

Keith Parks: ‘Missionary is still my dominant DNA’

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Keith Parks served as president of the Foreign Mission Board (now the [International Mission Board](#)) for twelve years. He then became the first coordinator of [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Global Missions](#) in 1993 and served there until his retirement in 1999.

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

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Memphis, Texas. We lived in Arkansas from my tenth year to my sixteenth and then moved to Denton, Texas.

How did you come to faith in Christ?

When I was in the Junior Sunday School department, our pastor gave a simple gospel message with an invitation in our General Assembly. I had been in Sunday School all of my life. I had the information. But that morning the Holy Spirit convicted me that I was a sinner and Jesus would save me if I would ask him. I did—and he did! Reexamination of this experience through the years has confirmed its authenticity.

Why did you feel called into ministry?

After graduating from the University of North Texas, I was part of the second group of BSU summer missionaries. Four of us went to San Andres Island off the coast of Colombia. Some who had never heard about Jesus

accepted him as Savior. I did not know there were people like that in the world.

I came back to enter Southwestern Seminary wishing that I could go tell them, but, assuming missionaries were holy and virtually perfect (a concept soon corrected), I knew that I did not qualify. However, the tug toward those who had never heard continued.

Dr. Jack McGorman preached at Mission Day Chapel. Dr. Cal Guy extended the invitation. I felt I should respond. But I was afraid that I would make a public decision and then would not follow through.

Finally, I said to the Lord, "I am going to start toward the aisle. If this is not right, stop me." As I moved my foot toward the aisle, a warmth flowed through my body, an assurance filled my heart and I practically ran to the front. That decision is as relevant today as it was then.

In addition to your most-noted position, where else did you serve in ministry?

I was pastor of Red Springs Baptist Church (near Seymour, Texas) for four years. I taught Bible and Homiletics for one year at Hardin-Simmons University. Helen Jean and I were missionaries to Indonesia for fourteen years. For twenty-two more years, I was on the administrative staff of the Board. I was Global Mission Coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship for six years.

When did you leave your most-noted position and/or retire from full-time ministry?

I retired from the Foreign Mission Board in 1992 and from CBF in 1999.

How have you occupied yourself since then?

For a few years, I spoke at churches and mission conferences, such as

Perspectives. I was visiting professor at Baylor and Truett Seminary. I also led some international prayer walks.

Where do you live now, and where do you go to church?

Helen Jean and I joined FBC Richardson in 2000. We teach an International Bible Class there.

Ministry/life

What was your favorite or most joyful aspect of ministry? Why?

Relating to and working with missionaries and local Christians all around the world. "Missionary" is still my dominant DNA.

When I was elected president of the FMB at Glorieta in 1980, Toby Druin, editor of *The Baptist Standard*, was the first to interview me. He said, "Keith, Southern Baptists will want to know more about you. Who are you?"

My response was, "Toby, I am a missionary."

Name the most significant challenges and/or influences you faced during your ministry.

One of the significant challenges was to help local churches and Christians to realize that the mandate to share the gospel with everyone was given to every church and every Christian. It was not the mission board's or the missionaries' work that they should support. It was, and is, the responsibility of every church and every Christian, but each of us has a different role to fill.

What element of ministry do you wish you could have changed?

I regret that we did not move more quickly to a biblical and locally effective way of sharing the gospel. Our approach was influenced too much by our

own cultural expression of Christianity and not enough by biblical patterns. We tended to spend too many of our resources developing Christians and not enough reaching those who had never heard.

How did your perspective on ministry change?

We had typically depended on spreading the gospel by sending missionaries to new locations. Southern Baptists were engaged in Bold Mission Thrust. We had committed at our Convention in Norfolk in 1976 to have our part in sharing the Good News with everyone in the world by 2000.

As I was thinking about the role our agency was to have, I had a disturbing insight. We were the largest denominational mission agency. We were getting close to involvement in 100 countries. Then it hit me! That is less than half of the countries of the world!

Defensively, I tried to justify what we were doing by recognizing that many countries would not allow missionaries to enter. Suddenly, I realized that we must find other ways of getting the gospel to the rest of the world. That led to non-residential missionaries, Cooperative Services International, and focusing on unreached people groups.

How do you expect ministry to change in the next 10 to 20 years?

There seem to be two divergent trends away from traditional Southern Baptist missions.

One is a tendency to withdraw from state or national cooperative efforts and express missions through short-term trips of church members and support for church members who are involved in mission efforts.

The other is missionary participation in smaller interdenominational mission organizations that focus on unreached peoples with a strategy that

depends on spontaneous, self-duplicating believers and is not dependent on foreign personnel or finances.

Hopefully, there will be something of a blending of these approaches in the future.

About Baptists

What were the key issues facing Baptists during the heart of your ministry?

My tenure as president of the Foreign Mission Board was from 1980 to 1992. The politicized takeover of the SBC and its agencies was the dominant issue.

Previously, trustees had been selected because of their mission commitment. Doctrine became the new qualification. Although it was increasingly difficult to remain focused on our reason for being, the Lord did bless with approximately a net increase of one hundred career missionaries, annually. There was also an increase of churches, baptisms and countries.

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

My regret is that we have become polarized like the rest of the culture. Our expression of our faith is not as balanced as I wish it were. I wish we could unite around a common cause and allow for diversity of belief as we once did.

The former purpose of the SBC, “to solicit, combine and direct the energies of Southern Baptists for the propagation of the gospel at home and abroad” still has a lot of gospel and good sense.

About Keith

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

My parents, Bob and Allie, lived more than lectured spiritual and moral values and stimulated a desire in me to adopt them.

My wife, Helen Jean, has loved, inspired and challenged me to fulfill Christ's purpose in saving me.

Doyle Baird, BSU Director at UNT, was the first to help translate my enthusiasm for the Lord into a more effective and directed ministry.

At Southwestern Seminary:

- Cal Guy inspired a mission's vision.
- Stuart Newman helped me learn to think more about difficult faith matters.
- Ray Summers and Dr. Jack McGorman led me to a deeper understanding of the New Testament and the fact that it is inextricably involved with missions.
- T. B. Maston expanded my understanding of practical applications of the gospel.

Dr. Baker James Cauthen impacted my life with his passion for reaching the world and his compassion for all people.

Staff members at the FMB, missionaries and international leaders too numerous to mention have been a blessing beyond my ability to express.

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

"A Man in Christ" by James S. Stewart. Paul's life and ministry were focused on and resulted from "Christ in me." This insight challenged me.

“The Company of the Committed” by Elton Trueblood. This book helped me understand that the reality of *ekklesia* is spiritual oneness (not a membership role) that requires personal involvement and results in multiplied spiritual blessing.

“The Will to Meaning” by Victor Frankl. This Jewish psychiatrist survived Auschwitz and emerged with the conviction that a strong purpose for living will enhance your likelihood of success. He elaborated on Nietzsche’s quote, “He who has a ‘why’ to live can survive most any ‘how.’”

“The Road Less Traveled” by M. Scott Peck. Peck details four elements that, if followed by more people, would result in our becoming more what God intends for us. These are: discipline, love, religion and grace.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

My favorite Bible passage is John 1:1-14. It expresses the Christmas story theologically. It emphasizes that God’s best plan for sharing the gospel with the world is by wrapping humanity around deity. Technology does not negate that.

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

Paul. He was a missionary, church planter and theologian. His letters are products of mission experience and guidelines for mission expression.

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

When I was six years old, I had rheumatic fever that affected my heart. Dr. Wilson told my folks that I would not live past 13. No faith is required to believe that I will prove his prognosis wrong.

When I made my first commitment to “full-time Christian service” as a senior in high school, my sister, Nelle, told me that it was an answer to our

parents' prayers. It was the first time that I knew what the Doctor had said.

She added that upon hearing it, Mom and Dad knelt by my bed and told the Lord that if he would spare me they would do all that they could do dedicate me to his service.

I found out even later that Mom had been called as a missionary while at Ouachita College. World War I prevented her from finishing college. Through the years, she had prayed that one of her four children would take her place. One did.