

Update2: Baylor disunity leads to Lilley's firing

July 24, 2008

Baylor University President John Lilley has been fired for failing to “bring the Baylor family together,” reported Howard Batson, chairman of the university’s board of regents.

Regents voted to remove Lilley from office, effective immediately, during their summer meeting July 24. The vote was taken by secret ballot, and the vote total was not announced to the board, Batson said.

Batson cited Lilley’s inability to unite Baylor’s various constituencies at least nine times in a 20-minute national teleconference with reporters and several times in an interview with the Baptist Standard shortly after the regents’ vote.

Lilley became Baylor’s president in January 2006, at a time when Baylor’s constituency had divided over the administration of the previous president, Robert Sloan, and particularly Baylor 2012, a decade-long strategy plan.

For two and half years, Lilley worked to strengthen Baylor but could not foster unity, Batson said.

“The board really thinks Baylor needs a new president who can bring together and unify the various constituencies of the university,” he said. “We felt like Dr. Lilley came at a very difficult time in the history of Baylor, and we acknowledge that. We do appreciate his service a great deal.”

Lilley could have stayed longer—possibly until his contract ends in 2010—if he had agreed to participate in a transitional process, Batson said.

Under terms of the proposed transition, Batson would have been

authorized to appoint a presidential search committee “sometime before the end of 2008,” he said. Lilley would have remained in office until his successor was selected.

“This could take from months to years,” Batson noted. “With John in place, we could take more time to do a thorough search. We probably saw John serving out much, if not all, of his contract. But he didn’t want to do it under those terms. ...

“The reality was we felt unless he was willing to transition, he would not have the support of various constituents of the Baptist family and move the university in the successful way it is moving. ...

“He didn’t want to work under those conditions. The board felt it could have worked very well, but he did not, and we respect his reasons.”

Although tensions with faculty flared this spring, when Lilley’s administration initially denied tenure to 12 of 30 faculty candidates, Batson said no single factor led to the regents’ decision to dismiss him.

“There’s no denying we had the tenure situation ... and the branding situation (Lilley’s initial decision to get rid of the popular “interlocking BU” logo). Perhaps the process was not as swift as some of us had hoped in bringing the Baylor family together,” he said. “I don’t know that there was any one particular relationship that caused the difficulty. ... We did not see the Baylor family coming together as we envisioned.”

In an e-mailed statement, Lilley expressed his disagreement with the regents’ decision.

“Two and a half years ago, I was invited unanimously by the board of regents to come to Baylor,” Lilley said. “I did not come to Baylor to advance my career. Gerrie (his wife) and I were reluctant but finally were persuaded to come because of the unanimous vote and the promised prayers of the

regents.

“We felt that we could help to heal the wounded hearts left in the wake of the conflict that preceded us. Despite the board’s unanimous vote, it became clear immediately that the Baylor board of regents reflected some of the deepest divisions in the Baylor family.”

Lilley expressed satisfaction with the work he and his team accomplished during his tenure.

“I am proud of the work my colleagues and I have done to bring the Baylor family together and to help the university achieve the ambitious goals set forth in our mission and vision 2012, documented in our annual report just presented to the regents,” he said.

“I deeply regret the action of the board, and I do not believe that it reflects the best interests of Baylor University.”

In both interviews, Batson affirmed what he called Lilley’s “significant accomplishments” achieved during the past two and a half years. They included:

- Baylor’s highest-ever ranking by U.S. News & World Report—75th—among national doctoral-granting universities, an increase of six places.
- Attracting a “large and diverse student body,” including last fall’s enrollment of 14,174, the university’s second-highest total.
- Record endowment, “now crossing the billion-dollar mark.”
- A record 402 students enrolled in Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary, including “more students interested in ministering in the local church.”
- Athletic successes, including the men’s basketball team’s return to the

NCAA tournament, the women's basketball team's continual appearance in the tournament, men's and women's tennis teams' Big 12 championships and anticipation of an exciting football season under a new head coach, Art Briles.

- Classification as a university with “highest research activity” by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Extensive construction on campus, including the \$42 million Brooks Village residential center and the \$30 million football training/practice complex.

“John has left Baylor better than he found it. John had a passion for the research element of (Baylor) 2012,” Batson said. “We are appreciative of his service and love for the university.”

The regents selected one of their own, Harold Cunningham, as acting president with “full authority” to lead until an interim president is chosen, Batson said.

Cunningham is immediate past chairman of the Baylor regents and served as Baylor vice president twice—for special projects and for finance and administration.

“Harold has a track record of proven leadership and is well respected within the Baylor family,” Batson said. “Harold is the perfect person to do this.”

Acting president is not the same thing as interim president, Batson stressed, noting the regents will begin a process to designate the interim president. That person will not be a candidate for the presidency, he pledged.

After the interim is chosen, the regents will begin a search for the next

president, he said.

Despite Lilley's firing and his predecessor's departure under a cloud of controversy, the regents do not expect difficulty "drawing top talent to Baylor," Batson said, noting, "We will be open-minded and do an international search."

The regents want someone with strong leadership skills and academic background, as well as ability to build consensus, he said.

"We want a unifier of the Baylor family; that's always a good thing," he said, adding, "Connections to the Baptist family are a must."

"The largest mandate is we need a new president who will listen to all the voices of the Baylor family and bring us together under the vision of 2012," Batson said.

A reporter noted many people think the regents themselves—or at least some of the regents—are a significant part of the ongoing conflict at Baylor and asked Batson what the regents will do to restore trust among the "Baylor family."

"Actually, I think the board of regents is more unified than I've seen it in a long time," Batson said. "We may not agree about every motion, but I see the board functioning in a healthy fashion. ... At the end of the day, we can walk out of our meetings as a unified, functioning board."

Lilley's "dedication and service to Baylor" are appreciated, said Jeff Kilgore, vice president and CEO of the Baylor Alumni Association. "He is a distinguished alumni and will always have a home with his alumni association."

Lilley inherited a "highly sensitive and emotionally charged campus—and alumni/donor base—probably without being fully equipped with an

adequate understanding of our experience in Baylor's recent history," Kilgore observed. "Having been away so long, I'm sure it would have been extremely difficult on anyone to get an in-depth understanding of the Baylor family and its unique structure. ..."

"While John made himself very accessible to many of the various constituent groups, he often remained vigilant to his own opinions," Kilgore added. "In a delicate time such as this for Baylor, it is not only important to reach out for input, but for that input to have impact on decisions and the direction Baylor heads.

"It's become evident how essential inclusiveness and collective buy-in are to the success of a private academic institution and alumni relations."

Kilgore noted Lilly was "the single conduit of information between regents, faculty and alumni," adding that task "probably proved to be too much for any one person and probably not the most effective model moving Baylor forward."

Although the alumni association often has been at odds with the regents in recent years, Kilgore extended an olive branch.

"We understand what a difficult and critical process it is to determine the university's leadership and to take measures to move Baylor forward, and our association of alumni and donors stands ready to provide support in any possible way," he said. "Our regents are entrusted with much, and we are all looking toward their leadership and a process that fosters inclusion and input from faculty, staff, alumni and other constituent groups.

"That input across the family is always welcomed and appreciated during times such as these."

Baylor is one of nine universities affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and one of 27 BGCT agencies and institutions overall.

One of Lilley's fellow institutional leaders, Ken Hall of Buckner International, expressed both pride and grief regarding Baylor.

"Baylor overall is a great university," Hall said. "I'm particularly proud of the university as it is today. As a Texas Baptist, I'm very proud. But I'm also extremely grieved that, for the past several years at the board and the highest levels of administration, there continues to be disunity."

Hall noted he does not know the specific facts of the regents' decision to fire Lilley but said he is praying for "this great flagship ministry of our Baptist General Convention of Texas."

"I am personally praying that during this time of transition, the current leadership—both volunteers and paid leaders—and the various constituencies will find in their hearts a way to get together and represent what it truly means to be a Christian university.

"They need to genuinely present a Christian approach to divisiveness and difficulty. We see it in our churches, our denomination and in our institutions too often. We're not representing our Lord best when people see us fighting."

Matt Cordon, a Baylor Law School professor and president of the Faculty Senate, could not be reached for comment.

Hiding in plain sight

July 24, 2008

The arrest of former Bosnian Serb despot [Radovan Karadzic](#) has topped

summer beach novels in doling out drama and intrigue. It also poses an interesting question.

Karadzic has been a fugitive since 1995, when the [International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia](#) indicted him for war crimes. He directed the [Siege of Sarajevo](#) and is believed to have ordered the [Srebrenica massacre](#) and numerous other massacres across Bosnia. At his command, international justice officials believe, tens of thousands of non-Serbs—primarily Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats—were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands lost their homes, and many thousands more wound up in concentration camps.

The carnage catapulted Karadzic to the ranks of Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein in the pantheon of evil dictators. (Not Adolf Hitler; nobody's down there with Hitler.)

Arrested in the last place you'd look

But the plot twist in the Karadzic saga spun out this Monday, July 21, when he was [arrested](#) in Belgrade, Serbia, living in plain sight. Sounds like a turn in a Robert Ludlum or David Baldacci novel.

[The New York Times](#) noted Karadzic didn't hide "in a distant monastery or a dark cave," but "behind an enormous beard, white ponytailed hair topped with an odd black tuft, and a new life so at odds with his myth as to deflect suspicion."

So *that's* who the old guy is

For years, Karadzic had been presenting himself as "Dr. Dragan Dabic," a psychiatrist who practiced alternative medicine in a Serbian clinic. He looked more like a funky [Santa](#) or a pudgy [Albus Dumbledore](#) than the mastermind of ethnic cleansing.

People who knew him well and/or followed his case closely said they wouldn't have recognized him. "If I passed him on the street, I don't think I would have looked twice," acknowledged Dejan Anastasijevic, a reporter who specialized in war crimes and followed his case closely for [Vreme](#), a political weekly in Belgrade. Even Karadzic's landlord didn't know his tenant was one of the world's most-wanted fugitives.

Politicians and pundits have speculated how this could happen. How could such a familiar persona "hide" under the noses of authorities for so long? Some have speculated the Serbian government knew Karadzic's whereabouts but turned a blind eye until they yielded to pressure to capture him so they can enter the European Union.

Whatever. The fact is one of the world's most infamous tyrants went incognito for years. Right in front of the people who supposedly knew him best.

Who does this remind you of?

So, here's the question: Don't Christians do this all the time?

If we claim our true identity, then we bear the unmistakable marks of Christ. If we live out who we truly are, then we plainly, visibly—recognizably—present the presence of Christ wherever we go.

But how many of us live at least part of our lives incognito? People who interact with us regularly and believe they know us well don't have a clue about our identity as a believer in Jesus Christ? We don't wear a ponytail, long beard and old-coot glasses, but we present the parts of our personalities that are thoroughly secular, areligious and very unlike the nature to which Christ has called us.

Reminds me of the old evangelists' line: If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Eat breakfast, help Brits set record

July 24, 2008

OK, guys: How'd you like to eat breakfast, enjoy friends, help your British brothers, strengthen the global Baptist movement and break a world record—all at the same time?

Mark your calendar for Saturday, Oct. 11, and set your mouth for bacon and eggs, biscuits and gravy, pancakes and sausage or just about whatever will draw a crowd of men to your church. Donuts might work, but don't count on it.

British Baptist connection

The idea comes from a long-distance friend of mine, [Phil Creighton](#) , who used to be an editor for [The Baptist Times](#) , a terrific newspaper and website affiliated with the [Baptist Union of Great Britain](#) . We worked alongside of each other when the [Baptist World Alliance](#) met in Birmingham, England, a few summers ago. Now Phil is an editor with a secular newspaper, the [Reading Evening Post](#) .

Phil sent me an e-mail and made me an offer I just couldn't refuse.

"Cheeky favour"

"Marv, I'm actually emailing you a cheeky favour," Phil wrote. (Don't you just love how the Brits express themselves? "Cheeky favour." Not exactly the way somebody from, say, Texas, would pose a proposition.)

"I'm involved with the [Baptist Men's Movement](#) in the UK, next year becoming its youngest-ever president," Phil added. "As part of an attempt to help churches with their men's ministries and to put BMM back on the map, we're launching a record-breaking attempt called the [Bigger Breakfast](#) .

"The idea is simple: On Saturday, October 11, churches host a men's breakfast—in their homes, churches, cafes ... wherever. It doesn't matter. If we can get more than 18,943 men taking part, we'll beat a world record set by Texan Cowboys back in 2001. So, Texan Baptists can help make a new record, thus keeping it in Texas!"

There you have it, an invitation to breakfast from jolly old England.

"We'd love it if Texan Baptist churches would be willing to sign up too!" Phil said. "Churches are free to charge what they want to for hosting their breakfast, we just need to churches to register so that we can tally numbers."

Sign up, or it doesn't count

Of course, the BMM fellows need us [register](#) so they can verify their totals and set the record. To do that, you need to go to the Bigger Breakfast website.

Looks like this is a Baptist male-only deal that has nothing to do with theology. (Refreshing, in a back-handed way, huh?) They didn't set the world-record rules. They're just trying to break them.

Let's help.

Can we agree to disagree?

July 24, 2008

For several days now, I've been carrying a note I wrote to myself. It says: "100% agreement not mandatory."

I have no idea when I put down those words. The piece of paper is getting pretty ragged on the edges, snug as it is in my money clip with the George Washingtons, Abraham Lincolns and the occasional Andrew Jackson. So, I've obviously been toting it around for awhile, reading the message to myself every day.

But I know why I wrote that note. I'm bone tired of the notion people have to be in complete agreement or else they're adversaries.

Zero to furious

Have you experienced this attitude? You're involved in a discussion, and you disagree, and the person you're talking to goes from zero to furious in about 0.046 seconds. It's not like you attacked this person or said bad things about his mother. You just happened to disagree. And now you're the enemy.

We probably see more of this behavior in years that are divisible by four. Presidential elections seem to bring that out in people. Predispositions toward partisanship and polarity. You're not voting the way I will? Well, you're the enemy.

Beyond election-year politics, it seems to reflect a broader tilt toward incivility. When we think clearly about disagreement, we recognize that the "other" has reasons for believing. And when we think humbly about disagreement, we concede that even we may be wrong.

They proved my point

Unfortunately, clarity and humility don't surface that often, particularly in American public discourse. Once, I illustrated this by describing the patterns of rhetoric and the belittle-to-win-an-argument tactics I hear on talk radio. Maybe I called it the "Rush Limbaughization of America." So, because I disagreed with some folks about the efficacy of talk radio and the relative contributions of radio hosts, some folks got really mad. Touché.

Sadly, I see this in the church. The most glaring example is the Southern Baptist Convention and a series of my-way-or-the-highway presidential elections. People who didn't agree 100 percent with the folks who won those elections found themselves left out.

That's not the only example, of course. Members of congregations practice this kind of thinking all the time. Don't believe it? Bring up the subject of worship music, and you'll get an earful from partisans of "traditional" and "contemporary." Sometimes, you'd think Jesus only likes one kind of music—never mind that neither the organ nor the guitar were invented when Jesus preached.

OK, I'm guilty, too

Full disclosure: My wife, Joanna, will vouch that I tilt this way, too. We're fixing dinner and talking about stuff and she disagrees. If I don't watch it, I'm raising my voice, as if practically shouting will force her to see the pure light of my reasoning. "I disagree, but you don't have to get mad about it," she says. And she's right.

Tragedy of anger

The tragedy of resorting to anger when we disagree manifests itself several ways:

- Anger prevents us from learning important lessons.

Baptists, of all people, ought to know this. We talk about “the priesthood of all believers” and affirm every individual has the privilege and responsibility to seek wisdom directly from God. The obvious corollary to this is that no individual is the sole owner and arbiter of all wisdom. If we listen instead of shout, if we stay calm and don’t get hot, we can reason and glean knowledge and wisdom from each other. (And even when we still disagree, we benefit from understanding why we disagree and why the other person thinks as she does.)

- When we practice arrogance and refuse to listen, we dishonor the presence of Christ in others.

When we get hot and take a hard line solely to win an argument, we treat the other person as an object, not a child of God. But when we respond with dignity and respect—even if, or especially when, we don’t agree—we affirm God’s hand in creating and guiding the other person.

- When we treat our positions as absolute, we ignore the complexity and ambiguity of creation.

People who disagree with us aren’t necessarily totally wrong, and their disagreement doesn’t make them totally bad. Sometimes, we forget this. In so doing, we overlook the richness and diversity of humanity, which is a blessing from God.

You can think of other examples. But here’s the deal: “100% agreement not mandatory.” In fact, healthy, open, vibrant disagreement can be a blessing.

Top cities, but what about churches?

July 24, 2008

Thirteen Texas communities have made CNNMoney.com 's list of "America's best small cities."

They got the "cities" part right, but I'm not sure I'd agree with their definition of "small." Here's the Texas portion of the list by rank and population:

- 7 [Round Rock](#) 92,300
- 14 [McKinney](#) 107,500
- 15 [Carrollton](#) 121,600
- 18 [Richardson](#) 99,800
- 20 [Allen](#) 73,200
- 34 [Euless](#) 52,000
- 38 [Frisco](#) 80,400
- 56 [Missouri City](#) 73,600
- 57 [Denton](#) 109,500
- 64 [Sugar Land](#) 79,900
- 67 [Garland](#) 217,900
- 69 [Lewisville](#) 94,500
- 96 [Grand Prairie](#) 153,800

If you grew up in a town with about 7,500 people, even Euless—popping in with the smallest population, 52,000—seems pretty big. But if you give credit for being a small "city," then OK.

Define "small"

But here's the deal. None of these cities is free-standing. Denton and

Round Rock are closest, but these days, only the locals easily recognize the dividing lines between these communities and the mammoth cities that have grown out to meet them.

Of the 13 Texas cities on Money's list, 10 are part of the Dallas-Fort Worth "Metroplex." Last I heard, about 5 million of your closest friends and neighbors live there. Two are close to Houston, which is so big it gives me a headache thinking about those numbers. And Texas Top Town, Round Rock isn't even the outer edge of greater Austin anymore.

Don't think I'm knocking the list. Joanna and I raised our daughters in Lewisville, and I still call it my hometown. (Hey, [Fighting Farmers](#) !) These are great places to live and, particularly, to raise a family.

How to choose?

If you study the Money report, you'll see the [criteria](#) for making the grade—finances, housing, education, "quality of life," leisure and culture, weather, health, and the kind of people who would be your neighbors.

Nothing surprising there. But all this small-city ranking got me to thinking about (OK, you saw this coming) churches. If you were going to rank the quality of congregations, what criteria would you use?

In [The Purpose Driven Church](#) , Rick Warren focuses on fellowship, discipleship, worship, ministry and evangelism. These qualities comprise the template for building and strengthening congregations around the globe.

In my travels, I've found myself attracted to churches because of their spirit. Doesn't matter if they're large or small, rural or urban, rich or poor. A friend once described Texas churches as filled with folks "who would take on hell with a water pistol." That's what I'm talking about—warmth, excitement, anticipation, friendliness and optimism based on their

confidence that God wants to do something with and through them. When a church has that spirit, Rick's five focuses pretty much take care of themselves.

Farewell, friend Randall

July 24, 2008

Randall O'Brien's new job translates into happy news for Carson-Newman University and sad news for Baylor University and Texas Baptists.

[Carson-Newman](#) just named O'Brien its 22nd president. He will begin his transition Aug. 1 and take the helm of the Tennessee Baptist Convention-affiliated school Jan. 1.

O'Brien has been executive vice president and provost at [Baylor](#) for three years and has served at Baylor 17 years. Before becoming Baylor's chief academic officer, O'Brien taught religion, and he was a favorite among students. He also has served 15 Texas Baptist churches as interim pastor. (To see a story about his election at Carson-Newman, click [here](#) .)

O'Brien was a brilliant choice for Carson-Newman, which had become embroiled in [turmoil](#) during the administration of its previous president, James Netherton.

O'Brien is one of the most genuinely likable Baptists God ever created. In an often-fractious environment, O'Brien managed to make friends and build confidence on practically every branch of the "Baylor family" tree. I've been in conversations with folks who held vastly different perspectives on all that has transpired at Baylor in recent years, but one of their key points of

agreement was that Randall O'Brien's teaching and leadership have been gifts to Baylor.

His preaching and leadership also have been gifts to Texas Baptists. Besides that, he's been an encourager and friend to a great host of folks who have been blessed to know him.

And with O'Brien, it's always been a package deal. His wife, Kay, has taught in the Baylor School of Social work and strengthened not only Baylor but churches and friends across the state.

They will be missed.

Of course, the O'Briens' departure provides a measure of historical balance. Texas would not have become Texas if a host of Tennesseans had not migrated here 170 or so years ago. Maybe it's only fair that we send a couple of our best back to help a historically fine Tennessee Baptist school

Where to look for generosity

July 24, 2008

What's your favorite human trait?

Hard to answer, huh? Integrity, compassion, humor, wisdom, humility, transparency and, of course, love are some of my favorites.

But generosity ought to be at or near the top of anybody's list. I like generous people. Not because they give me things. (Sometimes, that's

downright uncomfortable.) But because generosity says so much about a person. I've never known a generous person who wasn't kind. Generous people usually strike me as being compassionate and honest, as well as humble and respectful. You could make a strong case that generosity is the bellwether of numerous virtues. If you're generous, the others come with the package. If you're miserly, don't look for much else.

If you want to meet generous people, your best bet is to head to Birmingham, Ala., according to a new survey by the [Tijeras Foundation](#) . The foundation's vision is to create "better enabled, more elevated and encouraged Christian organizations; more personal lives enriched by God's grace; increased evidence of God being honored in the name of Jesus Christ within our society."

Top and bottom

Birmingham is the most generous city in America. Its residents donate 3.6 percent of their income to charity. Memphis, Tenn., came in second, at 3.4 percent, and Columbia, S.C., ranked third, at 3.2 percent.

Sadly, Texas didn't place any cities in the [top 10](#) of the 60 communities studied nationwide. But we got two in the bottom 10. San Antonio came in dead last, with residents contributing only 1.7 percent of income to charity. Austin came in five places better, tied with Boston, Honolulu, and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., at 2.0 percent.

What makes for generosity?

Tijeras Foundation staffers told the [Birmingham News](#) four factors indicate generosity: Generous communities have a higher percentage of evangelical Christians, married couples, entrepreneurs and African-Americans.

You'd think Texas, with all its Baptists and other conservative Christians, can-do spirit and emphasis on traditional families, would produce at least

one or two cities that cracked the top 10 and would steer clear of the bottom 10. But as reaction to my recent [blog on tithing](#) showed, we're not of one mind about what God expects of Christians.

Still, if Baptists took tithing and storehouse giving seriously, then our communities would be marked by generosity. And we'd make a greater difference in our culture.

The REAL buckle of the Bible Belt

July 24, 2008

Superlatives come naturally to Texans. We like to talk about being the biggest and the best, the most and the greatest.

Reminds me of the old story about the boy from Back East who came out here to visit his cousin. All the way from the airport, the Texas side of the family bragged about the vastness of the Lone Star State and its superiority to everything else. When they finally arrived at the West Texas farmhouse, the visitor asked for directions to the bathroom. He found what he believed to be the right room, couldn't find the light switch and inadvertently fell into the indoor swimming pool. Trailing pools of water down the hall, he admitted his new-found appreciation for the grandeur of Texas: "I guess everything really is bigger and better in Texas. That's the most awesome bathtub I've ever seen."

OK, bad joke. But you've got to admit, Texans like to brag.

That buckle feels off-center

That's probably why Christians—especially Baptists—out here historically have claimed Texas is the buckle of the Bible Belt. We've always figured we're holier than y'all.

Well, the latest poll produced by the [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#) debunks that notion. The [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#) clearly indicates that designation goes to ... (drumroll, please) ... [Mississippi](#) .

Yep, that's right. We're not even the notch on the belt next to the buckle. In fact, Texas ranks down on the list on most categories of quantifiable religiosity. If you're getting a headache, take two aspirin, lie down and read a few chapters of Deuteronomy out of your King James Bible.

Mississippi tops the list of six of eight categories of conservative religious belief. In fact, the only time it comes in second place, Utah wins, and most Texans and [Mississippians](#) would agree the Mormons in Utah aren't exactly talking about the same thing when they answer the Pew people's questions.

Test of faith

Here's your [survey](#) :

1. Believes in God—absolutely certain. Mississippi, 91 percent; Texas, 77 percent.
2. Religion is “very important” in one's life. Mississippi, 82; Texas, 67.
3. Attends religious services at least once a week. Mississippi, 60; Texas 47.
4. Prays at least once a day. Mississippi, 77; Texas, 66.
5. Prays and receives answers to prayer at least once a month. Ol' Miss, 46; Texas, 39.
6. The word of God is literally true, word for word. Mississippi, 64; Texas, 42.

7. There is only one true way of interpreting their religion. Utah, 46; Mississippi, 39; Texas, 30.

8. Their religion is the one, true faith, leading to eternal life. Utah, 50; Mississippi, 35; Texas, 28.

Of course, questions of orthodoxy aren't ultimate tests of faithfulness. Jesus said, "... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Jesus' brother James advised, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27).

Another poll perspective

By the way, the latest Baptist Standard [editorial](#) takes a look at why so many Americans, including Baptists, agreed with this statement: "Many religions can lead to eternal life."

Somber, yet hopeful, Memphis afternoon

July 24, 2008

"That was somber," my friend Brent said as we stepped out of the soft lighting of the [National Civil Rights Museum](#) into the harsh sunlight of a summer afternoon in Memphis.

For about two hours, I'd felt as if a strong hand had been planted in the small of my back, pressing me toward milestones I shouldn't miss. When I

preferred to turn away, I felt as if firm hands turned my head to fix my gaze upon signposts of shame as well as signals of strength.

Brent (who helps people every day as director of housing for [St. Jude Children's Research Hospital](#)) makes me laugh. When our children were very young, we attended the same church in Nashville and became tight friends. Even though we've both moved away, we've stayed close. And when we're together, we usually find ways to have fun. Usually.

But that Saturday, Brent let me choose where to go sight-seeing in [Memphis](#) , his hometown. Maybe because we recently remembered the 40th anniversary of [Martin Luther King](#) 's assassination. Maybe because I'd just heard [Fred Shuttlesworth](#) , one of Dr. King's lieutenants in the battle for civil rights. Maybe because this election year promises to reconfigure race in America. I can't tell you why, but I chose the Civil Rights Museum over [Graceland](#) and [Sun Records](#) .

So, we turned away from rock 'n roll toward racial reconciliation. We chose King over [Elvis](#) .

Brent and I stood out in the museum crowd. Two of very few white faces in a sea of black.

I understand why every American of color would want to visit the Civil Rights Museum. It tells the story of the long, gallant, heart-breaking, courageous, violent, impassioned, noble, poignant, improbable, inexorable, valiant march from slavery to full rights at U.S. citizens.

The first panel points all the way back to 1619, when English traders began capturing Africans, shipping them to America and selling them as slaves. The last stop looks in on the very [Lorraine Hotel](#) room where King spent his last night on earth and out to the balcony where a sniper's bullet ended his life.

In between, the museum tells the tale of a monumental struggle. In a better world, emancipation would have been the end of it, but emancipation marks only the beginning. Panel after panel details the slow crawl toward equality—from “separate but equal,” to integration and boycotts, Freedom Riders and sit-ins, marches on Washington and across Alabama.

Brent got it right. Somber. No person with a shred of compassion could read words of hope and desperation and resolve without being moved. No person with an inch of empathy could stand mere feet from where King last stood and not breathe the air of longing—not just for freedom, but for equality and respect.

I understand why every American of color would want to visit the Civil Rights Museum. And I wish every white American would go there, and simply feel. Somber. Yet hopeful.

Monday musings: The importance of a name

July 24, 2008

The swift boat veterans want their good name back.

Four years ago, “swift boat” floated into the American lexicon as a synonym for political attack. Whether you voted for or against John Kerry for president, you most likely came to associate [“swiftboating”](#) with an [ad campaign](#) to discredit Kerry’s military service in Vietnam and, more to the point at the time, to bring down his political campaign.

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, funded in large part by T. Boone Pickens, came out against Kerry. Their ad campaign led Americans to think about hardball politics, not heroic defense of democracy, when they hear “swift boat.” And now, political pundits are wondering when the “swiftboating” of ‘08 is going to begin. Just like the “-gate” in “Watergate,” the term has taken a political life of its own.

But some Vietnam vets who served on those boats are trying to change all that. “Swift boat veterans—especially those who had nothing to do with the group that attacked Senator John Kerry’s military record in the 2004 election—want their good name back, and the good names of the men not lucky enough to come home alive,” the *New York Times* [reported](#) this morning.

“You would not hear the word ‘swift boat’ and think of people that served their country and fought in Vietnam,” Jim Newell, who spent a year as an officer in charge of one of the small Navy vessels, told the *Times*’ Kate Zernike. “You think about someone who was involved in a political attack on a member of a different party. It just comes across as negative. Everyone who is associated with a swift boat is involved in political chicanery.”

“It’s completely inappropriate,” Michael Bernique, a highly regarded swift boat driver added. “The word should connote service with honor, which is what was conducted. Anything that demeans that honor is shameful.”

Although I was born about three years too late to serve in Vietnam, I resonate with their feelings. This has nothing to do with John Kerry or swift boats, but with a couple of other names that mark my own identity. I’m talking about “Christian” and “Baptist.”

Too often, these labels of faith carry baggage into the marketplace of ideas. People who drop the names “Christian” and/or “Baptist” fail to live up to

the ideals of Christ and the heritage of Baptists. Their words and actions lead people away from Christ and in the opposite direction of Baptist churches because people see them and think, “If that’s what being a Christian is like, I don’t want any part of it” or, “Why would anyone want to associate with Baptists like that?”

Who knows whether the swift boat veterans will succeed in reinterpreting their label from “political dirty tricks” to “ honorable military service?”

But the question for each of us who happens to be Christian and possibly Baptist carries even greater consequences: Will you live a winsome, compassionate, grace-filled life so that others will want to know Christ because of you?

Friday favorite: Scientist Francis Collins

July 24, 2008

For several years, [Francis Collins](#) has perched high on my most-admired-people list.

World-class smart

Dr. Collins is one of the world’s most respected scientists. He’s the director of the [National Human Genome Research Institute](#) . In that role, he envisioned and led the [Human Genome Project](#) , which mapped and sequenced the 3 billion paired chemical components that comprise human [DNA](#) . Many scientists and historians have called the Human Genome

Project the most significant scientific achievement of our time, and considering the advance of scientific knowledge in the past century, that would make it the greatest scientific feat in history.

The goal of the Human Genome Project is to improve health. It gives physicians and medical researchers an almost-infinite array of possibilities for exploring the causes and cures of illness. For many decades, the medical community will draw upon the discoveries made by Francis Collins and his colleagues.

Paradox-jumper

But Collins also is a [Christian believer](#) . He's up-front about his faith in a vocation or discipline typically thought to be secular, even atheistic. (Collins says that's not necessarily so. He claims at least 40 percent of scientists also are Christians.) All his notoriety associated with the Human Genome Project has provided him with a powerful platform to proclaim his faith. And proclaim he has.

I guess what I particularly appreciate about Collins' stand for trusting his faith while working in science is that he jumps across a paradox that causes so many folks—scientists and believers alike—to stumble. Conventional wisdom seems to say you cannot reconcile the hypotheses and theories of science with the beliefs and claims of faith.

But that just doesn't make sense. As my pastor/daddy first told me when I encountered scientific theories in junior high: "Science attempts to explain what and how. The Bible (and our faith) tells us Who and why." That's always seemed both logical and consistent with the majesty and sovereignty of God.

So, I've been affirmed and relieved to realize one of the world's most eminent scientists feels that way, too. He's written a book about his perspectives on science and faith, [The Language of God: A Scientist](#)

[Presents Evidence for Belief.](#)

Articulate, insightful

One of the best blessings of this week occurred this morning, when Ari Shapiro interviewed Dr. Collins on National Public Radio. Follow this [link](#) , and you can listen to their discussion (and maybe, by the time you read this, a transcript will be available, too).

As he approaches retirement this summer, Collins talks about a range of issues. The most intriguing was how he contrasted the historic isolationist approach to scientific research with the results that were possible when a vast team of scientists worked on a project together. They never could've decoded DNA without working as a team, and now other scientists are seeing the value of that approach to other scientific conundrums.

Of course, that resonated with someone who's always advocated cooperation among Christians. If scientists can sequence 3 billion parts of the DNA strand by working together, could Christians reach 7 billion people with the gospel, wipe out hunger, erase illiteracy and "turn the world upside down" if we cooperated better?

Funny & faithful

While I was hunting down the link to Collins' NPR interview, I ran across his appearance on [The Colbert Report](#) . Check it out; he's not only smart, but also funny, great-spirited and an attractive Christian out in the "real world."

Enjoy; it's Friday.

Joy trumps death

July 24, 2008

How do people face death without a relationship with Jesus Christ? And how can unbelievers comprehend the joy, peace and encouragement Christians sense at the memorial service of a saint?

I attended the funeral for Sharon Epps-Bailey, known to most of her family and many friends as Shell. Although I never knew Shell, I had prayed for her, because [Oscar Epps](#) is a friend of mine, and he asked me to. But sitting in her service, I felt a kindred spirit with her and realized that, someday, we will be friends in heaven. And she'll make me laugh.

Shell and Oscar enjoyed a dual relationship. She was his big sister. But he was her pastor at [Community Missionary Baptist Church](#) in DeSoto, Texas.

Hundreds of family, friends, church members and co-workers packed the congregation's sanctuary for her memorial service June 25. That room became the epicenter of hope, the ground zero of promise, the calm eye of the hurricane of disease that blew across Shell's life and impacted so many people who loved her.

She struggled with sickness four years. The battle was long and hard. The death of her body provided sweet release for her soul.

A better place

Her family and friends know that. That's why her memorial service was a joyful celebration. As speaker after speaker affirmed, Shell doesn't suffer anymore. She's in a better place than she was last week.

Shell's mother, Pearl Epps, stood before the crowd and gratefully proclaimed, "Thank you, Lord." She asked why a mother could thank God

at the funeral of her daughter, and she eloquently explained the peace she and all of her family feel knowing their precious wife, mother, daughter, sister, aunt and cousin is with the Lord. She asked prayers for the family, who misses Shell terribly. But lest anyone misunderstand, Pearl told them: Don't pray for Shell. She's better off than we are.

Moments later, I thought my heart would break when Oscar described the time his daughter and niece came to see him—"as their pastor, not their daddy and uncle"—to ask why God wouldn't heal Shell.

Healed, at last

"Shell is healed," Oscar insisted, pointing out the complete deliverance from pain she received when God took her to her home in heaven.

Contrasting the difference between short-term medical progress and complete restoration that comes in heaven, he asked, "Why would you want God to patch somebody up instead of heal them?" He contrasted the agony of her illness with the peace she felt the morning of her death, as she instructed him to tell her daughters, "Don't worry about me."

Mining meaning from misery, Oscar assured everyone in the room they could find the same peace and security Shell experienced, if only they would accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Oscar acknowledged Shell's family and friends are not through crying. They're going to miss her, and they need much prayer. But he insisted they won't grieve for Shell, because—at last—she has been healed.

Looking on Oscar's smiling face, I knew he means what he said. And watching Shell's family's glowing faces as they filed out of that room, it was obvious that they believe it, too.