

A Rancher's Rumbings, February 25, 2009

GRATEFUL FOR GOOD PREACHING

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Two weeks ago, I got a healthy dose of good preaching. I went to Dallas to see the Christian Life Commission give its Distinguished Service Award to Phil Strickland, the late director of the CLC and my closest friend.

I consider both of Phil's daughters my daughters, too, since I never had any daughters of my own, and I think that Phil felt the same way about Lance and Chad as his sons.

Of course, Phil raised those girls in such a way that they can out-shoot me, out-work me, and out-hike me, though I never admit it in their presence. It was wonderful to have dinner with them and their families – now including five kids in all. And I really like and admire their husbands.

But back to the good preaching that I mentioned.

Early that Sunday morning, I went to hear Jim Denison preach his final sermon as pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas. His text was the *23rd Psalm*. Jim talked about what it was like to be a shepherd in biblical times, and I had to laugh a little. He was explaining shepherding to a shepherder here!!! But he did the same great job he always does. He is a remarkable preacher – in fact, I consider him to be a preacher in the John Claypool mode, and there are some of you to whom that means a great deal.

But I have to laugh whenever I remember the time Jim visited me at the ranch and fed the cows with me. As Jim opened the feed sack, my 2000-pound bull put his head squarely in Jim's back. Believe me, the Houston boy quickly learned *not* to get between the bull and the feed sack!!!

I am excited about Jim joining the BGCT as its Theologian in Residence. He is an excellent choice for this position. He can now travel the state – preaching, teaching, and encouraging persons to love Christ and support the BGCT. I think he will have a remarkable ministry in this new position.

Jim's sermon that Sunday spoke to me about how God leads us, prepares a way for us, and guides us even when we are lost, afraid, and unsure of where we are going. I need reminders of that, as I tend to veer off the road pretty often.

Later that morning, at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, I watched as the CLC presented Phil's award. I was so proud to be there as a guest of the family for this special moment. His widow, Carolyn, continues to live the same grace that Phil lived.

At Wilshire that morning, George Mason preached on the importance of discipline to an athlete in achieving his or her goals. George, who preached from *1 Corinthians 9:24-27*, was once a quarterback for the University of Miami Hurricanes.

To be honest, I found myself feeling guilty during George's sermon. When I ran a marathon in 1979, I figured I would continue running throughout my life. In fact, I had dreamed of one day running a marathon with my sons. However, I did not keep up my training. It was simply a lack of discipline on my part.

But I found myself experiencing, during both Jim's sermon and George's sermon, something beyond my feeling of guilt. Both sermons reminded me of what makes really good preaching – that is, explaining a biblical text in a way that touches people deep in their souls . . . reaching down into someone's heart and reminding them of God's love and care and concern.

That's really what good preaching is – touching the soul with words that open up the heart to hear and respond to the spirit of God.

In their sermons, preachers show us their concept of God – their understanding of the nature and character of God. I want a preacher who speaks the grace that comes straight from God's heart.

Finding the right pastor for a church isn't easy. But it's critically important to the health of the church. A pastor's understanding of the nature and character of God goes way beyond his or her preaching. It shows up in the way that they behave toward the members of their church – Is the pastor a dictator or a shepherd? Does the pastor encourage everyone to serve according to their call from God – or does the pastor use a legalistic theology to restrict God's call?

Some of you reading this are looking for a pastor right now. Please let us know if your church is without a pastor, so that we can send you our "Help for Pastor Search Committees" packet. And feel free to call us and ask about persons whose résumés you have received. You want a pastor who understands the nature and character of God – not someone who has charisma but intends to "rule" the church.

A good biblical preacher will be one who searches the heart of God and knows his or her own heart, especially his or her own struggles to be faithful, and is willing to share that struggle with you.

I am grateful that my friends Jim and George touched my soul, reaching down and poking my heart with the spirit of God. I am so grateful that my own pastor has that gift as well. I make a special effort to get to church every Sunday that I'm in town. I love the singing, but the preaching is special to me.

I love the way that a man or woman called of God can reach down and touch me where I really live. A pastor like that can make any text come alive and speak to our deepest needs. I hope that, in your lifetime, each of you has a pastor who does that for you. It is very special.

I am often asked about the difference between a traditional, moderate Baptist church and a Fundamentalist church. My answer can be boiled down to a few simple questions. Does your pastor preach grace or legalism? Are all allowed to serve as God calls them – regardless of gender – or does a legalistic interpretation of Scripture restrict that call? Does your church welcome people who have failed and are seeking forgiveness and renewal? It's not hard to understand the difference. It ultimately boils down to whether the church practices grace or legalism.

This year, we are celebrating 400 years of the Baptist tradition. For 400 years, the Baptist tradition has stood for freedom and grace in Christ. This freedom is *not* something that Texas Baptists Committed invented 20 years ago. Freedom in Christ is God-given, and it is biblical. We believe that every soul is free to go to God without the help of any human priest – Christ is our High Priest and no other. We also believe that every soul is free to read and interpret Scripture under the leadership of the Holy Spirit – again, without any human intervention.

So again, I want a pastor who encourages those who hear God's call, and who preaches God's Word in a way that reaches deep into people's souls and helps them to hear God's voice calling them to follow Christ and to serve Him.

Thank God for good preachers!