

Jay Abernathy: Absolutely certain of the good news of Jesus

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Jay Abernathy has been the associate pastor for pastoral care and generations ministry at [First Baptist Church of Lubbock](#), Texas, since September 2016. 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](#).

Background

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

- Pastor, First Baptist Church of Palestine
- Pastor, First Baptist Church of Stamford
- Pastor, First Baptist Church of Era
- Youth Minister, The Woodlands First Baptist Church, The Woodlands
- Youth Minister, First Baptist Church, Jena, La.
- Youth Minister, Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas

Where did you grow up?

I was thankful to be reared in one place—from birth to high school graduation in Richardson, Texas.

How did you come to faith in Christ?

I'm still moving toward Christ in faith, and my journey began as a child. I remember praying with my parents as young as 5 years old. When I was 7 years old, I was injured seriously when hit by a speeding car. That made me very aware of my mortality.

Months later, I recovered from my injuries and attended services at my home church—First Baptist Church of Richardson. Then, as I understood more about the good news of Jesus and the reality of salvation, I made a public confession of my faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

My understanding was as deep and certain as can be for any 8-year-old. Thankfully, I continue to understand and treasure God's salvation more as the years pass.

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

- Baylor University, Bachelor of Business Administration
- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Master of Divinity in Biblical Languages

About ministry life

Why do you feel called into ministry?

I had incredible congregational ministry examples during my childhood and teenage years. As a teen, I was able to serve at my church in many ways. However, like many people, I struggled because I didn't feel adequate. I knew I wasn't perfect, and I wrestled with this calling until my senior year in college.

While attending a campus revival meeting, I confessed to God, "I am not

good enough.”

The Holy Spirit replied back to my heart: “You are right. You’re not, but I AM.”

The truth that it isn’t about me, but is about the power of the good news of Jesus, has sustained me ever since that day.

After that moment, I declared publicly that I would serve Jesus with all I had for the rest of my life. I sought the guidance of my childhood pastor and mentor, James Landes. Through him, God led me to realize a significant and solid calling to pastoral ministry.

What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

I believe everyone has a vital task in the body of Christ. Just as Ephesians 4:11-13 states, my favorite part of this work is “equipping saints for ministry.” It is incredibly energizing to help people realize and engage in their personal Christian mission through the services of teaching, preaching and leading in a local church.

How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?

Although I believe the gospel call is urgent, I have seen from Scripture and daily life that God works in lifelong time frames—and sometimes longer.

I have learned to be consistent and patient in partnering with people as they become followers of Christ and faithful disciples. The change that Christ is bringing about isn’t dependent upon my life span but on Christ’s long-term purpose for his church.

How do you expect ministry to change in the next 10

to 20 years?

Within the context of the United States, I believe ministry leadership becomes more exciting and challenging for ministry leaders and our local congregations as we move from a cultural Christianity to transformational Christianity. This will give us more in common with the church globally and historically.

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

Thankfully I've been able to be a part of two areas of ministry already. One, the Refuge of Light, a home and ministry for victims of sex-trafficking in Texas. The other is a connection with evangelical Christians in the Holy Land, specifically in the West Bank. Both of these ministries are opportunities to connect and encourage those who often are not considered. The risk is high, but the return is incredible.

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

When I meet people and the conversation gets around to what I do, it is noticeable how the behavior changes. That's expected. Sadly though, even church members behave as if ministers are another species. We are treated differently and can be tempted to believe we are different, which is not a good result.

I believe ministers would be better if we were more engaged as friends by church members, having honest conversations that aren't intended to pursue personal agendas.

About Baptists

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

Local church autonomy and soul competency of believers are pillars of our Baptist doctrine. However, they are poorly understood and applied by most of our membership. We must find a way to encourage and equip local churches for the responsibility of being part of a co-laboring fellowship without establishing an authoritative body that restricts the ability of each local congregation to pursue its unique mission.

On an individual scale, soul competency similarly offers much gain to the congregation, but also risks much. As we find balance in these doctrines, we may be able to protect better those in our churches who are at risk from foolish, evil leadership that preys upon the flock.

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

I'd love it if people understood more that we are not a denomination as typically defined, with an authoritative hierarchy. It would be great if we communicated proactively our distinctives and purposes instead of waiting until we had to defend our values.

Instead of debating the myriad of differences, it is time to acknowledge our central connecting *kerygma* and cooperative missional agenda.

About Jay

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

influence you?

I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have mentors who didn't prescribe God's calling but helped me know how absolutely to be certain of it.

My childhood pastor, James Landes, always had time for me as a child. Then as a college student, he listened and advised me on pastoral leadership.

My youth pastor, Gene Wilkes, patiently connected with so many of us, not just for teen years, but continues to lead me for a lifetime. Gene shows me the value of personal investment in fellow Christ-followers for the long haul as their servant and leader.

I also am blessed to have a number of peers in ministry who mentor me as we share contemporary matters of church service and family leadership.

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

I call it "the ministry of moving chairs and mowing lawns." Seriously, I have learned that the little bits of preparation and service matter, and they add up to readiness for the larger moments.

What is the impact of ministry on your family?

One time, my child came home from school and said: "I wish you weren't a pastor. The other kids say I can't hear their jokes because my daddy's a preacher!"

So, yes, the expected struggles hit our family. And though we couldn't count on everyone to help, we found the support and fellowship we received in our places of service was greater than most anyone else who doesn't have a deep connection in a church.

Additionally, we have realized that other than the usual demands of time and relationships, ministry has engaged my family in opportunities of mission action and personal growth that aren't availed of by most families.

Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite books or authors, and explain why.

Besides reading a reasonable spectrum of current theologians, I've found the works of G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to have staying power and depth.

Authors of the soul—like Brennan Manning, Brother Lawrence and Henri Nouwen—humble and nurture me devotionally. I return often to their writings. These authors serve as a colander through which a lot of the modern textual fluff I read is strained and valued.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

Cover page to the maps.

Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus? Why?

Caleb. As his name's meaning implies, he "doggedly" pursued what God promised over the long haul of his life.

I believe we fear the future too often and sell out the purpose and passion of the church. The "high country" is worth gaining, no matter the long obedience required.

Name something about you that would surprise people who know you.

If I hadn't been what I am, I would have loved being a Hollywood stunt man. Imagine if every day at work you got to take huge risks with life or

death on the line. Oh, wait, that's like ministry isn't it?

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

I'd want back every word I said too quickly. Though well-intentioned, or even accurate, some responses are not as helpful as I thought at the time.

Questions aren't always a request for information as much as for connection. So, I would listen more. A lot more.

What is the best stage of your ministry life?

Today, I believe. And, tomorrow looks incredibly exciting, too.