

Guest Editorial: Pure and Undefined

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Mark Twain once opined, "If Christ were here now, there is one thing he would *not* be, a Christian."

While Twain's cynicism toward Christianity is well-documented and often harsh, he makes us pause, given the optics and the way some Christians act today. From the obscene sex abuse scandals to the way we treat each other, it makes you wonder.

I started my career at Buckner International on June 6, 1994. The D-Day date is purely coincidental.

Less than three months earlier, I was director of public relations at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, which was like being cruise director on the Titanic. When Russell Dilday was fired March 9, I was immediately called into a meeting with the new board chair.

What followed was a series of calamities too numerous to mention here. I was put on a very short leash in bumbling efforts to silence the messenger. I thought I'd seen and heard everything until the cover-up by trustees got worse every day.

I was told I was being watched, and when we put our house up for sale within two weeks, the person brought in to watch me asked the next day why we were selling. We lived on a cul-de-sac. Go figure.

I saw and heard things that were hard to believe. At one point, a religion reporter at a major newspaper who had become a friend told me Southern Baptists could teach Washington politicians a thing or two. I winced, even

though I knew it was true.

At 35, after almost 10 years of being embroiled in Southern Baptist battles, I was cynical and disillusioned. I knew what Twain meant. My faith in Christ was strong, but I had lost all faith in denominational Baptists and to some degree my fellow believers.

And then the opportunity at Buckner came along.

Texas Baptist mentors like Tom Brannon, Presnall Wood and Toby Druin were instrumental in encouraging me to take the job. As Wood told me, “Scott, Texas Baptists need to hear Buckner stories.”

His words were prescient. As an editor and Texas Baptist statesman, Wood knew the stories of Buckner and other Texas Baptist care ministries could be a suave for so many wounds. But what neither of us knew was how telling those stories for 30 years would become my spiritual suave.

Pure and undefiled

Technically, Buckner doesn’t have a theme verse, but if it did, it would surely be James 1:27. I’ve never been inclined to get a tattoo, but if I did, that verse would be it.

“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (NASB).

That would be a long tattoo. Instead of putting it on our arms, maybe we should tattoo it on our hearts.

Texas Baptists are at our best when we are distracted by doing good. James knew what he was saying when he told us to focus on the needs of the most helpless and defenseless in society. A few things happen.

When we do good

First, it's what Jesus did. We follow the example of Jesus when we serve the most vulnerable in our world.

Jesus's human care ministry was healing the sick and lame, feeding the hungry and welcoming the poor and disenfranchised.

James also knew when we focus on serving the vulnerable, we're too busy doing good and we can't find time for other things.

I've watched hundreds of volunteers putting a new pair of shoes on children through Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls, and I've never heard them arguing theology or squabbling over doctrine. And as I've quipped before, no child has asked if they are receiving Baptist shoes.

Ask any volunteer with Texans on Mission doing mud-outs, clearing trees with chainsaws, or cooking and serving hot meals for people whose lives are devastated by disaster and you'll find they're too busy to fight each other or fight over denominational issues.

In fact, the only time that seems to happen in the New Testament is when Pharisees show up and criticize Jesus and his followers for doing good.

Another thing that happens when we're doing good is we demonstrate the gospel to a lost and cynical world, proving skeptics like Twain wrong.

I serve as a greeter at my church's monthly food distribution, welcoming people as they drive through the line and the food is put in their vehicles. I love the conversations I have with them, but even greater is seeing and feeling their appreciation for this ministry. Our neighbors know the type of church we are.

Serving and trusting

I've been around Baptist long enough to know simple answers rarely work. I've seen the worst of who we can be, so I'm not naïve either.

Along with focusing on pure and undefiled religion by serving the vulnerable, let's consider another solution for our occasional if not ongoing differences.

Texas Baptists instituted a system of trusteeship decades ago to govern our affiliated ministries. While this system has its faults and weaknesses, it nonetheless offers an effective platform to address serious issues with deliberations.

While the trustee system vests the responsibility of the institution with the current trustees, it should also engender real trust with constituents and key stakeholders.

I've seen what happens when boards take on agendas not in the best interest of the institution, but more often, I've seen the effectiveness of boards when they function as they were intended.

It's ironic after my experience with the Southwestern Seminary board that I would voice support for the trustee system. But if I can trust trustees at our Texas Baptist ministries, surely anyone can.

After 40 years in Texas Baptist life, I would like to see us give trustees (and regents) the opportunity to address issues. That does not eliminate involvement from concerned and even passionate stakeholders who are not on the board. To the contrary, it gives us people we can share our concerns with.

Our love for each other is shown in how we work together to answer difficult questions and solve problems we face together.

But Jesus taught us our love for our neighbor is just as important. Serving others in a Christlike way proves even Mark Twain wrong.

Scott Collins is the retired senior vice president of Communications at Buckner International and currently serves as interim editor of the Baptist Standard. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.

CORRECTION: Typo corrected in quotation of James 1:27.