

Glenn Young: The intersection of God and people

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Glenn Young has been pastor of First Baptist Church in Kilgore three years. 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 apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

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

I served as pastor at Clear Lake Baptist Church in Houston seven years, and also at First Baptist Church of Devine seven years before that. I pastored a mission church in South Louisiana and was student minister at First Baptist Church in Devine during seminary.

- Where did you grow up?

I grew up in deep South Louisiana, about an hour south of New Orleans on one of the peninsulas jutting out from the toe of the Louisiana boot. The community was Cajun and Catholic, except for a few families like my own who had moved in with the oil industry. I was in seventh grade before I met another Protestant student in school.

- How did you come to faith in Christ?

My parents always have had a deep and abiding faith. The last thing I saw each night when I walked by their room heading to bed was my dad on his knees praying. The first thing I saw each morning when I awoke was my mom reading her Bible at the kitchen table. Since there were so few

Protestants in our town, church and faith were never a matter of culture and community, but commitment.

My salvation seemed never to be a question of “if” but “when.” I was saved when I was 8 years old. As pastor, I am always cautious when children make decisions at such a young age, but I cannot deny what happened in my life at that age. I remember the look of shock on my schoolteacher’s face when I told him of my baptism. He seemed to think I was concocting some wild blasphemous story until my classmates explained to him that I was not Catholic.

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

I earned a bachelor of science degree from the University of Southwestern Louisiana, now the University of Louisiana, Lafayette. I earned a master of religious education degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctor of ministry degree in theology from New Orleans Baptist Theological seminary.

Ministry/church

- Why do you feel called into ministry?

Ministry always has been at the core of my life. My parents were not missionaries, but I grew up in a mission environment. I surrendered to full-time ministry at age 14. That was never as surprising to me as that I have spent my ministry career serving churches in the United States. I always assumed I would serve internationally through the International Mission Board. That has never been God’s plan for me, but he has been gracious to allow me to be involved in international missions as a local pastor.

- What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

My two favorite things in the world are God and people. Ministry is the

perfect intersection of both passions.

I believe God has designed us so that we derive great joy from doing the things we were created to do. A racehorse is most happy when sprinting. A hunting dog is most happy when on the trail. A preacher finds his greatest joy in preaching, and a pastor his greatest joy in pastoring.

Not everyone is called to do what I do, but everyone is called to do something. It is our greatest and most satisfying act of worship to do our best at what God has designed us to do, for his glory.

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

Personal relationships across a broad spectrum of people. Words like “community” and “family” can be cliché’ and over-used, but it happens to be the core of the church as conceived by God.

This is not my natural personality. I like solitude, but I need community.

God, not I, designed his family, so I should not expect a tailored church made to my preferred tastes. He is the one doing the reforming, and I am the one in need of reformation, and part of the cure he has prescribed for me is a big, sometimes unruly, diverse community of people.

Because, as Evangelicals, we emphasize personal relationship so much, we sometimes forget the vital role of the church family. When two people decide to marry, that is a very personal and intimate decision, but one marries a family not an individual, and through that union, together they grow a family. In the same way, our salvation is a personal decision that leads us into a much larger family.

The truth is I never will be as good a Christian on my own as with my church family. If I am, then I am probably in the wrong church.

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

What I describe above is great in theory, but it is not the reality for much of the church today. In our obsessive drive to be relevant to a sometimes-irrelevant culture, we come dangerously close to making the institution of the church irrelevant. We try too hard to make sure the church has the same décor as the hip coffee shop down the street, as if our mission was nothing more than to get people in to sell them a cup of coffee.

We should be aiming for a much more significant target.

Those 20-somethings who think your church is uncool will show up at grandma's house for Thanksgiving dinner, and her kitchen decor is at least as dated as your church foyer. They show up for something much more important than a clever marketing plan; they show up for family.

Some of our churches are like the 50-year-old youth volunteer who shows up at the student event in baggy, sagging jeans and a ball cap turned backwards on his head. He is not relating to students; he just looks silly. Be who you are and relate to people authentically.

It already has been said by someone that the church has become the purveyor of religious goods and services to consumers of religious goods and services. We have our big-box outlets and our neighborhood boutique outlets. The Great Commission must be about more than that. The one aspect that motivates me is the idea of personal relationship in a larger family setting.

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

Well, now that I have insulted the local coffee shop, I must confess the ministry I would most like to get started is a coffee shop.

For years, I have pastored in Texas and worked with churches in Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Every time I go over budget numbers

for ministry projects on this side of the border, I feel guilty knowing how much further that money could go in ministry just a few hours south of us in Central America. I have many pastor friends in these other countries who are reaching as many or more people than I am, and for whom a \$100 a month could make a major difference in their church and ministry.

All those countries happen to be coffee-growing areas. It first occurred to me years ago, when I was serving a church in Houston. I was having breakfast with my church staff at a local restaurant. We began looking around the dining room of this secular restaurant and noticed six different Bibles studies going on from six different churches in the area.

I wondered why we could not set up a coffee shop selling the coffee of Central American churches—and thus funding their ministry—to Central Texas suburbanites—thus meeting their need for community and connection. The idea is not unique to me, and there are, of course, several logistical challenges, but the coffee shop of today has taken the place of the pub of yesterday, and wherever people gather for community, it is ripe space for the gospel.

About Baptists

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

At a denominational level, we have a lot of great institutions doing great work, but many of our local pastors are disengaged from that work. My generation of pastors came of age in the middle of the “Baptist wars.” We feel like children of a bad divorce. Because of that, we often are too cynical of denominational life. Wounds heal but often leave scars. Sometimes comparing our scars just becomes an unhealthy focus on the past that serves as an excuse to inactivity in the future. We insulated ourselves in the local congregation as a defense mechanism.

We have a stronger generation of Evangelical Christians—many of them are Baptist but just don't know their rich heritage—who are passionate about engaging the world in big ways informed by the gospel. Unfortunately, too often, all they see is a disengaged and thus ineffective local congregation specifically designed to insulate from rather than engage the outside world.

They are unaware of the amazing institutions we already have in place to do the work they are called to do at a denominational level. Their generation's ignorance is informed by my generation's cynicism. We need to learn to forget the scars, break this destructive cycle and re-engage the younger generation into a vigorous denominational life.

About Glenn

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

My mentors in ministry are all dead now. I have had three men who served as my pastor throughout my life. They could not be more different, but all three have had a profound impact on my life and ministry.

The first was *Reggie Hanberry*. He was a sometimes-prickly hard-edged fire-and-brimstone preacher. He was the only pastor I ever knew until I left home for college. From him, I learned the importance of truth, even when it is difficult, and the value of longevity in ministry.

My college Pastor was Dr. *Perry Sanders*. He managed to engage the predominately Catholic community of South Louisiana as friends rather than adversaries. He was trusted and respected, and so his ministry thrived.

Finally, I learned the importance of pastoral care from *Charles Bush*. The rumor is that Charles once drove to Colorado from South Texas to make a hospital visit. I don't know if that story is true or not, but it is close enough to his character that everyone in Devine, Texas, believes it.

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

I wish I had learned more management skills in seminary. Church business is big business, and there is nothing particularly spiritual about poor management. Churches may not deal with the cash flow of big business, but the church's structure is at least as complex. Often, what makes for a great pastor makes for a poor businessman. Those are two very different skill sets, but both are needed. It is the pastor's role to lead the church in ministry and manage the many gifts God has given the church through its various members. It was never intended to be a "one-man show."

I remember sitting in a finance committee meeting early in my career. I looked around the table at a bank president, two bank vice presidents, two CPAs and one CFO. I certainly was not the financial expert in the room. My job as pastor was to give this dedicated team of laymen the ministry goals of the church, and their job was to get us there financially.

That is the way the body of Christ works. Spiritual management demands that we set our egos aside and allow God to bless his church through the many giftings of all its members.

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

There are so many, I am kind of a book hound, but like most pastors I would point to C.S. Lewis and say *Mere Christianity* is one of my all-time favorites. After being raised in a rather narrow fundamentalist setting, Lewis opened my eyes to the possibility of living an intellectually fulfilled life that was also faithful and true to God's word.

Calvin Miller did the same for me with his *Singer Trilogy*. I always assumed I hated poetry. Miller made me realize I just hate bad poetry, and there is a lot of bad poetry out there, especially in religious literature. Today, my favorite epic poem is Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but I needed Miller's much

more accessible verse before I could ever fully appreciate Milton.

Finally, I like most everything by Charles Dickens. His stories are nothing special, but his mastery of the English language makes him a must read for anyone who communicates for a living.

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

“Those who trust the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people from this time forth, and forevermore” (Psalms 125:1-2)

I am not sure why that has become my favorite passage, but I know when it became so. I read it as part of my quiet time sitting by the lake in Glorieta, N.M., on a frosty morning many years ago. If you know that setting, you know the lake is surrounded by majestic mountain peaks. The imagery of God’s word matched the beauty of his world that morning in a way that has made this passage my life verse ever since