

July 2009

Newsletter of Texas Baptists Committed and Mainstream Baptists

New Baptist Covenant Midwest Regional Meeting on August 6–7

The **Midwest Regional Meeting of the New Baptist Covenant** will begin at noon on Thursday, August 6th and conclude at 9:30 p.m. on Friday, August 7th at the new Embassy Suites Hotel and Convention Center in Norman, Oklahoma.

Messages will be presented by **Wade Burleson**, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church, Enid, Oklahoma, and past president of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma; **Major Jemison**, pastor of St. John’s Missionary Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, and past president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and **Ellis Orozco**, pastor of First Baptist Church, Richardson, Texas, who has served on the Administrative Committee and on the Board of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Testimonies will be presented by **Wilford Brown**, campus minister at Bacone College, Muskogee, Oklahoma, and former national coordinator for Intercultural Ministries for American Baptist Churches; former President **Jimmy Carter**; Oklahoma Governor **Brad Henry**; former Oklahoma Congressman **J. C. Watts**; and **Sarah Stewart**, ministry resident, First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, who recently graduated from George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas.

Other participants include **Tim Eaton**, president of Hillsdale Freewill Baptist College, Moore, Oklahoma; **Javier Elizondo**, executive vice president and provost of Baptist University of the Americas, San Antonio, Texas; and **Dwight McKissic**, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist



Jimmy Carter



Ellis Orozco



J. C. Watts

Church, Arlington, Texas, and past president of the Southern Baptists of Texas Pastor’s Conference. *See page 2 for the complete schedule of the General Sessions.*

Workshops and breakout sessions will focus on building bridges across cultures to better minister to the families of the imprisoned and the impoverished. *See page 3 for details on these special sessions.*

To pre-register for the meeting, go to the **Midwest Regional New Baptist Covenant** Web site at www.ok.newbaptistcovenant.org.

Hotel rooms are available at reduced rates for **New Baptist Covenant** attendees. To make reservations, call the Embassy Suites Hotel and Convention Center, where all meetings will be held, at 1-800-362-2779; The Guest Inn at 1-405-360-1234; or Motel Six at 1-405-701-3300. To receive the reduced rates (Embassy Suites – \$99 + tax; The Guest Inn – \$70 + tax; and Motel Six – \$44.99 + tax/single or \$50.38 + tax/double), be sure to mention that you are with the **New Baptist Covenant Convention**.

Texas Baptists Committed Breakfast at the New Baptist Covenant



Mitch Randall

The Texas Baptists Committed Breakfast at the Midwest Regional New Baptist Covenant will be held at 7 a.m., Friday, August 7, at the Embassy Suites Hotel and Convention Center, Norman, Oklahoma.

Our featured speaker will be Dr. Mitch Randall, pastor of NorthHaven Church in Norman, Oklahoma. NorthHaven is a partner church with the BGCT and CBF. Before going to NorthHaven, Mitch was pastor of First Baptist Church, Bedford, Texas. Mitch also writes a blog, which you can read by going to www.northhavenchurch.net. First click the **Blogs** link, and then click the **Mitch’s Blog** link.

Mitch recently received his Doctor of Ministry degree from George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco.

The cost of the TBC Breakfast is \$20. To make reservations for the breakfast, please email Carol Scott in our office at carolscott@txbc.org, or call our office at 325-659-4102.

**Schedule for Midwest Regional New Baptist Covenant
Embassy Suites Hotel and Convention Center, Norman, Oklahoma
August 6-7, 2009**

Thursday, August 6, 2009

Morning

Registration

Afternoon

1:00–3:15 p.m.

General Session — Mitch Randall, Session Leader

Testimony: J.C. Watts

Documentary film: “Beneath the Skin: Baptists and Racism”

Panel Discussion on the film, led by Robert Parham, with panelists Oklahoma First Lady Kim Henry, Tim Eaton, Javier Elizondo, Fitz Hill, and Dwight McKissic

3:30–4:45 p.m.

Workshops & Breakouts

Evening

5:15–7:00 p.m.

Baptist University of the Americas Dinner

7:15–9:00 p.m.

General Session — Todd Littleton, Session Leader

Special Music: Triple Cross Band

Testimony: Wilford Brown

Testimony: Hanna Massad

Message: Ellis Orozco

Friday, August 7, 2009

Morning

7:00–9:00 a.m.

Breakfast — Texas Baptists Committed/Mainstream Baptists Network

Speaker: Mitch Randall, pastor, NorthHaven Church, Norman, a BGCT partner church

9:15–10:30 a.m.

Breakouts

10:45 a.m.–12 noon

Overview of Common Ministry Projects

Afternoon

12:00–1:30 p.m.

Auxiliary luncheon(s)

1:45–3:30 p.m.

General Session — Wade Smith, Session Leader

Special Music: Baptist University of the Americas Choral Group

Testimony: Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry

Testimony: Former President Jimmy Carter

Message: Major Jemison

3:45–5:00 p.m.

Meetings to Organize Common Ministry Projects

Evening

5:30–7:00 p.m.

First Freedoms Dinner

7:15–9:00 p.m.

General Session — George Young, Session Leader

Special Music: St. John’s Missionary Baptist Choir

Testimony: Sarah Stewart

Message: Wade Burleson

9:00 p.m.

Adjourn

Schedule of Workshops and Breakout Sessions
Midwest Regional New Baptist Covenant
Embassy Suites Hotel and Convention Center, Norman, Oklahoma
August 6–7, 2009

Thursday, August 6, 2009

- 3:30–4:45 p.m.**
- Baptists In and Out of Africa**
David Goatley, executive secretary-treasurer, Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention
T. Thomas, coordinator, Cooperating Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma, and founding director of His Nets
- Baptists and Race**
Dwight McKissic, pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, Arlington, Texas
Fitz Hill, president, Arkansas Baptist College
- Baptists and Disaster Response**
- Challenges and Opportunities for Ministry in Inner Cities**
René Maciel, president, Baptist University of the Americas
Tom Ogburn, pastor, First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City
Chris Simmons, pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas
- Navigating the Intersection Between Church and State**
J. Brent Walker, executive director, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
- Welcoming the Stranger: Baptists and Immigration**
Suzii Paynter, director, Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas
- Calling Baptists to Service**
Joe Grizzle, pastor, CrossPointe Church, Norman, Oklahoma
John Reed, pastor, Fairview Baptist Church, Oklahoma City
- Western Heritage Worship**
Kathy Longhat, pastor, Rainy Mountain Kiowa Indian Baptist Church
Charles Higgs, director, Western Heritage Affinity Group (Cowboy Churches) for the Baptist General Convention of Texas

Friday, August 7, 2009

- 9:15–10:30 a.m.**
- Baptists and Disaster Response**
- Baptists, Health Care, and the Local Church**
Fred Loper, executive director, Baptist Medical and Dental Fellowship
- Baptists Ministering to Orphans and Children at Risk**
Arnie Adkison, chief relationships officer, Buckner Children & Family Services
- Building Affordable Homes**
Habitat for Humanity, Norman, Oklahoma chapter
- Calling Baptists to Service**
Preston Clegg, pastor, Spring Creek Baptist Church, Oklahoma City
Michael Bell, pastor, Greater St. Stephen Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas
- Celebrating 400 Years of Baptist Ethics**
Bill Tillman, T. B. Maston professor of Christian Ethics, Logsdon School of Theology and Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas
- Celebrating 400 Years of Baptist History**
Pam Durso, executive director, Baptist Women in Ministry
Bruce Prescott, executive director, Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists
- The Challenge of Environmental Stewardship**
Robert Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics
- Challenges and Opportunities for Ministry in Rural Settings**
Charles Higgs, director, Western Heritage Affinity Group (Cowboy Churches) for the Baptist General Convention of Texas
Wilford Brown, campus minister, Bacone College; and former national coordinator of Intercultural Ministries for the American Baptist Churches
Manuel Perez, pastor, Primera Iglesia Bautista, Ulysses, Kansas

Hope for the Future: Supporting the Baptist General Convention of Texas

by Bill Jones
TBC Communications Editor

In April and May, Texas Baptists Committed and the BGCT held the first in an ongoing series of jointly-sponsored meetings around the state. The meetings, titled *Hope for the Future: Supporting the Baptist General Convention of Texas*, are intended to inform Texas Baptists about the many ministries and services offered by the BGCT; show them how they can get personally involved in supporting BGCT ministries; and give them an opportunity to ask questions of Texas Baptist leaders.

The five meetings held in April and May took place at Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas; Ash Creek Baptist Church, Azle, just north of Fort Worth; First Baptist Church, Brownwood; Woodlawn Baptist Church, Austin; and Northeast Baptist Church, San Antonio.

Presentations heard by attendees at these sessions have included TexasHope 2010; the impact of our nine Texas Baptist universities; and BGCT work in the Rio Grande Valley. Attendees have also heard Dr. Jim Denison, BGCT theologian in residence, speak about the new Center for Informed Faith, of which he is the founding president. Suzii Paynter, director of the BGCT Christian Life Commission, has also spoken about the CLC's work on public policy issues.

BGCT publications have been well-represented, too. Marv Knox, editor of the *Baptist Standard*, has described the *Standard's* new E3 enhanced electronic edition to attendees; and Ross West, president of BaptistWay Press, has spoken about the many publications offered by BaptistWay, including publications provided in Spanish.

At the meeting in Azle, Wesley Shotwell, pastor of Ash Creek Baptist Church, presented a challenging message titled "Texas Baptists — A Network, Not a Denomination," which we have published as a *Baptist Reflections* column. You'll find it on page 11 of this *Newsletter*.

These are just a few of the presentations that attendees have heard at these TBC-BGCT *Hope for the Future* meetings.

If you're interested in some of the "nuggets" of information that have come out of these meetings, you will want to read the May 15 edition of David Currie's *A Rancher's Rumblings* — titled "Inspired by Hope for the Future," which you will find on page 6 of this *Newsletter*.

Also, videos of the April 27 meeting at First Baptist, Brownwood, are available on our Web site at www.txbc.org.

More of these meetings are in the planning stages. Please watch for dates and locations on our Web site.



A Rancher's Rumblings

By
David R. Currie
Executive Director

March 30, 2009

MAKING FOOLISHNESS REAL, part 3

I got emails from several people who told me they were looking forward to reading Part 3 of my thoughts on the Foolishness of the Gospel. To be honest, though, I thought to myself at one point, "I think I'm done with this Foolishness!"

Then one night last week, our baby goats we are raising on a bottle prompted me to think some more about the "Foolishness of the Gospel." The two baby goats, just over a week old, were following me everywhere I went. These new babies follow Loretta or me, because we are the only security they know. Every meal they've eaten has come from Loretta and me. They know no other mother or daddy. So everywhere we go, they go as 1-week-old baby goats, seeking the only comfort they understand...something warm to drink from the people who provide it to them. We give them a sense of security.

The older goats we raised on a bottle graze around the barn, eating grass, comfortable in a larger sense of security. Now if you put them over the fence with the "goat herd," they make it back before morning by crawling through the fence, because they are not yet ready for that much independence. They do not feel safe there.

Other babies can crawl through the fence, but they do not do so, because their mothers are on the other side from our house. If one crawls through to eat on our side, all it has to do is see me coming, and it will scramble to get back to its mother.

I think that feeling — of wanting to feel safe...seeking security — is something that every living being experiences, in one way or another.

The baby goats have surrendered themselves to total dependence on Loretta and me.

That brings us back to the Foolishness of the Gospel. The only real security we have is Jesus' death on the cross and our surrender to this truth, which is foolishness to our minds. We don't want to accept this truth. To us, security means another person or even our marriage; a good job; money in the bank; a debt-free house; financial and personal success. To paraphrase Jesus, sometimes we seem to be so interested in gaining the world that we neglect our souls. A good marriage, a good job, and financial success can be healthy and good, but they're not ultimate security.

Christ is the one and only source of ultimate security, which — to me — is eternal life and the abundant life found in Christ, bringing happiness and meaning and purpose to our lives. Our highest calling is to partner with the living Christ in what He is doing in the world. That may seem like foolishness to the world, but the reality is that it is God's wisdom.

God's wisdom turns our logic on its head. Our inclination is to seek the world at our feet. But the Foolishness of the Gospel puts us at Jesus' feet. It requires us to surrender our lives and our selves — to lose ourselves in Him...to lose ourselves, as He did, in serving others. Remember Jesus' words: "whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (*Matthew 10:39*) (NIV), and "the last shall be first and the first shall be last" (*Matthew 20:16*) (NIV).

The Foolishness is that Jesus gave His life willingly so that all of us might have life. Does that make sense? Not to us. It sounds like foolishness.

But think about this. When are you the absolute happiest? For most of you, I would guess that it is when you have lost yourself so totally in trying to help someone or fix some major problem that you have totally forgotten about yourself.

We all enjoy success...striving to achieve financial and emotional security is normal. But such security is only temporary, not eternal. All of us will ultimately die and leave our worldly goods behind; all that will truly be left of us is what we have invested in others.

Our only ultimate security is our partnership with Jesus — God who became man, lived among us, and then willingly gave up His life for us. The Foolishness of the Gospel is that Christ dying for us and our dying to ourselves makes us safe and secure forever.

"Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." (*1 Corinthians 1:20-21*) (NIV)

Paul understood the temptation to trust wisdom, experts, intellect, success, even appearance and popularity to give us a sense of security. But Paul says that God has made foolish this "wisdom of the world."

I want to close with a Happy Birthday to my sister (March 24) and to Mother (92 on March 27). You have both tolerated me and my foolishness for a long time, and I appreciate it. I will also be thinking of my Dad, who would celebrate birthday 101 on March 31 if he were still with us. You know, I still feel him with me from time to time, especially as baseball season is starting again and new calves are being born.

April 9, 2009

MAKING FOOLISHNESS REAL, part 4

As we commemorate Holy Week and celebrate Easter, the resurrection of the God/human, Jesus Christ, we come to the end of this series of *Rumblings* about "Making Foolishness Real."

Paul wrote, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." (*1 Corinthians 1:25*) (NIV)

The March 2009 issue of *Baptists Today* has a wonderful interview with Dr. Wayne Ward, the 87-year-old retired Theology professor from Southern Seminary. He was asked what he would preach about if he could preach one more sermon at Southern Seminary.

Dr. Ward said, "I'd start with a little bit of humility and the recognition that you don't have to have it all down in rigid,

theologically dogmatic statements."

As I read that statement by Dr. Ward, I remembered a letter I received in March from a young Texas pastor, criticizing CBF, as well as the BGCT for any (informal) ties that it has to CBF, and two seminaries that receive a small amount of funding from CBF. He followed these criticisms by saying, "On Judgment Day, however, I do not want to have to give an account of how I was connected in any way, shape or form to heretical teachings and false teachers."

I was deeply saddened by his letter and thinking. The reality is that every single church, religious institution, and convention started by human beings is flawed. I guess each of us defines "heresy" in our own way. *Webster's* defines it as "adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma." By that definition, to be a Baptist is to be a heretic, because Baptists are — by definition — led by the Holy Spirit, not by church dogma. If, on the other hand, we define heresy as a deviation from biblical truth, then again, we all stand convicted of heresy, because none of us is perfect when it comes to interpreting Scripture. Any pastor or teacher who claims to be infallible in that department is a liar.

So, by either of these definitions of heresy, all of us — including every single Texas Baptist pastor — have preached, taught, or spread heresy at some point. Jesus is perfect, and the Scriptures are authoritative truth, but we are fallible human beings imperfectly discerning the leadership of the Holy Spirit and imperfectly interpreting Scriptural truth.

The kind of thinking shown by this young pastor appears to me to focus on the wisdom of man and rigid certainty, while denying the "foolishness of the Gospel," which culminates in the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. Paul wrote, "God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." (*1 Corinthians 1:21b*) (NIV)

Friends, we do not "make foolishness real" by our doctrinal purity or our strong stands against sinful behavior. Most people realize they are sinners, whether or not they admit it. What they don't realize — or at least have trouble accepting — is that God loves them as they are.

We "make foolishness real" when we remember that the cross is God paying the price for every sin ever committed by every human being who will ever live. It is God's way of accepting every single one of us if we will only believe and accept His gift.

We humans confuse acceptance with approval. But acceptance and approval aren't the same thing — not even close! To accept someone (including ourselves) because they are people who God

Videos Now Available on TBC Web Site

We have added videos to the TBC Web site at www.txbc.org. We currently have videos of two recent meetings:

- **Hope for the Future: Supporting the Baptist General Convention of Texas**
First Baptist Church, Brownwood, April 27, 2009
- **2nd Annual Currie-Strickland Distinguished Lectures in Christian Ethics**
Howard Payne University, Brownwood, April 27, 2009
 - Bill Tillman, "The Bible and Hunger"
 - Jim Denison, "The Church's Response to Hunger"

loves so much that He willingly watched His Son die for them does not mean to approve of their way of thinking or way of life.

God accepts us and loves us as we are, period: selfish, prideful, materialistic, lustful, and on and on. Christ died to save us despite our sinfulness. That does not mean that He approves of our every thought or every action; it does not mean that He approves of the way we live our lives. It just means that we don't have to earn His love — we already have it. Not because of who we are, but because of who He is.

So the Good News is that Easter is for everyone who believes, whoever they are, whatever they have done. It is foolishness to us, because it seems so unnatural for us to love and accept people despite their behavior, but that is exactly what God does.

One of the major sources of division in Baptist life these past 30 years has been a disagreement over the character and nature of God. Is God best described by words like mercy, grace, love, and acceptance, or is God really about anger, judgment, and condemnation?

I could be wrong but, for me, the answer is clear. The true foolishness of the Gospel is God's unconditional love, acceptance, and forgiveness, and we need to preach it and live it with all our heart, mind, and soul. The world beats people up enough; the Church should be about love and acceptance. I will celebrate that this Easter morning. How about you?

May 15, 2009

INSPIRED BY HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

My Baptist roots run very deep. As I have mentioned before, Robert Morrison Currie — my great-great-grandfather — came to Texas in about 1857 and founded the First Baptist Church of LaVernia. A few years back, the members of that church honored me by asking me to speak at the celebration of its 150th anniversary.

This was the “mother” church of that area — it sponsored churches such as First Baptist Church of San Antonio. My great-great-grandfather was the first moderator of the San Antonio Baptist Association.

His son, David Blont Currie, came to Paint Rock in 1879 — he and his two brothers, Cyrus and Joe, are buried there. They were all Confederate veterans.

One of David's children was Anne, who was W. A. Criswell's mother; and another was my grandfather, William Glosson Currie.

Mother's sister, Jewette, was married to Charles C. McLaughlin, who was Texas Baptist director of missions for many years and, I believe, actually played a huge part in starting the River Ministry, as well as what we know today as Baptist University of the Americas in San Antonio. Many of you reading this knew Uncle Charlie and remember him well as being a “prince of a man.” If you want to know why there are over 1,300 Hispanic churches that relate to the BGCT, I can tell you in two words: Uncle Charlie.

So, as you see, Baptist ministry both runs in my blood and beats in my heart. Yet, no matter how long I'm in this work, I'm always learning new things. The ministries of the BGCT are sort of like the old song most of us sang as children in Sunday School — “Deep and Wide” — and I'm continually amazed to learn about the impact of its ministries.

This week, we held the fourth and fifth of what we plan to be an ongoing series of meetings around the state, jointly sponsored by TBC and the BGCT, under the title “*Hope for the Future: Supporting the Baptist General Convention of Texas.*” I have been amazed at how much I have learned — just during these five meetings — about Texas Baptist institutions and ministries.

For example:

- * Did you know that Wayland Baptist University teaches students on 13 campuses, including campuses outside the continental U. S. and internationally? Examples are campuses in Alaska, Hawaii, and Kenya.
- * Did you know that Buckner International has placed thousands of children in adoptive families — or, as Ken Hall calls them, “forever families” — over the past 130 years and will unite another 200 children with their new families this year alone? Yet no SBC agency can help you to adopt a child.
- * Did you know that the Fifth Great Awakening is happening around the world, and America is missing it? More Muslims are coming to Christ EVERY day than at any time in history. Some say that over 1 million people are coming to Christ EVERY day in the underground church in China.
- * Did you know that the largest single gift every year to Howard Payne University is the money provided by the BGCT?
- * Did you know that a graduate of the Baptist University of the Americas is the leader of ethnic ministries in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida?
- * Did you know that 95% of the BGCT's new church starts are successful?

I could go on and on.

You would have learned these things, too — and much more — if you had attended any of the five “*Hope for the Future: Supporting the BGCT*” meetings we have had in Dallas, Azle (Fort Worth area), Brownwood, Austin, and San Antonio. Actually, I have been very pleased with the attendance, but I'm anxious for even more people to hear the great things we're hearing at these meetings.

The BGCT is a convention that no other Baptist convention in the world can match for the breadth, depth, and effectiveness of its ministries. We support more institutions than the SBC supports as a national convention. We can do all of this because we are free and faithful — and that is because YOU have supported TBC.

These meetings have fed me spiritually so much. They have said to me, over and over, that my ministry has counted for much and resulted in some very good things. I appreciate that.

But TBC is not the issue — the issue is supporting free and faithful Texas Baptists. We are the light of the world for Baptists who believe in freedom and Baptist principles, and we must protect that at all costs. I know I can count on you who are reading this to do that, and I thank you for that.

But I still must urge you to start making plans now to come to Houston for this year's BGCT Annual Meeting on November 16–17. Don't leave any doubt that you love and cherish — and will do whatever it takes to protect — our Texas Baptist freedom.

May 21, 2009

CARING FOR THE POOR AS JESUS DID

At all of the TBC-BGCT *Hope for the Future* meetings, we are hearing an update on TexasHope 2010. It is a well-conceived emphasis begun by Randel Everett, BGCT executive director.

TexasHope 2010 calls us to prayer, care, and share. We are challenged to pray at noon, each day, for those in Texas who are hungry and those who do not know Christ. The BGCT has prepared materials for use in sharing the Gospel with every person in Texas by Resurrection Sunday, 2010. To find out more, go to the TexasHope 2010 Web site (www.texashope2010.com).

In a conversation earlier this week, I mentioned how much I despise getting politically-oriented emails of any sort — regardless of the political party or perspective behind them — and, especially, from friends who automatically assume that I agree with them on political issues. I delete them immediately, once I realize what I'm reading. We do not all think alike — which, to be frank, is healthy for America, as well as for Baptists.

One issue on which we can disagree is how to help the poor. Some believe strongly in government help for the poor, while others believe that churches and charities can do the job and should do the job of helping the poor without government help. I fall into the category of believing that we need both government programs and private help. But that is just my opinion, and I respect your opinion if you disagree with me.

During the conversation to which I referred, I mentioned the incredible book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by James Agee. I think it is one of the greatest books ever written (strengthened by the stark photographs taken by Walker Evans), and it has only grown in its appreciation since its publication in 1941.

In 1936, Agee and Evans lived, for a while, with three migrant sharecropper families in rural Alabama. In the book, Agee attempted to “directly appeal for the reader to see the humanity and grandeur of these horrible lives.” And friends, they did live horrible lives while being hard-working people — hard-working Americans just trying to survive.

Evans has photographs of women who — in their 30s — look like they are in their 60s. The photographs take your breath away, and Agee's prose is evidence of the talent that would later win him a Pulitzer Prize before alcoholism killed him at only 45 years of age. For you who love old movies, you need to know that Agee also wrote the screenplay for the Humphrey Bogart-Katharine Hepburn movie, *The African Queen*.

In 1989, a follow-up book — titled *And Their Children After Them* — was published that examined the descendants of the three families 50 years later. Sadly, most were still living in poverty, following the same pattern of marrying young, having children young, and failing to complete their education. Some had managed to buy trailer houses or live in apartments, but few owned a home.

So what is my point? We are called to care. The four Gospels speak to our attitudes toward poverty, the use of money, and the danger of wealth more than any other subject

Been to the TBC Web site lately?

If you haven't checked out the TBC Web site lately, we invite you to go to www.txbc.org today. In recent months, we have made enhancements that we hope will make it more useful to you. On our home page, you will be directed to the latest editions of the *TBC Newsletter*; David R. Currie's *A Rancher's Rumblings* column; and the *Baptist Reflections* column written by various Baptist leaders; as well as archives for all three of these publications. Our home page also features news about upcoming Baptist events. In the months to come, we will add even more enhancements, including links to up-to-the-moment Baptist news and views. *Stay tuned!*

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A Rancher's Rumblings

— reflecting the importance that Jesus placed on these attitudes.

Yet the poorest part of America is the Bible Belt, that region that runs throughout the South, in which Baptists are the largest denomination.

I sometimes wonder whether we Baptists actually read the Bible or just like to argue about it. For the most part, we ignore what it says about the poor. Instead, we love to blame poverty on laziness — this seems to excuse us to walk away from it with a clear conscience and no sense of responsibility for it.

Jim Denison, speaking at the *Currie-Strickland Distinguished Lectures in Christian Ethics* a few weeks ago, told us that we had to first feed the hungry to earn the right to share the Gospel with our culture. He said that Jesus always met people's physical needs first and only then did He begin to deal with their spiritual needs.

I agree with Jim. I worked in state government for over 4 years in the 1980s. I've been involved in various business endeavors for the past 15 years. I find it consistently true that persons who have a secular worldview are more compassionate and caring for the poor than most Christians I know. They are also more forgiving and accepting of people in general, and understanding and accepting of people's struggle and failure in particular.

TexasHope 2010 challenges us to pray for those in need. But that prayer should include praying that God will move us personally to care for them and to share with them — share our time and share what we have; then we can share Christ with them, for they will have already seen Jesus in our love for them.

A good place to start is the Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger. To find out how to give to this offering — which challenges us this year to give one meal once a month — go to the Offering's Web site (www.bgct.org/worldhunger).

If we do not Care, we have no credibility to Share. Think about it. Pray about it.

May 29, 2009

SERVING THEIR CHURCHES AND COMMUNITIES: SMALL-CHURCH PASTORS

After reading last week's *Rumblings* on caring for the poor, a rural pastor emailed me, telling me that he had just gotten back in the office from his eighth benevolence ministry experience that week.

That started me thinking about the special burden carried by pastors of small churches that can't afford a large staff. That's not to say that pastors of multi-staffed churches don't also personally work in hunger and benevolence ministries — they do, but, in small churches, that work is often the responsibility of the pastor alone. That pastor doesn't have other staff members on whom he or she can call to share that work.

Take, for example, my rural pastor friend, a man with a great heart, deep faith in Christ, and deep compassion for people who hurt and the challenge that he faces.

Such a pastor has little time for sermon preparation. Caring for your church takes time — but even moreso when you don't have other staff to share the burden. It may mean going to a football game nearly every Friday night in the fall, sometimes two basketball games per week in the winter, and on and on, staying close to your congregation and letting them know that their church cares

about their lives.

A small-church pastor may have to travel a good distance to sit with a family during a time of crisis. When I pastored a rural church, people had surgery in San Angelo, Kerrville, Fredericksburg, Brady, Austin, and San Antonio. Of course, pastors care about their people — but pastors are only human; they need their rest like anyone else. But the pastor of a small church doesn't get much rest. In my case, I went to sit with those families while their loved ones were in surgery; after all, our little church didn't have another staff person to take my place, and those families needed someone to be with them.

I have no idea what pastor salaries are now, since I haven't been a pastor in nearly 30 years, but I imagine a small-church pastor makes less than a schoolteacher in most places (and schoolteachers are shamefully underpaid for what they contribute to the lives of children, their families, and their communities).

If that small-church pastor has a parsonage to live in, which helps him or her survive, he or she retires with no home equity to use in buying one for retirement.

Through the years, we have held annual "young pastor retreats" as a part of our TBC ministry. Every year, I look in the faces of these young pastors and tell them straight up, "most of you will never ever pastor a church that runs over 200 in Sunday School. The odds are just against you, because there are not that many larger churches and, at some point in your ministry, you will have to come to a healthy acceptance that being a small-church pastor is a wonderful calling."

Having said that, please let me pay a special tribute to three men:

- * **Billy Ray Parmer** was pastor of FBC, Valley Mills for many years. He pastored the entire town, serving in the fire department and many other areas of the community. What he did was significant and magnificent.
- * **J. B. Bitner** was long-time pastor of FBC, Big Lake. He gave his life to that community in ways that will never be fully appreciated. He had a high calling, and he served well in a community that nearly died when oil prices went down. This church gives remarkable gifts each year to the Texas Baptist World Hunger offering.
- * **Earl Dunn** pastored a church in San Angelo on the side of town that has not had a new house built in 50 years. I'm not sure how long he served as pastor, but I'm pretty sure it was for over 25 years, and it was largely his leadership that kept that church running over 200 in Sunday School. Thirty years ago, his church sponsored the church that I now attend in the growing part of San Angelo. I consider Earl Dunn one of the most remarkable and successful pastors I have ever known.

And I could name 400 more such pastors, who gave their life to ministry with little financial reward but with incredible dedication.

Did any of these three pastors, all of whom I consider legends, have a church that grew significantly? No, their location and the economic environment of the area made it impossible for those churches to grow very much, but these pastors kept their churches focused on what it means to partner with Christ in ministry, both local and global.

I love and appreciate my friends who pastor multi-staffed

churches. They host TBC meetings in their churches, and they sacrifice time to serve on key BGCT boards and institution boards, but they know, too, that their ministries are no more important than those of Billy Ray, J. B., or Earl. It's just a matter of following God's call to wherever He leads you.

If you attend a rural or small church, go tell your pastor this Sunday how much you appreciate his or her service to your church and community. If you can find a way, raise \$500 and give your pastor and his or her family a weekend to get away and rest.

The BGCT is truly blessed by those who respond to the calling of Christ and use their gifts for his Kingdom — and we are all blessed to serve God wherever He leads us.

June 5, 2009

OUR BAPTIST FAMILY: SHARING WITH EACH OTHER, CARING FOR EACH OTHER, AND PRAYING FOR EACH OTHER

We've had an interesting time at the ranch the past couple of weeks. Last week, a brown-and-white nanny was near the fence by the house one morning. We keep the binoculars close by to watch the two bucks who come to eat corn morning and night and to see how their new horns are growing. So I grabbed the binoculars to look at that goat, who was all alone next to the fence.

That evening, she was still there, so we walked over to her. I told Loretta that I figured, for that goat to stay here all day, she must have a baby somewhere nearby. Sure enough, we saw twins sleeping under a bush about 20 yards from her, one on top of the other. An hour later, she started moving up the fence line, with them following behind. They were tiny babies. They looked like they were probably very premature, like little puppies just learning to walk.

For a week, we fed the goats nightly, and the mother would be there to eat corn. But there was no sign of the babies. Then Monday night, when she came up, they were with her — a tiny brown nanny kid and a tiny black-and-white billy kid, both of them healthy and whole. Both of us practically cried with joy. I have never seen such tiny kids survive, but it looks like they're going to make it.

Then I was headed down, with Bear my dog on the Polaris, to load the deer feeder with four sacks of corn. I noticed a huge rattlesnake moving through the tall weeds, but I didn't stop, because I didn't want Bear to see him. I found Dad's old 12-gauge and had Loretta drive around that area in the pick-up while I sat on the hood. But we couldn't find him and haven't seen him since then. I think he lives under the tin that I have piled behind the barn. Now I walk to my garden with my 12-gauge in hand every day and pull weeds with my right hand while holding the gun with my left. That snake was HUGE.

On Saturday morning, while working calves at the Paint Rock ranch, I climbed the fence on the chute to push the calves forward with a stick. My foot slipped, and I fell 2 feet, landing — on my ribs — on the top rail of 3-inch pipe. Oh my, the pain! And I figured it would probably get worse. But Sunday morning surprised me, as I felt only a little sore. So I went to church. But, after a sleepless Sunday night, I went to the doctor on Monday and was told that my ribs weren't broken — just bruised, along with prob-

ably some cartilage separated that would hurt me for 4 to 6 weeks — geez, such fun!

So, is there a point to this article so far? To be honest, not really. But you are my extended Baptist family, and I like sharing my life — both joys and sorrows (and pains) — with you.

However, there is something else in my family right now that I really need to share with you. One of my sons is trying to make a major decision and seeking the will of God for his life.

He has a job offer from someone he loves and respects, but it is in a location in which he really doesn't want to live. Yet it's the only job offer he has at this time.

He keeps asking God what to do. Should he take a job just because it's available — even though he feels no sense of God's leading in that direction? Or should he wait for something where he wants to live — even though there's no guarantee that such an offer will come his way?

Let me share with you the advice I've given to him. I welcome your feedback.

First, knowing the will of God is not simply about what you feel in your gut. Yes, I believe strongly in the priesthood of the believer, but emotions alone aren't a reliable guide to God's will. The followers of David Koresh and Jim Jones would have all told you that they "felt" they were in the center of God's will.

Second, as a Christian, we are part of the family of God. Any Christian, in making a major decision, should seek the counsel of trusted fellow believers. What do they think about this decision? What advice can they give to help the person reflect on the options available?

Third, does an open door — an opportunity — necessarily mean that it is God's will? Well, we can't ignore an open door. That the door is open — that the opportunity is available — doesn't automatically mean it is the door we should walk through. However, if no other door opens within a reasonable amount of time, then — gut feeling or not — that may be what God wants for you, even if you cannot see it at the moment.

If you then — even reluctantly — walk through that door and ask God, "Okay, now that I'm here, why am I here? How can you use me?" — at that point, you have decided it is the will of God and you respond with excitement and expectation — not because of the situation itself or your emotions, but because you have chosen to be faithful and follow where God leads.

I would love for the 2,000-plus people who receive this to pray for my son as he seeks the will of God. By the same token, I'm always honored when you email me about the needs of your own family and ask me to pray for them.

That's what it means to be the family of God. We have the blessing of caring for each other and being cared for by each other, and we have the privilege of taking each other's concerns to a God who cares and loves more than we can begin to understand. Being a Christian really is a special thing — it brings us together.

June 12, 2009

LOST OR FOUND OR ANY WHICHWAY

LOST AND FOUND

I carry in my Bible a copy of one of my favorite quotes from my favorite writer, Frederick Buechner. It's a saying of Leo Bebb,

the title character of *The Book of Bebb*, which is a compilation of four novels Buechner wrote, centering on this character.

Leo Bebb says, "We all got secrets. I got them same as everybody else — things we feel bad about and wish hadn't ever happened. Hurtful things. Long ago things. We're all scared and lonesome, but most of the time we keep it hid. It's like every one of us has lost his way so bad we don't even know which way is home any more, only we're ashamed to ask. You know what would happen if we would own up we're lost and ask? Why, what would happen is we'd find out that home is each other. We'd find out home is Jesus that loves us lost or found or any whichway."

I thought of this quote Monday night. The little kid goats I wrote about last week were not with their mother when Loretta and I fed them toward the middle of the week. I tried to assure Loretta that they were probably just sleeping, but — in all honesty — I was worried, because they had been with their mother Monday and Tuesday night and looked strong and healthy.

On Friday night, we were in Austin to watch Loretta's granddaughter run the 800 meters in the state track meet, which was even more special, since I had run there in 1971 in the Mile Run. On Saturday, we drove from Austin to Lubbock so that I could preach again at Second Baptist Church, Lubbock. You know, if I were to consider pastoring again, I would be begging those wonderful people to take me (and I think they just might).

On Sunday night, the mother goat was there again, and again there were no babies with her. I told Loretta I was sorry, but I was afraid that a bobcat must have caught them.

On Monday morning, Loretta was crying when she called me. I said, "What is wrong, Angel?" She told me, "The babies are here. They got outside the fence and are near the house — they are alive!"

On Monday evening, we caught them and put them in a pen. Then we went and caught their mother and put them all together. My, did they get after that milk! I turned to Loretta and said, "Well, now they are family — like Dot, Oreo, and Brown-Eyed Girl we raised on a bottle. So what are you naming them?"

She replied, "Lost and Found, I guess." And now you know why I thought of the Buechner quote that I carry in my Bible.

I could act like a preacher at this point and "unpack" Buechner's great words and turn them into a sermon outline. But I think, instead, I'll just leave them as he wrote them and let you and God decide how they speak to you.

SAVE THESE DATES

Before I close, let me give a few important dates to mark on your calendar.

On August 6–7, the *Midwest Regional Meeting of the New Baptist Covenant* will be held in Norman, Oklahoma. You can register at www.ok.newbaptistcovenant.org. The entire meeting is at the Embassy Suites, and the rooms are at a great price. We will have a *TBC Breakfast* during this meeting. Mitch Randall will be our speaker. Mitch is pastor of NorthHaven Church in Norman, a

church that partners with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Mitch formerly pastored at First Baptist Church, Bedford, and is a longtime friend of TBC. You may remember that Mitch recently wrote a *Baptist Reflections* column for us (see page 12).

President Carter will be speaking at this meeting, along with Ellis Orozco — who spoke at our *TBC Convocation* last year — and several other inspiring speakers. I urge you to make a special effort to attend. The national *Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant* in Atlanta in January of last year was the most incredible Baptist meeting I have ever attended. I'm excited that we have one closer to home this summer so that it will be easier for many of you to attend. You will find it an experience that you will remember for the rest of your life — Baptists of all kinds meeting together in unity, one in their love for the Lord.

Also, we have finalized plans for our *TBC Breakfast* during this year's annual BGCT meeting in Houston on November 16–17. Ed Hogan, pastor of Jersey Village Baptist Church in Houston, will be our speaker. Ed is a great friend (we hunt together) and one of the most effective and dynamic pastors in Baptist life. He served two terms as second vice president of the BGCT during a critical time in our history. You will want to make it a priority to be there to hear this visionary pastor's message.

I'm looking forward to attending many other exciting meetings this summer, including the following:

* *Hispanic Baptist Convention*, Dallas, June 28–30

* *CBF General Assembly*, Houston, July 2–3

* *Bivocational Smaller Church Ministers' and Spouses' Statewide Conference*, University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, Belton, July 10–12

* *African American Fellowship Conference*, DeSoto, July 27–31

The size and diversity of the BGCT means that there is a lot to do to keep the relationships strong and to keep educating our churches about the continuing threat of Fundamentalism — and the danger it poses to our churches. Thank you for your support in allowing me to do these things. If you haven't renewed your membership this year, please do so. TBC's ministry is important to the future of Texas Baptists. Please give what you can to provide us with the resources we need to educate and inform people and churches.

A WORD OF APPRECIATION

The last two issues of *Rumblings* resulted in the largest responses my writings have ever received. I think it is for two reasons: (1) like me, many of you grew up in a rural church and value what these wonderful pastors do for us in those churches; and (2) we really are a Baptist family at TBC and, since my son was struggling, you cared.

I cannot thank you enough. I forwarded over 20 emails to him and said, "Son, print these out and treasure them, read them from time to time, these people care about you." It was very special, and I thank you.

April 17, 2009

TEXAS BAPTISTS – A NETWORK, NOT A DENOMINATION

by Wesley Shotwell

Pastor, Ash Creek Baptist Church, Azle, Texas

“The times they are a changin’.” Maybe you recognize those prophetic words from rock legend Bob Dylan. He first sang them years ago in the midst of social upheaval, but they are no less true today than they were back in 1964. The times are indeed a changin’.

Now I don’t like that very much. I like things to be stable and secure; I need something to hold onto that will not shift around with every puff of sociological wind. But, as one anonymous wit has quipped, “Other things may come and go, but change is here to stay.”

Change is especially true in the ecclesiastical world. Every time I turn around, some blogger or church life pundit is reminding me that I can’t do church the way we used to. We can’t sing hymns anymore; we have to sing “praise and worship” songs, which is what I thought we were doing when we used to sing *Holy, Holy, Holy* and *To God Be the Glory, Great Things He Hath Done*. We can’t have Sunday School; instead, we have to have “Cell Groups.” I am old enough to remember Training Union, but that went out of style a long time ago.

Baptists in Exile

I remember when I was proud to be a Southern Baptist. Now *that* was something you could count on! I was a regular at Glorieta and Ridgecrest, and I was absolutely convinced that Bold Mission Thrust would indeed bring in the millennium by sharing the Gospel with every person in every country by the year 2000. As far as I knew, there were no Christians other than Southern Baptists and, if the Kingdom was going to prosper, it was up to *us*.

But alas, as they always do, things changed. Looking back on it now, I see that perhaps there is a silver lining to all of that change. For many of us, the SBC had become something of an idol. Now that we are in exile, it occurs to me that God may have raised up new Babylonians for the purpose of saving some of us from our idolatry.

A NOTE FROM BILL JONES, TBC COMMUNICATIONS EDITOR:

On April 13 and 14, TBC held its first two meetings centered on “*Hope for the Future: Supporting the Baptist General Convention of Texas*.” On April 13, we met at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas; the next night, we met at Ash Creek Baptist Church in Azle. That evening, Wesley Shotwell, pastor of the host church, spoke about the purpose and future of Texas Baptists. Many who were present considered it one of the clearest and most insightful statements they had heard concerning the future of the BGCT. At our request, Dr. Shotwell has provided that speech for the *Baptist Reflections* column that begins on this page.

What Happened to Denominations?

Things are changing in other communities of faith as well. They say we are now entering into a post-denominational age. It may well be, for all I know. The mainline denominations are losing people faster than they can count, while at the same time pollsters are telling us that people are more spiritual now than ever before. New kinds of Christians are emerging, who have little or no desire to be labeled as a Presbyterian or a Methodist or a Lutheran. They just want to be Christians who meet at the coffee shop or in someone’s home, but they have no interest in participating in a larger body like a denomination.

Denominations have a tendency to stifle individual expression. They are held together by creeds that impose a set of doctrines on members; they are governed by a hierarchy — whether it is a presbytery, a conference, or a synod. For some, decisions that are made by the authorities are perceived as too *conservative*, as we have seen recently in the Roman Catholic Church, with the uproar about a papal pronouncement concerning birth control and the spread of AIDS. For others, decisions made by ecclesiastical councils are perceived as too *liberal*; a case in point is the recent split of Episcopalians over the issue of homosexuality.

But such is the nature of denominations. In a denomination, *someone* has to have authority to tell the laity what to do and how to think. But we don’t live in that kind of world anymore. In a post-modern culture, people will not let a creed or council tell them what it means to be a Christian. So it may well be that we are entering a post-denominational age.

Baptists – Cooperating for the Sake of Missions

Well, that ought to be good news for Baptists! Baptists are *not* a denomination. We are a movement of believers who are suspicious of ecclesiastical authority and creedal fiat. We were post-moderns before anyone knew what that was! Our leader is Jesus, our creed is the Bible, and our community of faith is the local church.

The rest of the world may not understand our polity, insisting that we are indeed a denomination, but *real* Baptists know better. Baptists have long been suspicious of denominationalism, even to the extent that early Baptists in America were quite reluctant to even cooperate with one another, fearful of diluting the autonomy of the local church.

But many of us, though by no means all of us, eventually put aside our fears so that we could begin cooperating with one another for the sake of missions. Cooperation was based not on creed or council, but on a burning desire to do more together than we could do separately. We designed networks of local churches who would work together, but we emphatically resisted denominationalism and tenaciously held onto the autonomy of the local church.

It seems to me that the networking model of Baptist cooperation is a model that fits post-modern culture. Though we may mourn the possibility that denominationalism is gasping its last breath, Baptists should be well-positioned for our age. After all, we are not a denomination. We who cooperate with one another are a *network*.

BAPTIST REFLECTIONS

SBC Fundamentalism – Creeds, Councils, and Conformity

The problem, however, is that many Baptists have either forgotten or abandoned the model of networking and are trying to mold us into a denomination at the exact moment when denominations are waning. This is the practical problem of Southern Baptist Fundamentalism. I refer to Southern Baptist Fundamentalism as distinct from the old Independent Baptist Fundamentalists, because at least the Independent Fundamentalists tenaciously held onto the autonomy of the local church, even to the extent of often resisting the notion of working with one another at all. Southern Baptist Fundamentalists, on the other hand, want churches to cooperate but only under the condition of denominational conformity. The only way they can enforce conformity is through creeds and councils that draw lines to determine who is qualified to be a member of the denomination.

Therefore, Southern Baptists now have a statement of faith that is no longer an unbinding confession but a creed for doctrinal accountability. Scripture is interpreted for the masses by approved leaders, leaving no room for the Spirit to work differently in the lives of individuals. Members of institutional trustee boards act as a college of cardinals, delving into the personal and private prayer lives of missionaries. Declarations have come from the Southern Baptist hierarchy, concerning everything from the role of women to birth control and to how many children ought to fill the proverbial family quiver. Now power is in the hands of a privileged few, with the result that fewer and fewer are able to fit inside the approved Southern Baptist box.

The point is this: Southern Baptist Fundamentalism is insisting that we are a denomination in what appears to be a post-denominational culture.

Texas Baptists Committed – Our Baptist Watchdog

The work of Texas Baptists Committed is to constantly remind Texas Baptists that we are a network of autonomous cooperating churches and *not* a denomination governed by a powerful few. Texas Baptists Committed helps local churches by providing information and support for Pastor Search Committees who are fearful of being deceived by an authoritarian pastor who would drag their church into Fundamentalist conformity. TBC supports the work of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, because it is through *that* network that we are able to participate with one another in a variety of ministries without the fear of being under a denominational thumb.

On the other hand, all institutions, including the BGCT, can devolve into a self-preserving bureaucracy that feeds on its constituents and can tend to control rather than serve. Therefore, TBC must be a watchdog, even of the BGCT, to keep us free from denominational control, constantly reminding our institutions of our networking nature as opposed to a denominational structure.

TBC's Role – Keeping Us Free to Evangelize Effectively

This is *not* an irrelevant preacher fuss carried on for our political enjoyment. It is a struggle that goes to the heart of how we are going to win our culture to Christ. It is an evangelistic necessity. If we are going to have the ability to speak to a post-denominational world, we must fiercely resist the temptation toward denominationalism. It is not a matter of irrelevant politics. It is a

matter of effective evangelism in a changing world. Texas Baptists Committed is needed to continue to remind all Texas Baptists that we are a network of autonomous churches and *not* a denomination.

The times are indeed a changin'. While in one sense that is disconcerting, in another sense it is very encouraging. Baptists OUGHT to be primed and ready to speak to this changing culture about the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ. Well, we *will* be primed and ready if we can resist the temptation to devolve into a denomination.

Texas Baptists Committed has an evangelistic mission, as it reminds us of who we really are. *We are Baptists*. Let's act like it and then change the world.

April 23, 2009

RETURNING THE CHURCH TO OUR TRUE CALLING

by Mitch Randall

**Pastor, NorthHaven Church, Norman, Oklahoma (partnering
with the Baptist General Convention of Texas)**

Earlier this month, *Newsweek* published an article by Managing Editor Jon Meacham, entitled "The End of Christian America." As the starting point for his article, Meacham cited the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey, which found that the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has climbed from 8 to 15 percent since 1990. During the same period, the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen from 86 to 76 percent. It appears as though the Christian faith is losing influence within the culture. Some of my brothers and sisters blame this on an increasingly secularist culture. I see it differently.

First, I think that the blame for the decreasing numbers of self-identified Christians rests uncomfortably at the doors of the church. For decades now, the church has spent much of its focus on changing culture through the political process. In many cases, the church attempted to impose conservative Christian orthodoxy on the entire American culture. Boggled down in political elections and denominational strife, the church lost its mission to the world. Somewhere along the way, the leaders of the church took us for a ride we were not meant to take. Focused on winning political elections and controlling denominational coffers, the church has drifted away from the original purpose of our existence. We are

A NOTE FROM BILL JONES, TBC COMMUNICATIONS EDITOR:

On April 8, Mitch Randall posted — on his blog — his response to Jon Meacham's *Newsweek* article ("The End of Christian America," April 13 issue). For TBC's *Baptist Reflections*, Dr. Randall has expanded on the thoughts he originally expressed on his blog. You can read his blog regularly — just go to www.northhavenchurch.net; on that page, click **Blogs**, and then click **Mitch's Blog**.

May 20, 2009

HUNGER A MORAL OUTRAGE: HOW WILL WE RESPOND? (reflections on the 2009 Currie-Strickland Lectures in Christian Ethics)

by Bill Jones

TBC Communications Editor; and member, TBC Board of Directors

called to go out into the world and be the presence of Christ.

The church must once again embrace the mission the Lord gave us before he ascended to heaven. It is time to return to the way of Jesus and the first-century church. They are our examples. It is time to love those around us (yes, even those who don't love us) and recapture the missional fervor of the Apostle Paul. It is time to feed the hungry, offer hope to the poor, and empower people with the ever-present Spirit of God. In other words, it is high time we refocus our efforts around the Great Commandment and Great Commission. If the church fails to refocus ... if we continue down the same path we have walked in recent years, we will continue to decline.

Second, I agree with Meacham's claim that America is *not* post-Christian. Many of my brothers and sisters insist that the end of the world is near if they do not win this "battle," as they call it. However, in reality, it's not the world as a whole that's coming to an end — it's only "their world" that's being stopped dead in its tracks. In other words, the church is *not* going to die.

However, the church *is* changing. There's no denying it. Those who have been leading the church for the past 20 to 30 years are losing their influence. The greatest unknown for everyone is *how* the church will change. If we continue to hold to beliefs without basis, we will continue to decline. However, if we reenergize ourselves around a missional strategy that demonstrates the love of Christ to a world that is poor, hungry, sick, and lonely, then we will start seeing a church that is healthy and growing, and meeting the needs of the world around us — today and in the years to come.

Although this kind of talk intimidates many among us, there is a new movement "emerging" within the church. This movement has two interesting characteristics. One, it has the audacity to take Jesus at His word. And two, it is young.

Young adults and students are seriously translating the words of Jesus into their own day-to-day lives and seeking to bring about God's justice in the world. They have a deep passion for working alongside the "least of these," as Jesus called them (*Matthew 25: 31–46*), in a way that is not condescending but empowering and transforming. Yet, the sad truth is that these young adults are not seeking the local church as the venue for carrying out their mission efforts. Instead, they are going through parachurch organizations to fulfill their desire to do missions. They have grown up in churches that talked big but did little. This "emerging" generation is tired of seeing meaningless words substituted for action. They want to be involved in action that is meaningful and intentional.

So, if the church is to be what Jesus has called us to be — the light in the midst of a dark world — we must accept responsibility for the decline in the numbers of those who identify with us. We must fall on our knees to repent of allowing Christ's church to drift away from its calling. We can stop the decline of the church only by being humble and open to change.

The church in America can thrive again if we embrace this new way with humanity and passion. We must stand alongside our global brothers and sisters to participate in the "kingdom" work of which Jesus spoke while He walked among us. The church can adapt and overcome, but we must be willing to listen to the voice of God and bold enough to follow where He directs.

On April 27, we assembled in the Campus Theatre at Howard Payne University in Brownwood for the 2nd annual *Currie-Strickland Distinguished Lectures in Christian Ethics*. These lectures were begun — and have been funded — by Gary and Molli Elliston in honor of David R. Currie, TBC executive director; and in memory of Phil Strickland, longtime director of the BGCT Christian Life Commission.

We were a diverse crowd — preachers and laity, professors and students, young and not-so-young. But we had one thing in common — we wanted to hear something we hadn't heard before, to learn something we didn't know before, to be challenged to do things we hadn't done before.

And so we did, and so we were.

This year's lecturers were Dr. Bill Tillman and Dr. Jim Denison. Dr. Tillman serves Logsdon Seminary as T. B. Maston Professor of Christian Ethics; and Dr. Denison serves the Baptist General Convention of Texas as Theologian in Residence, and the Center for Informed Faith as its founding president.

Dr. Tillman spoke on "*The Bible and Hunger*"; Dr. Denison followed, speaking on "*The Church's Response to Hunger*."

What we heard that day was rich and full — and I cannot do it justice. But, in case you weren't able to make it that day, please let me share with you just a taste of what you missed ... and just a smattering of what you will hear when you watch the videos, which are available — beginning today — on our Web site.

Threading the Lectures

Each speaker began by laying out a theme that he then threaded through the rest of his lecture.

For Dr. Tillman, it was "*Why the Bible and hunger?*" This was an extension of a question — "*Why the Bible?*" — that, he explained, Professor Yandell Woodfin first posed to him during his oral exams at Southwestern Seminary in the spring of 1977.

"That question," Dr. Tillman said, "has never left me." It is a question, he said, that should cause all of us to consider "the Bible's relationship to social issues, spiritual formation, and evangelism ... the basic components of Christian life."

The central theme of Dr. Denison's lecture was "*The church must respond to hunger if it wishes to reach the culture*." He shared what he called "a prophetic moment for me," which occurred last year, when Dr. Randel Everett, BGCT executive director, said to him, "I don't believe I have the right to preach to someone who's hungry. I don't have the right to preach the Gospel to a hungry person."

"Jesus believed that," Dr. Denison said. "That's why Jesus took a small boy's lunch and used it to feed 5,000 families and

would do the same with our lunches today ... Because Jesus understood ... that a hungry body is as much a concern to a heavenly Father as a hungry soul.”

Threading the Bible

Early in his lecture, Dr. Tillman asked, “If the Bible is so important, how do we get ... *into* it?” His answer? “Hunger is one of the best places to start.” He asserted that the Bible emphasis on hunger is woven throughout and that, to miss it, “one nearly has to read *around* the passages.”

Dr. Denison made the same point in his own way. “A response to hunger is required ... in every category of biblical revelation ... the Law, the Prophets ... the Writings ... Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation.” This led to what he cited as his first imperative — “The church must respond to hunger to obey the Scriptures.”

Threading Hunger with the Whole of Life

In approaching ethical issues, Dr. Tillman said, we should keep a balanced focus. “Too much on the Bible side, and the Bible can become one of the idols that the Ten Commandments warned about ... and too much on the issues side ... and a kind of faddish ‘issueism’ ensues.”

Dr. Denison said that Christians’ tendency to separate the spiritual from the secular — labeling the spiritual as “good” and the secular as “evil” — derives from ancient pagan tradition. This theology, he said, teaches that “the real point of life is to purify the soul” while denying the physical. The result, he asserted, is an evangelical tradition that is today concerned more “about preaching to the soul than preaching to the body ... (but) if flesh was inherently evil, how could Jesus have been sinlessly incarnate? Why was it that Jesus always started with physical need and moved from that to spiritual need?”

He then told about a west Dallas ministry that provides for a variety of needs of the “neighbors” in the community who come seeking help — among those needs food, computer skills, job training, résumé-building, and ESL classes.

“Then it almost inevitably happens,” he said, “when the ‘neighbor’ asks the volunteer why they do what they do. And by now the volunteer has earned the right to share the Good News. And so, many come to Christ — out of a ministry that feeds the hungry so it can feed their souls.”

Threading the Bible with Christian Ethics

Dr. Tillman said that he asks his students to critique articles presenting different ethical approaches. His students typically wind up doing little more than “perhaps a good descriptive resaying of the articles.” He challenges them to go beyond that. “What about specific, incremental, subjective, concrete application?” he asks them.

“Because of those puzzled looks I get,” he continued, “I decided to build my own approach. And I call it, simply, ‘Tillman’s Overly Simplified Approach.’ I begin with the Bible – surprise!”

As he explained, Tillman’s Overly Simplified Approach contains five options, or approaches, to doing Christian ethics: *Thou shalt not* — *Thou shalt* — *I must* — *I will* — *I am*.

Dr. Tillman developed this list “by watching how real people interpret and live out Scripture.” The parts, he said, “build on each other, and sometimes they do depend on all parts being in any

particular one.”

He then cited specific Scriptures to show how these approaches are developed in the Bible. When he got to *I must*, he noted the change of subject from *thou* to *I*: “from an external directive that now I ... have heard the directive from God. I’ve got a choice about it — but there’s also an *expectation* of a response that’s hanging there. *I must*.”

But *I will*, he said, brings “perhaps a newly found internal motivational level ... the application of Scripture becomes intentional, willful.”

“Then, finally, *I am* ... the *Leviticus* passage (19:1–2; 9–18) is at the core of ... ‘the holiness code’ of the Old Testament ... ‘I am God, ... and if you’re going to go by my name, you’re going to do these things ... in the spirit, the character that I do them.’ ... And one of those acts of integrity is to make sure people have food.”

Dr. Tillman continued, “I have no idea, specifically, who heard that narrative that Jesus gave, that *Matthew* (25:31–46) wrote down. There most certainly were people there ... who had heard the other discourses ... quite probably, most of those disciples that followed Jesus closely had ... sat in on all of those dining experiences with Jesus ... a whole array of character conversations around food — ethical lessons — *food and ethics*.”

Threading Rightness and Relevance

Dr. Denison noted a dramatic change that has taken place in Western culture — “You and I,” he said, “are called by God to reach a culture that is more skeptical of orthodox Christianity than at any time in Western history ... a culture which no longer sees truth as absolute ... which thinks of truth as personal and subjective.”

He cited the recent American Religious Identification Survey, which found a decline — in those characterizing themselves as Christians — from 86% in 1990 to 76% today, “the largest decline in the history of religious polling in America.”

As for Western Europe, “today in England, four times as many Muslims go to mosque on Friday as go to church on Sunday.”

But, Dr. Denison added, “the good news is that we are today right back where we started. In the 1st century, everything that I said of this culture could be said (*of that one*).”

First-century Christians, he said, operated among a great diversity of faiths — “followers of Zeus and the gods ... disciples of Aristotelianism ... Neoplatonism ... Stoics ... Epicureans ... Cynics ... Skeptics ... all this variety of ideas, Judaism and Christianity only one of them.”

“In the 1st century,” he continued, “the church demonstrated the rightness of its faith by the relevance of its ministry ... unwanted babies were usually birthed and then abandoned. So the church went to the trash heaps each night and rescued the babies, and adopted them as their own ... Christians bought slaves in the marketplace and set them free. In 1st-century Rome — where women had no means of employment outside the home except prostitution, at least most of them — the church would welcome the prostitutes into their families, adopt them as members of their own, and teach them a different craft. First-century Christianity demonstrated the rightness of its faith by the relevance of its ministry — and, by *Acts 17*, they had turned the world upside-

BAPTIST REFLECTIONS

down and birthed the mightiest spiritual movement the world has ever seen. We're back where we started."

"When we feed the hungry, we earn the right to reach the culture."

So Why the Bible and Hunger?

As Dr. Tillman came to the end of his lecture, he stated his conclusion that "'Why the Bible and hunger?' still remains as a question ... Stanley Grenz — in his *Theology of the Community of God* — said, 'The Spirit gave us the Bible *through* inspiration and *for* illumination.' ... put those two words alongside Scripture — (it) can *inspire* us with regard to hunger in this world; it can *illuminate* our hearts and minds."

Then Dr. Tillman added, to Grenz's *inspiration* and *illumination*, two key terms of his own — "integration and implementation ... faith, belief in Scripture, living life, feeding the hungry — they're one and the same ... extending literal food to another, in the name of Jesus, demonstrates an extraordinary understanding of God's message to humanity — of how we should be related to one another and how we should be related to God. Nothing can be so authenticating — to ourselves, to others — as to what it means to live the Christian life."

Making It Personal

Jim Denison closed by relating the story of how he came to faith in Christ, saying that he would never have come to Christ if the church had waited for him to come knock on its door. Instead, the people of the church came knocking on *his* door. As he put it, the church "demonstrated the rightness of their faith by the relevance of their ministry."

He then issued a closing challenge: "The church must respond to hunger if the church wishes to reach this culture. And if we do not wish to reach the culture, we have no reason to be."

So How Will We Respond?

The discipline of Christian Ethics was never intended as an abstract discussion of the great social issues of the day. It is,

rather, a prickly reminder that Christ calls for a personal response from each of us — and that taking up our cross daily means ministering to "the least of these," that we might so minister to Him. So it is with the *Currie-Strickland Lectures*, and Bill Tillman and Jim Denison were more than true to that purpose.

Before the two lecturers made their presentation, Carolyn Strickland — 1st vice president of the BGCT — spoke of her own passion for feeding the hungry, a passion that was shared by her late husband, Phil (longtime director of the BGCT Christian Life Commission, as mentioned earlier). She quoted him as saying, in 1996, "Hunger is not just a historical or political misfortune — it's a moral outrage!" That year, the Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger was birthed.

If we are to respond personally to the outrage of world hunger, the 2009 Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger is a good place to start. This year's theme is *Give Texas Something to Say Grace Over*. Every Texas Baptist is being challenged to give one meal once a month. That's not a lot to ask, is it? There are five ways that you can give to this offering:

- Place a check in your church's offering plate, payable to your church, and with the words "Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger" noted on the Memo line.
- Write a check payable to the Baptist General Convention of Texas; again, write the words "Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger" on the Memo line. Mail to: Christian Life Commission; 333 N. Washington; Dallas, TX 75246.
- Go online to www.bgct.org/worldhunger, click **Donate Online**, and complete the online giving form.
- Include the Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger in your will or estate plan — for more information, call the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation at 1-800-558-8263.
- Recommend that your church include the Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger as a line item in its missions budget.

I urge you to watch the videos of the Lectures (www.txbc.org), listen to God's call, and respond as He leads you.

Annual TBC Breakfast at the New Baptist Covenant Regional Meeting — August 7, 2009 at 7 a.m. Embassy Suites — Norman, OK

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