

MBCB: State flag must go

By William H. Perkins Jr.

Editor

The Executive Committee of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) on June 23 endorsed changing the controversial Mississippi state flag on biblical grounds.

“Jesus’ ethical teaching calls us to rise above the precepts of this world to demonstrate a higher treatment of others,” according to a statement released in a late morning press conference.

“In Matthew 7:12, He taught us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. In Matthew 22:39, He identified the second greatest command as loving your neighbor as yourself. It is therefore apparent that the need to change the flag is a matter of discipleship for every follower of Jesus Christ.

“Currently, 38% of Mississippi is black and many of those Mississippians are hurt and shamed by the historical symbolism of the current flag. For those who follow Christ to stand by indifferently and allow this to exist is inconsistent with both of these clear teachings of Christ.

“This reality calls those of us who follow the Lord to stand up to help our hurting neighbor. The application of this stance calls for a change to the current flag in order to mitigate the hurt its symbolism entails.”

The Mississippi flag has stirred public outcry for at least 20 years due to its inclusion of the Cross of St. Andrew, known widely as the Confederate battle flag used during the U.S. Civil War. While several southern states once had the battle flag included in their state flags, Mississippi is the now the only state to do so.

The Mississippi flag was adopted by the Mississippi Legislature in 1894, but because of legal technicalities was not the official state flag until ratified by referendum in 2001.

MBCB Executive Director-Treasurer Shawn Parker said at the press conference, "I want to reiterate our position on this is not motivated by politics. It is not motivated by economics. It is not even motivated by athletics. Our position on this is motivated by our understanding of the teaching of Jesus Christ...

"We take these teachings quite seriously and believe that this is indeed a moral issue and a Gospel issue...Our hope is that our stand and our conviction will bring healing to the racial tensions that are felt in Mississippi."

Parker also emphasized to the reporters at the press conference that the MBCB statement does not purport to speak for the churches affiliated with the convention nor for individuals in those churches.

"I would be remiss at this point if I did not acknowledge that all of those churches are autonomous, meaning by that they are self-governing, and so in that regard we would stop short of speaking for all of those congregations but it is our conviction that this statement does represent the majority of those congregations...

"We would be presumptuous theologically if we said this statement represents every Mississippi Baptist, but we do believe it represents the vast majority."

Ken Hester, president of the Mississippi Baptist Convention and senior pastor of First Church, Pontotoc, said at the press conference, "I am compelled to urge the Legislature to change our state flag. I do so hopefully to keep me in line with the teachings of the Apostle John who said, let us not love in word or in tongue only but also in deed and in truth, but I

also hope this sends a message to the African American pastors... who are Mississippi Baptists... and to their congregations that we would rally together to win Mississippi – all of Mississippi – and the world to Jesus Christ.”

Clarence Cooper, chairman of the MBCB Executive Committee that voted unanimously to release the statement, said at the press conference, “We’re not here from a political agenda standpoint. We’re here today to talk about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, and if there’s anything that is causing people to feel an offense to the preaching of the Gospel – even if it be our state flag – then it is time for a change...I again stand based on the Word of God that we want nothing to hinder people from the Gospel.”

Jim Futral, MBCB executive director for 21 years before retiring earlier this year, said at the press conference, “I thank God for Mississippi. I love Mississippi and I am a Mississippi Baptist through and through... [The] fact is that the symbol on our flag is the living, lasting symbol of tyranny, of oppression, of slavery, and a war was fought [but] the symbol remains and somehow, someday, people who feel that oppression on them to this day do not need to be living with that in our state. Something needs to be done.

“The day will come when all of Mississippi would be blessed by this. It doesn’t matter your ethnicity. It doesn’t matter the color of your skin. All of our state would be blessed if we would have a new direction, and especially in this one area.”

The Mississippi Baptist Convention Board is approved each year by messengers from cooperating churches attending the convention’s annual meeting. When the convention as a whole is not in session, the board governs the statewide programs and ministries of the convention.

When the full 100-member board is not in session, the programs and ministries of the convention are administered by the

board-elected Executive Committee.

To view the June 23 press conference and the full text of the Executive Committee statement, visit mbcb.org.