

George Mason: 'Docent in the museum of grace'

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George Mason has been pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas 27 years. The native of Staten Island, N.Y., who long ago began to feel at home in Texas, discusses ministry.

Background

Besides Wilshire, where have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?

Pastor, Hillcrest Baptist Church, Mobile, Ala., 1985-89

Singles and college minister, First Baptist Church, Arlington, 1979-85

Interim youth minister, University Baptist Church, Coral Gables, Fla., 1978-79

How did you come to faith in Christ?

Grew up in Christian home, active in church.

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

Bachelor of business administration, University of Miami, Fla., 1978

Master of divinity, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982

Doctor of philosophy, Southwestern Seminary, 1987

Ministry/church

Why do you feel called into ministry?

Ministry best matches my sense of gifts and graces, and it allows me to participate best in the work of God in the world through the church.

What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

I love helping the church make courageous and compassionate decisions to bear witness to God's love and grace more effectively in our broken world. Because the church is the body of Christ, it is the visible model of the promised peaceable community that God is bringing to pass through the Holy Spirit at the end of the age. Any time and every time the church makes progress to be a more self-consciously just, equitable, compassionate, merciful and faithful community, we have a clearer picture of God's future breaking through in the world.

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

Mentoring the next generation of pastors through Wilshire's pastoral residency program. This is a church effort, not just mine. But realizing we are having an effect on the health of churches and ministers for years to come is deeply rewarding.

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

The increasing donor mentality of members. Christian stewards give generously as a spiritual practice that is rooted in a deep relationship to God and the church. They give cheerfully out of gratitude for God's gifts to them and out of devotion to the community of faith that is God's chief agent of witness and mission in the world.

Sadly, too many today need to be implored to give in the same way any

nonprofit enterprise seeks support. Rather than regular tithes and offerings that come from the duty of love, we now have to make appeals for special purposes to motivate givers.

This also shifts the work more toward a philanthropic mindset instead of a stewardship mindset. Donors need attention and recognition, while stewards enjoy the spiritual satisfaction of pleasing God and sharing in the work. Donors need justification for giving by the reporting of measurable results; stewards trust God and the church to make their gifts a blessing to the world.

We need more boring, steady stewardship and less flashy, project-oriented giving.

How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?

I no longer believe it's my job to fix everyone and everything. It's not my church, and I can't be an expert on everything. The church belongs to Christ, and he's not going to abandon it or neglect it.

My job is to do the best I can as a steward of the mysteries of the gospel for the season of leadership I have been given. I am like a docent in the museum of grace, trying to point people to the wonder of God's truth, goodness and beauty that is all around us all the time. I try to invite people to discover the abundant life Christ promises when we truly love God and our neighbor as ourselves.

What qualities do you look for in a congregation?

The capacity to love above all else is what the Apostle Paul told us to look for. And that means resisting subtle efforts at conformity and uniformity that would make love easier by only having "people like us" in our church.

When a church has a broad diversity of thought and yet a great sense of

respect for our common life in Christ, love is ruling the church. When our demographic makeup stretches across social, economic and ethnic strata, love is a ruling quality. When we are able to embrace the unknown future as eagerly as we cherish our memories of the past, love is our underlying motivator.

Name a couple of the most significant challenges and/or influences facing your congregation.

The first challenge is common to all churches in America today, namely, how to create the habits of faithful engagement among members that have been declining in a time when the culture no longer supports the church as it once did. Attendance, giving and service are becoming more challenging as people are losing the crucial link between their relationship to God and to the church.

Second, how to do effective evangelism in a pluralist culture where respect for other religions is a given and fear-based witness does not match our theology. My instinct about this is that we have learn to bear witness in a way that invites people to join us in a life that always is being converted as we follow Christ. Being Christ-followers is not something you do once, as if it is a single transaction, and then set about asking others to make the same transaction. It is a lifelong journey of faith in which we always are being converted. This perspective should produce a greater humility in our witness, while not minimizing our confidence in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of all.

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

Like most other callings, such as medicine, law or education, pastors generally understand their field or work to be more complex than lay people think of it. This will often result in pastors challenging the

congregation to examine their assumptions and interpretations, which can be unsettling.

We would expect that from other professionals. We want our doctors to know the nuances of science and the latest developments of medicine, for instance. We begin with a basic trust in their competence, and we don't mistrust them because we read something on the Internet that we would really rather believe to be true.

In matters of faith, simpler is not always better. Pastors trying to be faithful to the gospel will often seem to be a step ahead of where the congregation feels comfortable. Those who run too far ahead of the people and those who always try to remain in lockstep with the congregation will not lead effectively. There has to be a fair amount of tension in order for a church to be growing in Christ and in its mission.

The late ethicist T. B. Maston compared it to a rubber band—too much tension, and the band will snap; not enough tension, and the band will not do the job it was meant for.

About Baptists

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

Where to begin? First, Baptists need to strike the right balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Baptists are non-creedal people, but we usually have been theologically orthodox nonetheless. That's a good thing that should be maintained. But it gets endangered on two sides—those who think being non-creedal means you can believe anything and never be challenged about whether your beliefs are within the bounds of historic Christian faith, and those who have so expanded their definition of orthodoxy that it now includes things never addressed by the creedal

tradition.

It used to be that believing in the Trinity—God as Creator and Sustainer of all things, Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world, the Holy Spirit as the Giver of life and Guarantor of the age to come—were enough basics to form our common life and worship. Now, some would add to the heart of orthodoxy things like the nature of authority between husbands and wives in marriage, the role of women in the church, and any number of other social and political positions.

On the matter of orthopraxy, Baptists always have been concerned with what works, but we need to be moored to what's right at the same time, or our size will only be a reflection of organizational strategy and not of Christian mission.

Second, Baptists are struggling with how to be distinctively Baptist in a less denominational environment. Some churches are dropping the name "Baptist" altogether, and even some who keep the name function more like Evangelical nondenominational churches today than Baptist churches.

What's often lost in this approach is the nurturing of Baptist convictions for the next generation, such as the priesthood (and prophethood) of all believers, over against hierarchical pastoral authority, as well as religious liberty understood within the useful framework of the separation of church and state, rather than the privilege of using your faith freedom to discriminate against others.

While some conservative churches are less denominational by being more Evangelical in their identity than Baptist, some progressive churches are becoming more mainline and ecumenical than Baptist. Seeing our Baptist witness as a unique voice within the whole church is better than asserting that we are the whole church. But we have something to contribute as well as to learn in this relationship, and that requires being consciously Baptists

while being consistently generous in our desire for the unity of the Body of Christ.

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

It would be helpful first to remember that “the Baptist denomination” includes all sorts of conventions, associations, societies, networks and fellowships. We should remember that it includes black Baptists, Hispanic Baptists, Korean Baptists, British Baptists, etc. People like me need to widen our vision of who Baptists are. These sisters and brothers all around us and across the globe define Baptists for us today every bit as much as I do.

Next, I would hope we could renew our commitment to partnership in mission that is at the heart of our cooperative relationships. We have odd situations now where, for instance, GuideStone (Financial Resources) will serve non-Baptist churches that they believe are “Great Commission” churches, but they won’t serve Cooperative Baptist Fellowship churches. That is largely a decision that goes back 25 years to the creation of CBF, but it persists as a kind of warning of the consequences to churches that consider leaving the Southern Baptist Convention.

The BGCT is wrestling with similar questions about where to draw lines of cooperation with churches. The not-so-subtle consequence of these decisions by denominational bodies is that they create an extra layer of consideration for what decisions congregations may make—beyond our traditional respect for local church autonomy. Associations are membership bodies that may hold churches accountable for doctrinal positions, but conventions primarily are missional bodies that are not driven by doctrine but by voluntary partnership of congregations.

About George

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

Dan Yeary was my college pastor. He put the idea of ministry into my head before it had really occurred to me, and then there was no getting it out. He taught me to love the church and to preach with passion, always looking for stories to make the word become fresh.

David Kirkpatrick was my major professor at Southwestern. He helped me embrace the life of the mind and stimulated my theological imagination. He also taught me that knowing the history of theology was only a prelude to doing theology.

Charles Wade was my pastor during seminary years, and I served on his staff for six years. He taught me the nuts and bolts of the pastoral life, gave me a sense of privilege for the opportunity to enter into the big moments of people's lives, and showed me that a church that follows Jesus needs to do so in the world. His integrity has always inspired me.

Bruce McIver was my predecessor at Wilshire. He gave me his unconditional blessing and made me want to become worthy of it. I hope to do the same for my successor some day.

Hardy Clemons has modeled a kind of self-awareness in ministry that reminds me to be myself and no one else. We all should have peers and people younger than we as mentors also.

Suzii Paynter makes me proud of people with imagination who serve our churches in the tough roles of denominational and institutional life.

My colleague at Duke Divinity School, *Curtis Freeman*, always challenges and encourages me.

Gary Simpson, pastor of Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, is a brother as well as a colleague who has taught me a lot about the African-American experience by his friendship.

Amy Butler at the Riverside Church in New York City teaches me about being tough and tender at the same time.

Every pastoral resident who has come through Wilshire over the past 15 years has taught me something and made me better.

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

The list is too long to enumerate. In general, we ask too much of seminaries. They are invaluable in training the life of the mind to prepare us for ministry. But there is a kind of learning that can only happen by doing. The church is a laboratory of learning in which we continually practice ministry. I am still learning.

What has been the impact of ministry on your family?

Wilshire has been an incredible church for my three children. They allowed them to grow up without undue scrutiny, and because the church was healthy, they still love the church. They are involved in their own churches today and aren't jaded by their experience of being preacher's kids. My oldest is a divinity school graduate herself and married to a pastor. My son is a deacon in our church. And my youngest attends church regularly in New York City.

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

Classically, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, because it draws back the veil in the present time to see the journey of the soul that we only think is an afterlife experience. We go through hell to get to heaven even now, but all

the way is grace. Dante needs a guide, which is first and last the actual love of his life, Beatrice, but she also passes him off to the Roman poet Virgil, who leads him through hell and purgatory until she picks back up in paradise. Dante is drawn to God by his love for a woman through whom God's love shines. At the end, all love comes together in the God who is love. Just beautiful.

As for others, I would say Frederick Buechner always has inspired as a person who wrote with one foot in the church and one in the world.

G.K. Chesterton always helps me see the strength in tradition before I run off with the populists too quickly.

Poets like John Donne, W.H. Auden, Rumi, Hafiz, Langston Hughes, Denise Levertov, Mary Oliver, Seamus Heaney, Billy Collins and Scott Cairns all make words make worlds.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

Philippians 3:12: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus made me his own."

That and the verses that follow keep me from becoming complacent or discouraged. There is always more ahead to hope for than what is behind us.

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

It isn't fashionable these days to say Paul is a favorite Bible character, but I have to admit that his story inspires me. If there is a corollary to white privilege in a biblical character, it might have been Paul, who talks about his impeccable Jewish pedigree that he was willing to forego as a ground of spiritual identity for the sake of the gospel. His mission to the gentiles, to

outsiders, to the excluded required him to suffer personal pain and rejection from the people of God he had known, loved and served his whole life before coming to know the power of Christ's resurrection. He was willing to suffer for this gospel that explodes all social and religious barriers in favor of a radical new humanity in and through the Holy Spirit. It reminds me all true spiritual leadership involves some measure of faithful betrayal.

Name something about you that would surprise your church.

After 27 years together, I'm not sure what would surprise them. Maybe how much I love Dallas, even if I still walk around in a New York state of mind.

Write and answer a question you wish we had asked.

Is there a question you haven't asked? Please keep a copy of this for my eulogy!

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