

David Ritsema: ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel ...’

February 15, 2017

David Ritsema has been pastor of First Baptist Church in Waxahachie almost five years. He also is a resident fellow, professor in New Testament and governor of the B.H. Carroll Theological Institute and an adjunct faculty member in Dallas Baptist University’s Graduate School of Ministry.

From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on church and ministry. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated minister to be featured in this column, or to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

- Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?

Lead pastor, Woodlawn Baptist Church, Austin, 2007-12

Senior pastor, Oak Knoll Baptist Church, Fort Worth, 2003-07

Senior pastor, North Waco Baptist Church, Waco, 2002-03

Senior pastor, Mosheim Baptist Church, Mosheim, 2000-02

Children ministry associate, Green Acres Baptist Church, Tyler, 2000

Youth evangelism, 1999

Youth intern, Green Acres Baptist Church, 1998

Youth minister, First Baptist Church, Gresham, 1997

- Where did you grow up?

The East Texas town of Big Sandy, near Tyler—under the shadow of Green Acres Baptist Church with pastors Paul Powell and David Dykes

- How did you come to faith in Christ?

I made a profession of faith at 6 years old when attending Sunday school and was baptized. However, my parents subsequently dropped out of church, only rarely ever attending, thereafter. I did not start regularly going to a Baptist church until college.

- Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

Doctor of philosophy in New Testament, B. H. Carroll Theological Institute, dissertation thesis: *The Divine Messiah: A Portrait of Jesus in the Johannine Literature*, 2011

Post-grad, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, 2008

Master of divinity in theology, cum laude, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, 2002

Bachelor of arts in Christian ministry, magna cum laude, East Texas Baptist University, 2000

No degree, Tyler Junior College, Tyler, 1995-1998

Ministry/church

- Why do you feel called into ministry?

My senior year of high school, I attended classes at Tyler Junior College, so I could graduate a semester early. After I finished, I kept taking classes, and the next semester, I met a girl in my physics lab who invited me to church, Green Acres Baptist in Tyler, and also to the Baptist Student

Ministry. I got involve in both, and the next semester the BSM asked me to be the president.

I spent the summer interning at East Texas Medical School in the area of my major, computer science, and realized I did not want to do that. When school started again in the fall of 1997, I went with other students from the BSM to Focus, and while Dave Busby was preaching, I was praying with my Bible open to [Romans 1:16](#). I closed my eyes, and I could see a dimly lit valley with hurting people in it and a cross in the distance. I heard God say to me, "Will you help me help those people?" I saw "the hand of God" waiting for me to respond, and I stood and went down to the front for the invitation and surrendered to the ministry.

- What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

At first, my favorite part of ministry was just being with people. The scary part was that I was responsible for teaching God's word. The responsibility of that drove me toward education. However, today, one of my favorite parts of the ministry is to spend hours digging into God's word and learning the background. Plus, there is nothing more exhilarating than standing before God's people to deliver an impassioned and well-prepared presentation of the gospel.

- What one aspect of congregational life gives you the greatest joy?

Seeing a person's life transformed, and then watching over time as they grow into maturity in their faith.

- What one aspect of congregational life would you like to change?

I'd like to see more of our people committed to deep discipleship. (Heck, it would be nice if they showed up on Wednesday night for Bible Study.)

- How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?

It changes all the time—sermons now have videos, images, handouts—but one thing that has remained the same is my commitment to making a big deal about the preaching and teaching of God’s word.

- How do you expect congregational life to change in the next 10 to 20 years?

That depends a lot on what happens in our culture, from Hollywood to Washington, D.C. I expect some major cultural transforming event will happen that will jar society back to a need for God—or else farther from him. I would predict that within 20 years, we will see an influx of young people back to church/God. However, the world’s religious voice will increasingly come from Africa, South America and Asia.

- If you could launch any new ministry—individually, through your congregation or through another organization—what would it be? Why?

This is not novel, but I’d love to see a nice coffee shop in our church. Beyond that, I want to develop a ministry that connects young people with a relevant understanding of the Christian message—and how to articulate that within our world.

- What qualities do you look for in a congregation?

Dynamic worship, preaching and teaching.

- Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your congregation.

Other churches that tend to monopolize demographics by catering to specific interests.

The long historical *tradition* of the church its members find pride in but outsiders see as an obstacle to assimilation.

And the natural tendency of church members toward inaction when it comes to *evangelism*.

- What do you wish more laypeople knew about ministry or, specifically, your ministry?

I wish people “knew”—or better “appreciated”—the enormous financial sacrifices that ministry continually brings—not so much the idea that a pastor is not paid enough (I think most pastors are paid pretty well), and a lot of them have a nice car or a nice house. What the layperson does not understand (I know for me particularly) is that I am ready to give that up at any point (and probably will) for a gospel-centered cause. A pastor’s heart and treasure are with the Lord, not with that stuff.

For example, I don’t have a college fund for my kids (and, man, are they going to need one) because we are giving every extra dollar we make (including me working two side jobs, and my wife working another) to give to our church’s building campaign. I don’t think anybody else knows that, and I seriously doubt anyone is more financially and personally invested to the point of real sacrifice than we are.

Frankly, I have turned down great opportunities to go to much larger churches because I am so deeply invested in the success of the ministry here. I wish people would remember that when they decide to send a trivial email or quip about some unimportant issue.

About Baptists

- What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?

The historical challenges of Baptists have never really changed much—polity, interpretation of the Bible, Calvinism versus Arminianism. Since Baptists never really defined themselves early on but developed their

views over time—even believer’s baptism was not initially by immersion—coupled with the fact that Baptists developed a reputation for division, it is always going to be hard for Baptists to co-exist with each other.

Now, if we can figure out a mission project that we all agree on, we might have a truce for a few decades.

To me though, the simple answer to your question is *the interpretation of the Bible*. I think the single greatest Baptist theological question today is: Is the Bible’s ancient message still God’s word for today, or does modern man know better? For example, if the Apostle Paul prohibits *porneia*—the NIV translates it as “sexuality immorality” multiple times and includes all forms of sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman—does that prohibition stand for us today, or can the modern Baptist pastor say, “I know better than Paul!”

- What would you change about the Baptist denomination—state, nation or local?

I would push the reset button and get Baptists back together. I would, frankly, scrap the name “Baptist” for any denominational identity and move to include churches that do not define themselves as “Baptist” but are in fact within the same theological stream of thought, especially many non-denominational churches. Baptists ought to remind themselves sometimes that the Bible never says we have to call ourselves “Baptists.” In fact, that might be label affixed upon us by our critics and no longer relevant to our worldm especially outside the United States in places like Russia and China, where I have talked to missionaries and leaders who constantly make this suggestion.

About David

- Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?

My first mentor was my Baptist Student Ministry director, *Mark Jones*. Several guys at Green Acres helped a lot, including a layman named *Jeff Phelps* and a youth minister named *Bob Billups*. Directly and indirectly—through his sermons, especially the ones on tape—the pastor at Green Acres, *David Dykes*, was and is the most continuous mentor in my life. His predecessor was a beloved mentor of mine, *Paul Powell*. Paul came to Truett when I was student there and became a dear friend, preaching for me several times at all my churches and doing revivals. He was my job reference and the source of almost every bad joke I ever told. I will cherish his memory and our friendship to the day I die.

Living in Austin, *Ralph Smith*, the longtime pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church, became a mentor. The faculty at Truett Seminary and B. H. Carroll were also mentors, especially *Bruce Corley*.

I've had so many great mentors in my life—men who have poured into me their time, honesty, energy and passion for the Lord. I would not be who I am without them. I would encourage every young pastor to get a mentor—or two or three or more.

- What did you learn on the job you wish you learned in seminary?

My first year of seminary was my first year pastoring. My much older pastor friend at First Baptist Church in Pineland wrote to me while I was pastoring. I told him how things were not going well—the chairman of deacons did not like me, the church had many conflicts, they had not baptized a person in many years, but someone they all knew better than I did. I told him I was surprised at how awful, ugly, mean, vicious and vulgar church people were. He wrote back to me and said, “David, sooner or later in your ministry, you are going to find out that people are really *no d-n good!*” (His words not mine, since I don't use vulgarity). His honesty, however, is perhaps the truest statement I ever discovered in ministry.

My job—to work with people whose lives are all screwed up but who come to church in hopes of finding something that will help—is not an easy one. Paul Powell told me: “People have enough problems in their life. When they come to church, they don’t need any more.” I wish I learned earlier that I can’t fix everyone’s problems, but I can keep from making more of my own, and no matter how hard I try, people are still going to need fixing.

- What is the impact of ministry on your family?

I married *up*. It’s true. My wife loves the church; she loves ministry; she loves my preaching—really; she loves her family going to church. I suppose if she didn’t, I wouldn’t do it anymore. My kids don’t always want to leave their iPads and listen to a sermon, but they enjoy and appreciate what they get out of church.

In our family, church is fun, but it is also important. The impact of ministry on my kids is that they don’t always have dad at 100 percent, but they have a dad who gives 100 percent to them and to the Lord. I sincerely believe my kids will look back on their youth and say they loved their dad being a preacher.

- Name some of your favorite books (other than the Bible) or authors, and explain why.

Early on, I always loved mysterious novels, history, autobiography and literature akin to J.R.R. Tolkien. I loved the world he created and the way in which he showed the evil of evil and showed the path to triumph through the power of weakness.

I love reading the biographies of preachers. Recently I have read or reread George W. Truett’s biography, B.H. Carroll’s and Jay Frank Norris’. Those stories are full of real life and real ministry. Also, I have also read the biography of the early Baptist pastors William Carey, Andrew Fuller, Charles Spurgeon. I have read the biography of almost every important

Christian leader in history. I did most of that before I came to seminary. I keep adding on, though—a new biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer; which, by the way, I like anything Eric Metaxas writes. I don't read a lot of fiction but do sign up for reading retreats periodically and catch up on all the latest Pulitzer Prize-winnings pieces in all genres, but especially children's fiction.

Most of my reading is the area of my Ph.D., which is in New Testament and biblical studies. I keep up on all the current material about "the Messiah" in the Dead Sea Scrolls, messianism, Judaism, and stay on top of Johannine studies. I read voraciously, especially in these areas—several books a week; sometimes more than one in a day. Recently, my review of an academic book was published in the *Review of Biblical Literature*. I have another one I am going to complete in the next few months. I don't just read for fun, or to preach, or to teach, but I also read to publish and regularly present at academic guild meeting. Last year, I presented with N.T. Wright at St. Andrews University in Scotland.

- What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

[Romans 1:16](#) is the most important verse in my life because it was the text that started me on this path into ministry—the haunting question in my mind was, "Am I ashamed of the Gospel?" I decided that for the rest of my life I would *live the gospel out loud*.

Before that, I would have said [Philippians 3:10](#), which was the first verse that ever really haunted me. In my high school days, I found myself walking the aisle of a church one night, weeping and begging God that "I might know him and the power of the resurrection." Since then, Paul's mission statement in [Acts 20:24](#) is important to me, especially when I have to decide on moving to another church or going into a dangerous mission.

- Who is your favorite Bible character (other than Jesus)? Why?

Paul, duh! No, I would say the early disciples of Jesus stand out as most significant. Certainly, Peter ranks at the top. However, I am a big admirer of John's Gospel and the hero of that story, besides Thomas, is Mary Magdalene. I feel sometimes like I am closer to her than I am to the others. I, too, want to hold on to Jesus—especially when I am close to a tomb.

- Name something about you that would surprise your church.

I don't like the taste of cigars or whiskey, but I love dark, red wine. In fact, my retirement dream is to own a vineyard. [See John 15.](#)

- If you could get one “do over” in ministry, what would it be, and why?

I have only one moment I wish I could redo. I got a mad at a person who deserved it, but I should never have sunk to depths. A wise pastor told me, “A bulldog can whip a skunk, but it's not worth the stink!” That's a lesson I learned the hard way.

- Where do you get your sermons from?

The first time I met one of my mentors—a man who pastored one of the largest churches in Texas—he said to me, “Where you do get your sermons from?” Whenever I meet a young pastor, that is my first question, too. I then tell that story, and it starts a conversation. One of the odd things happening nowadays in the preaching world are people who accuse preachers of stealing sermons from others, which I suppose there is some of that, but I think there is greater problem—a dearth of good sermons worth stealing!