks to an innovative lease-to-own program involving the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The partnership between the BGCT and the [Community Empower](#) home ownership counseling network—along with [CitiMortgage](#) and [Ebby Halliday Realtors](#)—provides an 18-month new-home lease to potential homebuyers.

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Prosperity gospel promises material blessings to faithful

October 16, 2006

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Prosperity gospel promises material blessings to faithful

By Ken Camp

Managing Editor

A recent *TIME* magazine cover story raised the question: “Does God want you to be rich?” The answer from many pulpits, best-selling books and television evangelists seems to be, “Not only rich, but healthy and happy, too.” The implications of that response trouble some Baptist pastors, theologians and ethicists.

The prosperity gospel—also known as “name it and claim it,” “word of faith,” “positive confession” or “seed-faith” theology—teaches that God wants his children to prosper and be in good health. It calls on followers to step out by faith and claim the prosperity that is the birthright of every Christian.

Strategy for lowering credit card debt

October 16, 2006

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Strategy for lowering credit card debt

By Mike Harris

The number one rule to reduce debt is “keep hope alive.” One important way to do this is to deal with the sense of guilt involved with having debt in the first place. It’s important to note that many of God’s finest people struggle with debt. According to *The Dallas Morning News*, the [average student loan debt](#) for a new pastor coming from seminary in 2001 was \$25,018. If you have debt, you have a lot of company. We often start behind, and it is hard to catch up, especially for those in ministry. You have to be brave to even start addressing this issue.

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A second way to keep hope alive is to tally all your debts. List the company's name, balance, interest rate and monthly payment. Circle the lowest balance. Make it your first victim. Pay the other accounts their minimums and put all extra debt reduction efforts into paying off this account. When it is paid off, use this extra amount towards your next

lowest balance. Within a matter of months you will reduce the number of bills.

How to cope with high energy costs

October 16, 2006

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How to cope with high energy costs

By Roy Hayhurst

The arrival of your monthly electric bill can be a tough experience as energy prices continue to rise around the country. Instead of complaining about the rising costs of energy at your home, church or school, there are simple steps you can take to mitigate these escalating expenses. Among the steps:

Turn off the lights. According to the [Energy Department](#), “only about 10%-15% of the electricity that incandescent lights consume results in light — the rest is turned into heat.” That means if you have incandescent lights, turn them off anytime they are not in use — not only will it save electricity costs, but it will help keep a room cooler.

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Consider replacing your incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent lights. Compact fluorescent bulbs are more expensive — costing 10-20 times more than incandescent bulbs — but last 10-15 times longer. They also produce the same light as incandescent bulbs that need 3-4 times the wattage and most fit in your existing light fixtures with little or no

modification.

Are 401(k) & 403(b) Roth contributions right for you?

October 16, 2006

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Are 401(k) & 403(b) Roth contributions right for you?

By Sherre Stephens

Starting this year, your employer may add a [401\(k\) or 403\(b\) Roth contribution](#) to its retirement plan, but is this option right for you? It depends. Consider the following key points.

Eligibility. Roth IRAs are not available to higher income taxpayers; however, income limitations do not apply to 401(k) or 403(b) Roth contributions. If you are eligible to make elective deferrals, you are eligible to make Roth contributions.

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Taxes. Which is more valuable to you, paying taxes now or later? If you are in a very low tax bracket now and expect to be in a higher tax bracket in the future, or you have many years ahead to contribute and accumulate earnings, a 401(k) or 403(b) Roth contribution may be beneficial. Decades of compounding earnings can result in significant accumulations and tax-

free distributions can provide more purchasing power during retirement years.

How to opt in to medicare coverage

October 16, 2006

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How to opt in to medicare coverage

By Sherre Stephens

Those who opt out of [Social Security](#) coverage often reconsider this decision later in life due to the lack of [Medicare](#) coverage. Under current rules, here is a summary of how to opt into Medicare coverage at age 65.

Eligibility for Medicare Part A (hospital insurance)

There is no premium if you or your spouse has 40 or more quarters of coverage, age 65, and a citizen or lawfully permanent resident of the United States. However, if you have insufficient quarter of coverage, you can buy Medicare Part A coverage as follows:

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Cybercolumn By John Duncan: The church

October 16, 2006

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CYBER COLUMN: The church

By John Duncan

I'm sitting here under the old oak tree, reflecting on the church. A picture of a church building hangs on the wall in my office. The white wooden church reminds me of the simplicity of the past, the joy of the present, the hope of the future and God's own peculiar people.

The church is the *ecclesia*, Greek for the people "called out," or a Roman way of saying that the church is an association of people and obligations and reciprocal, circular response of love to the cross and to Jesus and to each other. The church is the bride of Christ, people making preparations for the walk down the aisle and the cake and the flowers and the celebratory joy of a white wedding dress and birdseed scattered in a euphoric moment of hysteria. The church is a fellowship of the spirit, *koinonia*, which means that the church is a place where people share, care and bear one another's burdens.

John Duncan

RIGHT or WRONG? Church-state separation

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RIGHT or WRONG? Church-state separation

I've heard that if the First Amendment were up for a vote, it would not pass and many Baptists would lead the charge against it. But my understanding is that separation of church and state—which the First Amendment protects—is a traditional Baptist tenet. So, how can we re-establish Baptist support for church-state separation?

Why would any Baptist want to overturn the [First Amendment](#)? I cannot imagine any Baptist inviting government oversight of our preaching and worship services, so I don't believe any would want to discard the [Free Exercise Clause](#), which denies Congress the power to "prohibit the free exercise" of religion. Some, however, want to at least modify the [Establishment Clause](#), which prohibits Congress from establishing religion as a state project. Why? Clearly some Baptists want to use the power of the state to reassert a religious influence in our land in hope that such an influence would stem the tide of what they consider to be the serious moral decline of our culture.

[Previous Columns](#)

Concern for such moral decline is well founded. The question, though, is whether such a strategy for moral transformation is either appropriate or effective. Until recently, the dominant Baptist answer to this has been a resounding “No!” Any reassertion of this traditional Baptist outlook will come through courageous pastors and adult Sunday school leaders who will have to counter powerful voices that have influenced many Christians through various media channels.

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TOGETHER:

Changed lives change lives of others

Intentional evangelism is one of the 11 characteristics of a healthy church. Jesus sent his disciples into the lost world announcing the Good News of the kingdom of God. When you are lost and have no idea of the way home, the very best news in all the Earth is when someone calls out, “Follow me, and I will take you home.”

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We all love John 3:16, with its declaration that God loves us so much he wants to spend eternity with us. Have you also noticed the spirit of John 3:17? “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” The whole life of Jesus bears out that spirit. He lifted up every person who came to him. He welcomed all who approached. His condemnation rested upon those who, in their self-righteousness, felt they needed no repentance and counted themselves better than others. They built walls instead of bridges.

As I call you to consider the importance of evangelism in your local church, I have to also remind you of a specific warning from Jesus: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Matthew 23:15). This frightening warning is not to discourage us from bearing witness and inviting people to become disciples of Christ. It reminds us that we must help people come to Christ and enroll in his school of discipleship, not become clones of us.