

Novelist Grisham calls fellow Baptists to respect diversity

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ATLANTA—Best-selling author John Grisham contrasted the Mississippi Baptist church of his childhood with the greater openness of his current congregation, University Baptist Church in Charlottesville, Va., in a rare public address concluding the Jan. 31 evening session of the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant.

In a message titled “Respecting Diversity,” Grisham told of how his childhood church was not open to racial diversity or the inclusion of women in leadership roles. The biblical cases for exclusion were based on literal interpretations of selected scripture passages, he said.

“Even as a child, I didn’t understand this,” he said.

Grisham acknowledged women as “the backbone of the church,” but they were not permitted to hold certain positions of spiritual leadership. He suggested, however, that not all members agreed with such literal interpretations.

“My mother may have played lip service to this submission stuff,” he said,

“but she didn’t really believe it.”

In fact, he said, even those who found biblical justification for racial segregation and male dominance had limits to their insistence on literal interpretation.

“When Paul told Timothy to have a little wine...,” Grisham said to laughter and applause.

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“Well, some things were not so literal. There was wiggle room after all.”

In choosing a church today, Grisham said, he expects more openness to diversity.

“If there is a hint of discrimination,” he said, “my wife would go somewhere else and take me with her.”

Grisham said the move toward openness has not occurred in all Baptist churches.

“Sadly, in many ways and in many places that church still exists today,” he said.

Grisham said the name Baptist is not widely respected in many circles because it is associated with exclusion.

“The reason is because, for so long, so many Baptists have worked so hard to exclude so many.”

Clearly alluding to but not naming the Southern Baptist Convention, which is not formally participating in the historic Atlanta gathering, Grisham said the “largest Baptist convention” affirms biblical inerrancy and gets most of the attention.

Grisham, who opened the address by telling of his frustration in trying to define and defend his Baptist faith to a reporter in New York City during a book tour, concluded with three suggestions.

To get off the defensive and to restore the good name, he said, Baptists should first truly respect diversity.

“God made all of us, loves us equally and expects us to love each other equally without respect to gender, race, sexual orientation or other religions,” he said.

Second, he said, the church must stay out of politics.

“As a church, our mission is to serve God through teaching, preaching and serving others,” he said. “When the church gets involved in politics, it

alienates many of the very people we are called to serve, and those who push politics will pay a price.”

Third, Grisham urged fellow Baptists to spend as much time out on the streets in ministry as in the church.

“Jesus preached more and taught more about helping the poor and the sick and the hungry than he did about heaven and hell,” he said. “Shouldn’t that tell us something?”

Christians are needed by the sick, the homeless, neglected seniors, scarred war veterans, impoverished children, refugees, immigrants and prisoners, Grisham said.

“We cannot pick and choose,” he said. “We need to get on with the business of serving others.”

Before Grisham’s address, Julie Pennington-Russell preached on “The Bible Speaks about Respecting Diversity” and former Baylor University football coach Grant Teaff gave a testimony. Teaff, now executive director of the American Football Coaches Association, is a member of First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas.

“We never see Jesus until we see him in every face,” said Pennington-Russell, who moved to the First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., from Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, last year.

Noting the broad racial, economic, geographic, cultural and theological differences present, Pennington-Russell said, “We are practicing the Baptist tradition of respecting each other’s differences.”

“Respectfulness” is a good gift, she affirmed, but then asked, “Is this really the gift we came so far to give this week?”

Respect alone “has no power to change something that is broken between

you and me," she said. "Only love can do that."

Respectfulness is not a bad gift, "but it runs out of steam at the 50-yard line," she said.

"But love, like Forrest Gump, runs all the way down the field, through the end zone and into the parking lot."

We have the ability to be respectful of others while still holding them at arm's length, Pennington-Russell said, but "love doesn't let us get away with that."

"Jesus is the face of love," she said, the one "who showed us what the power of real love could do through us in this world."

Jesus came reaching out to us, "and in light of such a love, maybe it's time for you and me to do some reaching, too," she said, challenging participants to think of someone they have difficulty loving.

"Let love take you by the hand and lead you like a child to a new way of seeing that brother or sister, and look for Jesus in the face of that person," she said.

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