

Voices: A church for earthlings

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Recently, I attended the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion annual meeting in Nashville, Tenn. Our host for the conference was Belmont University, which invited us to their lovely campus filled with soaring neo-classical architecture. Every year, the society meets, and its members present papers in our various disciplines, such as biblical studies, theology and church history. We also discuss pedagogy in a Baptist context.



Jeremiah Bailey As part of our welcome dinner, we heard two special guests. One was documentary filmmaker Cliff Vaughn, a talented observer of religion in America, who reflected helpfully on truth-telling and producing documentaries. The other, to my delighted surprise, was an indie rock musician, Corey Bishop, who offered us an acoustic solo set.

Two gifts

We learned Bishop was a graduate of the school's religion department. He related a longer version of his story, telling us about his one-semester stint at Candler School of Theology, then a name change and pursuit of music.

Bishop ultimately imparted two gifts to me that evening: His delightfully playful lyrical style and an opportunity for self-reflection.

The self-reflection came from something that played out over the course of his set. He made comments and exhibited body language that indicated, at least on some level, his disconnection from and discomfort with his setting.

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At one point, he explained he and his fiancée decided he probably should not play this one song, but with a slight sheepishness, he asked the audience if it would be all right if he did, noting it made references to drugs. Someone in the crowd shouted, “We’re Baptist professors, not aliens!” He went on to play the best song of the night—a rollicking jaunt extolling the superiority of love to all other highs, clearly speaking from experience. It was a great set, and everyone had a good time.

No excuse

What really struck me about this exchange was this is someone who had been part of the Baptist community and still, after some time away, defaulted to an understanding of Baptists as prudish and obsessively boundary-policing. Reflecting on this fact, I must assume his experiences led to such caution.

Frankly, given the Bible we have, there is no real excuse for Baptists to be prudish and to shrink from the discussion of all manner of things in society.

The Book of Genesis alone has more sex, rape, murder, betrayal, incest, genocide, theft, drunkenness and prostitution than Game of Thrones. The records of the kings of Israel and Judah likewise are filled with plots, intrigues and assassinations. Not to mention that, erroneous allegorizing aside, we have an entire book of the Bible that consists of an extended

poem to erotic love. If you ever want a congregation to be surprised by Scripture, explain to them what many scholars think the Song of Solomon really means when it says, “Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine”!

Stepping away from simply salacious examples—by modern American standards—this issue of communicating in an exclusively churchy way, an idiom of ecclesiastical prudishness, goes far beyond being able to talk about sex and murder and such. The Scriptures do not shy away from the full spectrum of human emotion and experience. In particular, I always have been struck by the humanity of the Psalms, which put on stark display much of what we as individuals often try so hard to hide.

Frank reflections

I do not think it is an accident our Bible contains in the Psalms and prophets frank reflections on the apparent injustice of the world, expressions of uncertainty and declarations of pain. Scriptures voice the doubts of the people about the promises of God and make no effort to hide even the ugliest expressions of their suffering.

When facing the loss of their nation and the difficult theological questions arising from the destruction of the temple, the Psalmist vents the rage of his people, crying out to God his desire that the infants of his oppressors should be killed. I do not take the presence of that Psalm in our Bible to be an endorsement of its ideas but rather an acknowledgment of the limits of humans to cope with suffering and their need to relate those experiences to God.

If God really did have a hand in forming our Bible, then we ought to acknowledge it is necessary for the church to make room for the full gamut of human experiences and emotions.

We need to make a space for people to ask honestly without a preconceived

or pat answer, “Why do the wicked prosper?” We need to make space for people to express their doubts about God and their fears. And, yes, we need to make room for people to talk about sex and sometimes drugs—and rock and roll, too, if it is a part of their story.

Churches are for people, and people are complicated. We’re human, and the records of our faith have not flinched in the face of that fact, so why should our churches?

We’re Baptists, not aliens.

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