

DOWN HOME: Remove those shoes; this is holy ground

September 11, 2008

I wish I'd taken off my shoes.

If I hadn't been overwhelmed by the moment, and if I had my spiritual wits about me, that's what I would have done. I stood on holy ground.

To an outside observer, it looked like a tiny patient room in Houston's M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. A nurse who entered that room to change an IV drip saw a frail man in a hospital bed, attended by his daughter, his brother and me. She didn't pause, because she had work to do. Besides, the scene seemed similar to scores of rooms where she works every day.

But my heart burned within me. I stood on holy ground.

I felt unworthy of that blessing, but I went as an ambassador of others, and so I sought to soak up enough of that blessing to bestow it upon those who sent me.

I went to see Cecil Sherman—native Texan, lifelong Baptist, faithful pastor, wise denominational statesman, cancer victim. I went on behalf of my fellow directors of Associated Baptist Press and the ABP staff. Months ago, we voted to present him our Religious Freedom Award. But before we had a chance to gather in a banquet room, break bread, sing his praises and give him the award, leukemia attacked his body.

We prayed for him, but some of our group wisely said we should do more. They said we should give Cecil the award now, while he can use the encouragement. So, they commissioned me to go to Houston.

Through the years, Cecil told us no Baptist can speak for another. He

knows his Baptist polity, and that statement usually is right. But on that afternoon, I told him I spoke for thousands of his friends and colleagues. We all want him to know we love him, respect his towering intellect, admire his courage, revere his presence among us, and want God to heal him. Without a doubt, I spoke for them. And for myself.

I wish you all could know Cecil Sherman. Through years when people denigrated Baptist principles and trampled Baptist freedom, Cecil stood strong and spoke the truth. In his hospital room, I thought back to his leadership among us, particularly during the early years of the “Baptist battles.” People praised him for speaking up to his adversaries. But I always admired him for speaking truth to the folks on his “side.” That requires infinitely more courage. And he has trainloads of courage.

Because Cecil reached the prime of his leadership during a contentious time in Baptist life, some people associate him with that contentiousness. In his room, looking upon his gracious, still-resolute face, I saw the person God called out—a gracious pastor who loves Jesus and loves people, a faithful Christian who believes Christians owe it to God and each other to tell the truth.

His courage hallowed that room.

I stood on holy ground.