


Listen to encouragement from the balcony, not voices from the cellar

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NACOGDOCHES—To be emotionally and spiritually healthy, people must listen to the voices that call from their “balconies,” not the whispers from their “cellars,” Kyle Childress urged during the first Faith and Trauma—Light and Darkness Conference in Nacogdoches.

[Austin Heights Baptist Church](#) in Nacogdoches sponsored the conference at Stephen F. Austin State University as a byproduct of the church’s new ministry to adult survivors of sexual abuse.

Kyle  Childress “Our early years of development define for us scripts of behavior that we will likely repeat unconsciously for the rest of our lives,” said Childress, pastor of the church. “From early on, we were given scripts to work with, and we spend our lives responding, reacting and repeating these scripts.”

This helps to explain the passage in the Old Testament book of Exodus that says the “sins of the parents” cause pain and suffering for generations after, he said.

“These traumatic scripts of deprivations, distortion and abuse stay with us long after the events and issues that originally cause them are gone,” he insisted. “Part of the definition of trauma is that it never goes away.”

Childress cited the late Baptist pastor Carlyle Marney, who called those old life scripts “cellar voices” and labeled the family, friends and colleagues

who offer encouragement “balcony people.”

“Cellar voices tell us who to hate and who we must destroy before they destroy us,” Childress said. “These cellar voices show up in the middle of the night, when no one is around or when we find ourselves reacting compulsively when we’re not even thinking. ... You find yourself reacting to someone because of something they’ve hooked in you from your past.”

For example, someone may say something that prompts a deeply emotional, painful response because it echoes the cellar voice of long-past abuse or criticism, he said.

A danger of listening to those cellar voices not only is experiencing personal pain, but also passing that pain—and the sound of those voices—along to loved ones, he noted. Another danger is allowing those voices to deform faith “so that we see God as a cellar god.”

The sound of cellar voices is repeated and amplified by what Christian historian Martin Marty calls “mean Christians” and “mean churches,” he added.

“For the most part, mean churches and mean Christianity have a god who speaks, leads and inspires from the cellar—the god who feeds our fears, angers, prejudices and hatreds,” Childress said. “May the true God save us from our cellar voices and our cellar churches.”

A key reason for the conference was helping people learn how to refuse to listen to cellar voices, he added. “The cellar voices might not go away, but they do not have to be the dominant scripts we live by,” he said.

Instead, people find redemption when they listen to Jesus’ voice, he promised. “His voice heals and comforts, encourages and calls us onward to wholeness and light and hope. In his presence, people were healed, enemies reconciled, people caught in destructive ways of living were able

to change, people came together and supported one another, and they learned to be peacemakers. All of that is what church is supposed to be, can be and from time to time is.”

When the church echoes Jesus’ voice, it is filled with what Marney called balcony people, Childress said.

“The balcony has people in it who are cheering us onward,” he explained. “Our balcony people are made up of those from the past and the present who call us toward the goodness God has for us. And they counter the cellar voices, which are always whispering at us, pulling us downward.”

Scientific studies show faith in God provides comfort, support and hope in the face of illness or trauma, reported [Harold Koenig](#), director of the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health at Duke University Medical Center.

To illustrate, he cited a Duke Hospital poll that revealed 40 percent of patients said religion was the biggest factor in coping with their illnesses.

In addition, a survey of every study that quantitatively mentions “religion” or “spirituality” shows 79 percent of the surveys indicate “religious people experience more happiness and greater well-being,” compared to only 1 percent that indicate religious people’s experience of well-being or happiness is lower than the norm.

The conference attracted about 100 professionals involved in health, education, social sciences, religion and social service. They participated in numerous breakout sessions on aspects of abuse, trauma, grief and healing.

With additional reporting by Marie Leonard of the Nacogdoches Daily Sentinel.