A lush green forest with a dirt path leading through it. The trees are tall and thin, with dense foliage. The path is made of dirt and leads into the distance. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

A  
PERSONAL  
HISTORY

FISHER HUMPHREYS

A  
PERSONAL  
HISTORY



A  
PERSONAL  
HISTORY

Fisher Humphreys

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To

Camille Grace Humphreys

Kate Elizabeth Humphreys

Jane Margaret Humphreys

and in memory of

Fisher August Humphreys (2006)

with love and hope

from Granddaddy

and in memory of

Stephanie Caroline Humphreys Hoffman (1965–2020)

with love and hope

from Daddy

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A PERSONAL HISTORY

## PREFACE

The Bible is filled with stories about people's lives. The four Gospels contain many stories about the life of Jesus, and the Book of Acts contains many stories about the first followers of Jesus. In the years following the events recorded in the New Testament, Christian writers not only copied and preserved the biblical stories, they also added new ones. They wrote about martyrs, missionaries, bishops, saints of the deserts, theologians, Christian rulers, and founders of religious orders.

Of course, those were all important people who made a big difference in the world. Is there any justification for telling the stories of ordinary people who made at most a tiny difference in the world? Theologically, the Christian belief that all human beings have been created in God's image and the belief that God loves and cares for every person without exception, suggest that the telling of any person's story is an appropriate activity for Christians.

And there is something else. Somewhere in my forties it occurred to me that if one of my parents or grandparents had written down stories about his or her life or about the lives of his or her ancestors, I would treasure that book. It was a short move from there to the idea that my children and grandchildren, and perhaps in the future their children, might someday come to treasure a book like that. That is when I decided to write this book. I have written it with my immediate family in mind.

Other potential readers include my extended family, my friends, my former students, people who are interested in Christian theology and how it is taught, people who are studying the controversy that convulsed the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s, and people who have an interest in Baptist life or in church life generally in America from the 1950s until the present.

I am grateful for the help I have received as I was writing this book. My wife Caroline has helped me to remember things that have happened in our family's life, and she also offered wise comments about one of the early versions of the book. My sister Ruth Talbot has reminded me about many things about our parents and our sister and brother and about life in our hometown. My former pastor Sarah Jackson Shelton, who is

the best story-teller I have ever known, has offered helpful comments on an early version of the book, especially on the narrative portions. The best editor I have ever known, Rebecca England, has once again done her magic and made the book better than it otherwise would have been.

Of course, the responsibility for errors, asperities, and oversights is mine alone. And I do expect there will be some errors. I expect this because, in the process of working through my files, I discovered documents and photographs that showed me that some of my memories have been mistaken.

In writing this book I have sometimes followed a practice which I observed in the novels of a young Irish author, Sally Rooney. She does not use quotation marks. When I was not sure of the exact words used by some of the people whom I quote in this book, I sometimes omitted the quotation marks.

When I was a child my mother sometimes said, “If you can’t say something nice about someone, don’t say anything at all.” I have tried to follow that maxim in this book. I just don’t see the point of writing unkind things about people, dead or alive.

In my mind this book is similar but not identical to an autobiography or a memoir. I think of autobiographies as being focused almost exclusively either on one’s professional life or on one’s personal life, and in this book I have written at length about both. I think of memoirs as reflections on selected events or discrete parts of one’s life, and I have included events from throughout my entire life. For that reason I have entitled it *A Personal History*. I have dedicated it to our three beautiful granddaughters, Camille, Kate, and Jane, and to the memory of their beautiful brother, Fisher, who died the day he was born, and to the memory of our beautiful daughter Stephanie who died while I was writing this book.

## *Chapter 1*

# HOMETOWN

I was born in Columbus, Mississippi, on February 5, 1939. I lived there until I left home for college in 1956. Columbus is a town of about 25,000 people in northeastern Mississippi, about five miles from the Alabama state line. Most of the town lies between two bodies of water, both of which have Choctaw names. The larger is the Tombigbee River, and its name means “coffin maker.” It is navigable and is part of the Tennessee–Tombigbee Waterway. The smaller is the Luxapalila Creek; its name means “flying turtle.” As a child I liked to put messages in bottles and throw them off a bridge into the Luxapalila.

Columbus was founded in 1810, seven years before Mississippi became a state, and in the nineteenth century it was a thriving town. It had beautiful homes and churches and an opera house. During the Civil War the church in which I grew up, the First Methodist Church, was used as a hospital, as were other church buildings in town. Because the Union army did not attack Columbus, it still has several beautiful ante-bellum mansions. There is an annual Spring Pilgrimage in which some of the grand old homes are open to the public. As a young boy I frequently played and stayed overnight in one of them, Shadowlawn, where one of my childhood friends, Ed Edmonson, lived. As a teenager I, along with other members of Boy Scout Troop 35, served as a guide during the pilgrimage, riding with out-of-town visitors in their cars and giving them directions to the various homes.

During the Civil War both Union and Confederate soldiers were buried in the cemetery in Columbus. The year after the war ended four women in Columbus decorated the graves of Union soldiers as well as of Confederate soldiers. This was the first of several events that eventually led to creation of the federal holiday known as Memorial Day or Decoration Day, which is celebrated on the last Monday of May. Today the cemetery is called Friendship Cemetery. My father and his parents are buried there.

## A PERSONAL HISTORY

Despite these and many other reminders of the Confederacy, I never felt any affinity for the Confederacy or the Lost Cause or states' rights. For as long as I can remember, I have thought of myself as an American, not as a Southerner or a Mississippian. As a child I was puzzled that some people thought differently about this.



Columbus is the home of the Columbus Air Force Base, originally a Strategic Air Command base and today a base for training pilots. The base is located nine miles north of town. When I was a child its importance to me was that there was an Officers' Lake north and west of town. It was open to the public, and Mother and we children swam there frequently. Between my freshman and sophomore years in college, I worked for a year as a payroll clerk for a construction company that was building several hundred officers' homes on the base. It was temporary work; I was already planning to become a Christian minister and so needed to return to college. It was my first full-time secular employment, and it was a good learning experience. One event that was eye-opening for me concerned income tax payments for the hundreds of construction workers and their foremen. At the end of the year we discovered a discrepancy of ten cents between what our records showed we had sent to the government and what they showed we had deducted from the workers' wages. The five of us in the payroll office worked for almost a week to locate where the ten-cent discrepancy had happened so we could correct it. We are all relieved when we found it.



Columbus is the home also of the Beneke Corporation which in my childhood was said to be the largest manufacturer of toilet seats in the world. When I was a child my mother worked for several years as an administrative assistant to Ed Beneke, the president of the company.



Columbus is also the home of the oldest state-supported college for women in the United States. Founded in 1874, today it is known as Mississippi University for Women; when I was a child it was

Mississippi State College for Women or “MSCW” or simply “the W.” In my childhood I lived with my parents, my brother, and my sisters in a house across the street from the W, at 324 11th Street South; the house is still there and is owned by the W which uses it as a counseling center.

When we were children my friends and I roamed the college campus. We liked to buy candy and ice cream at the Goose, the campus hangout. On the campus there was a large goldfish pond with goldfish that seemed to be about a foot long. Alongside of and connected to one of the two– or three–story buildings was a fire escape shaped like a silo, but instead of a circular stairway inside, it had a circular slide. For obvious reasons the door at the bottom could never be locked, so we would pry the door open and painstakingly climb our way up the slide and then slide back down. On at least two occasions a campus policeman shouted at us and we ran away from the campus to escape him.

Today there is a large brick building, Parkinson Hall, across the street from our house, but in my childhood there was an athletic field there. There the college girls, as we always called them, practiced archery, softball, and soccer, usually wearing uniforms of white blouses and blue shorts. When I was about six years old some of them who were playing softball invited me to take a turn at bat. The pitcher miscalculated and hit me with the softball, knocking me to the ground. I was immediately surrounded by several alarmed college girls, which I thought was nice. I wasn’t badly hurt.

One of the college professors, Dr. Painter, became legendary in Columbus because he read literature aloud to children. I was told that he had a radio program, but I don’t remember listening to it. I do remember that on several occasions he came and read to us in our house, and I assume he was a friend of one or both of my parents. Today there is a Painter Hall on the campus.

As a four–year–old I attended the nursery school on the campus of the W, and the following year I went to the kindergarten on the campus. When I was six years old I entered the first grade at the Demonstration School. This was a public school but was located on the campus of the W. It was a laboratory school for training student teachers who were studying at the W. All three schools were located within one block of our

house. I have always loved school, and I think that one of the reasons is that these three were such good ones, staffed as they were by the college and its gifted teachers. It was a gift to grow up in the shadow of a such a good college.

My love for school began very early. Each morning our nursery school teacher asked each student to open his or her mouth; she inserted a tongue depressor, and if our throats were red, she told us that we had “an infection” and could not attend school that day. One morning my throat was red, and the teacher told my mother that she would have to take me back home. I cried all the way home. I was 4 or 5 years old.



Except for the antebellum homes, the Air Base, the Beneke Corporation, and the college, Columbus was, I think, a fairly ordinary, Southern, county seat town. Its streets were paved, though you did not have to travel far before most of them either ended or changed into gravel or dirt roads. There was a bustling downtown section whose center was the intersection of Main Street and Market Street, with buildings two or three or four stories high, numerous retail stores, banks, and professional offices. There were three movie theaters, the Varsity, the Princess, and the Dixie. Most of the traffic was cars and trucks, but occasionally a mule-drawn wagon appeared on the paved streets; I don't remember seeing anyone on horseback in the downtown area. My friends and I liked to put on skates and hitch a ride on the wagons by holding onto a piece of lumber called a tongue that extended a foot or two behind each wagon. Adults seemed to think that this was dangerous, but I never understood why, since the wagons didn't go as fast as we went when we were free skating or riding our bicycles.

Our house on 11th Street was small but it had a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bath. It was heated by a large in-floor gas heater and a smaller built-in gas heater in the wall of the bathroom, and for cooling we had floor fans. We had electricity and overhead light fixtures. In my very early years we had an icebox, a heavily insulated wooden box that was kept cool by putting a large block of ice in a compartment at the top, but by the time I was in elementary

school we had a refrigerator. The stove and oven were gas. Our radio was inside a piece of wooden furniture about the size of a small chest of drawers located in the living room. Occasionally our family gathered to listen to a show as a family. We didn't have television. In most ways our house was up-to-date for the times. We knew people who heated with coal in built-in fireplaces, cooked on wood-burning stoves, didn't have electricity, and used kerosene lamps for nighttime lighting.

Not everyone had a telephone, but we did. Our number was 817. At that time telephones didn't have dials; all calls were made through an operator. In Columbus all the operators were women. To place a call, you picked up a phone and the operator said, "Number, please." You told her the number you wanted to call and she connected you. If you couldn't remember the number, you could tell the operator the name of the person you were calling and there was a good chance she would know the number and connect you. Long distance calls cost extra, and in our family we only called long distance at Christmas or in crises. We didn't have a party line, but many people did because they were cheaper than private lines. On party lines, different families shared the same telephone number. When an operator placed a call to a party line number, the phones would ring in all the houses with that number. The operator would signify the right family by the number of rings: one ring for this family, two rings for that family, three rings for another family, and so on. Party lines encouraged eavesdropping, because all the houses on a party line could listen in whenever anyone was talking.

Until the end of World War II in 1945, most cars were black. They were tall and had running boards to enable you to step up into them. The glass of the windshields was flat, not curved. Many cars still had hand cranks in case the batteries went dead, and they had starter buttons. If a parked car was in a forward gear rather than in neutral, and if you pushed the starter button, the car would lurch forward even without a key in the ignition switch. When I was about seven years old, my younger brother Hunter and I managed to lurch a car into the closed door of our garage, stopping only when the door splintered. When we realized the damage we had done, we became alarmed and hid behind the garage, but it didn't do any good; our father found us and gave us a spanking anyway.

On the north side of town there was a public park called Lee Park which our family visited frequently when we were very young. When I was about six years old, Hunter and I had a dangerous experience there. The water in the lake of the park had partially receded, leaving a wide, muddy, quicksand-like area around the perimeter. Hunter and I walked out onto the mud and began slowly to sink. At first we thought this was fun, but then we realized we had sunk to our waists and were still sinking and couldn't pull ourselves free. We yelled for help and our mother came running. Several adults saw what was happening to us, but no one seemed to know what to do—no one but Mother. She found two or three broad wooden planks which she laid down end to end on top of the mud. She was able to walk on the planks without sinking, and she pulled us to safety. If she was frightened, she didn't show it.

Columbus always felt to me like a safe, pleasant place to live. Even when I was very young, I walked and rode my bicycle wherever I liked, and my friends did the same thing.

I was about ten years old when I began to notice that African Americans, who must have been about half of the town's population, lived in different neighborhoods than whites. One reason I hadn't noticed this sooner is that our house sat on the invisible boundary between a black and a white neighborhood. In front of our house, which faced east, was the W, and immediately behind our house was a large African American church. My bedroom was at the back of our house, so for years on Sunday evenings, when I had gone to bed for the night, I could hear the evening worship services of the church. The preaching was energetic, and the music was heavenly. I don't remember the words that were sung or preached, but I do remember that it gave me a feeling of well-being to hear that beautiful music as I drifted off to sleep.

The earliest playmate whom I can remember lived across the street from the church. His nickname was Boo Jack, he was black, and he was three or four years older than me. Beginning when I was about five years old, we played together almost every day during the summers and many days during school months. In addition to playing with me, Boo Jack tried to teach me how to fish. It never occurred to me to ask why we attended different schools. Several of my white friends went to

elementary schools other than the one I did. Nor did I ask why he and his black friends sat in the balcony at the Varsity Theater on Saturday mornings while we white kids sat downstairs.

When I was still in elementary school, Boo Jack was killed in a knife fight outside the Varsity. No one told me that he had died. I only found out a few days later when I missed him and asked where he was. I suppose my parents thought it would be too distressing to tell me that he had died in such a violent way. This is the first death I can remember.

When I did eventually realize that the schools, churches, social clubs, and some of the businesses in Columbus were racially segregated, I didn't find it particularly disturbing. I suppose that I simply assumed that that is how societies are organized. I had never lived in a racially integrated society. I had never seen an integrated society depicted in movies, and we didn't have a television set. The books I read as a boy, books about Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan and the Hardy boys, didn't depict racially integrated societies, except that Tarzan had friends who were black Africans.

Despite the segregation of institutions, contact between whites and blacks was constant. All of the contacts I experienced or knew about were positive. Not until years later did I become aware that there must have been many negative contacts that I had not known about. What was tragic was not the nature of our contacts, but the assumption—for the people I knew, it was always an assumption, not a consciously adopted or defended belief—that whites were entitled to be the dominant group. I don't think I ever talked to anyone about any of this when I was a child. Today I wonder whether Columbus felt like a safe and pleasant place to Boo Jack the way it did to me.

I believe that racial segregation is evil. In fact, I find all class distinctions intrinsically evil. I have lived for three years in England where class distinctions are public knowledge. You're either born into royalty or nobility, or you aren't. Though I am an Anglophile and love many things about England, I find its class distinctions dehumanizing and appalling. Here in America class distinctions are more subtle and include things such as education, income and wealth, type of occupation, race, and cultural interests. These distinctions seem to me almost as dehumanizing

and appalling as the British ones, and more insidious. I think they display an outlook that is incompatible with the Christian teaching that all human beings are created “a little lower than God” (Psalms 8:5) and are bearers of the image of God (Genesis 1:27). I like the subversiveness of the joke that in America football is a great democratizer because at football games a doctor who makes \$200,000 a year feels comfortable sitting next to a plumber who makes \$300,000 a year.

The novelist Walker Percy had a point when he wrote that America’s original sin is its mistreatment of persons of color. I was born into and grew up in that original sin. It would have been better to grow up in a beloved community in which differences such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender did not separate people or generate antagonisms. I am grateful for the Christian hope that Christ “is our peace” and that he has “broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph. 2:14).

Despite segregation and racism, Columbus was for me a pleasant hometown, and I am glad to have lived there for my first seventeen years. None of my family members has lived there since 1965, and almost all of my friends from there are gone, and Columbus is not on an interstate highway, so I rarely visit anymore. I have lost touch with the town, but I hope it as good a home for its residents today as it was for me in my childhood and youth.

## CHAPTER 2

### FAMILY

Some sources say that the name “Humphreys” derives from the Germanic words *hun* (warrior) and *frid* (peace), a peaceful warrior. Others associate it with the French *l’homme vrai*, a true man. It is both a surname and a given name, and it has been spelled more than a dozen different ways. One of the earliest persons known to have had the name was Saint Humphrey, a bishop in northern France who died in 781 a.d. Persons with the name had arrived in America no later than the 1640s.

#### Grandparents

I knew just five of my ancestors, my parents and three of my grandparents. The grandparent I never knew was my paternal grandfather Charles Fisher Humphreys. He was born in 1877 in the town of Paris in Henry County in northwestern Tennessee. His grandfather was Henry Harry Humphreys. Henry and his brothers Thomas and Abner were among the first settlers of Henry County, arriving there from North Carolina in 1825. (In the back of this book there is a genealogical chart).

Charles Fisher Humphreys was called “Fisher,” and he had a career in business management, sometimes as an owner and sometimes as an employee. He owned and managed a shoe store in Paris, and he owned an Overland Car dealership there. In Birmingham, Alabama, he managed a clothing store, and he managed a Buick car dealership in Columbus. It was in Birmingham that he met my grandmother Ruth Elizabeth Alleman. She had moved from her home in Warsaw, Indiana, in 1910, to teach in a kindergarten in an orphanage in Birmingham called Mercy Home. It was created by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and managed by a woman named Mrs. Ramsey. Grandmother Ruth also worked in a department store. In 1911 she and my grandfather were married by the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. They moved around for two years and arrived in Paris in January 1913.

## A PERSONAL HISTORY

My father, Fisher Hugo Humphreys, their only child, was born there later that year. In 1923 the family moved to Columbus.

My grandfather died in Columbus in 1938, the year before I was born. Grandmother Ruth remarried two years after I was born. Her second husband was Davis Shackelford Cox, Jr., known as “Dee.” Dee owned some small dairy farms—seven, I think—, one of which I remember well because on it I was chased by a cow after I had climbed the fence into the cow

pen. Dee also owned a milk processing plant in Columbus. It was called Cicco (pronounced “psycho”!), an acronym for Columbus Ice Cream and Creamery Company. It was the first creamery in Mississippi to use the pasteurization process. Even during the austerities brought on by World War II, we always had plenty of milk and ice cream in our home.

When I was young, I thought of Dee as my grandfather, though he was that only by virtue of his marriage to my grandmother. Dee had three daughters from his first marriage whom I knew slightly. Their names were Ann, Louise, and Mary Dee.

In my childhood I spent a lot of time in two elegant homes. One was Shadowlawn on College Street. The other was Granddaddy Dee and Grandmother Ruth’s home. In their living room were deep carpets,



Charles Fisher Humphreys and  
Ruth Elizabeth Alleman Humphreys

antique furniture, a grand piano, a large chandelier, and several paintings. Even as a very young child I could sense the difference between their house and our own smaller, more Spartan home.

Grandmother Ruth seemed to enjoy having us grandchildren visit, and we were there often. She taught us card games and dominoes and gave us copies of *National Geographic* to read and fed us all the ice cream we could eat. We were fascinated by her hobby of making pretty jewelry from tiny seashells. She brought some of the shells from Bonita Springs, Florida, where she and Dee had a big beach house located on a large tract of waterfront land.

We spent weeks at a time at the beach house when we were children. We loved to play on the white sandy beach and in the Gulf. On one memorable occasion Dee shot a panther on the beach with a .22 rifle. This was foolhardy because the rifle was not powerful enough to kill the panther and might have incited him to attack. But it did drive him away from the beach. I visited that beach briefly in 2015, and as far as I could tell there are no longer any free-standing homes there, just high-rise condominiums and apartment buildings.

Grandmother Ruth was, I think, a beautiful lady. A few years before she died she told me that in her youth she had dated one of the sons of the evangelist Billy Sunday who lived at Winona Lake, Indiana, which is adjacent to her home in Warsaw. She said that their romance was undermined by Ma Sunday, the mother of the young man, who disliked my grandmother for reasons Grandmother did not understand. Perhaps it was that experience that led my grandmother to distance herself from the church.

Grandmother Ruth was an important person in my childhood. Unfortunately, I saw her less frequently following our parents' divorce in 1952, but after I left home for college in 1956, she and I began to write to each other occasionally.



My mother's parents were Henry James Sharkey and Lovie Evelyn Wales Sharkey. For many years Granddaddy Sharkey managed lumber mills at a time when portable mills were sometimes taken to



Henry James Sharkey and  
Lovie Evelyn Wales Sharkey

the timber rather than timber being brought to stationary mills. As a result, the family lived in at least four states in those years—Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. In later years Granddaddy and Grandmother Sharkey settled in Tallahassee, Florida. There Granddaddy sold used cars for a few years. Near the end of his life the two of them worked together for several years managing a small,

independent motel located a mile or two down Apalachee Parkway from the state capitol. Granddaddy took care of business matters and the customers, and Grandmother oversaw the cleaning staff.

My parents, brother, sisters, and I visited the Sharkeys repeatedly across the years, and I knew them pretty well. They were both from Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana. Granddaddy Sharkey looked a little bit like Santa Claus but without the beard. He was serene and seemed to have all the time in the world to spend with us grandchildren.

Grandmother Sharkey was as anxious as Granddaddy was serene. She was thin and fastidious and a marvelous cook. Granddaddy died when they were living in Tallahassee, and she outlived him by about 18 years. When she was about 90, her only living child, Dan Sharkey, insisted that she move into a retirement community in Little Rock, where he lived. She complained and resisted at first but finally gave in. Dan told me that after a few days she stopped complaining. He said that he thought that what happened was that all her life she had waited on other people and that after a couple of weeks in the retirement home

where people were waiting on her, she decided the retirement home was pretty nice after all. She was 93 when she died.

Late in his life Granddaddy Sharkey's youngest brother, Charlie Sharkey, made an audio-tape on which he recounts some of the history of the Sharkey family. He said that his grandparents, my great-great-grandparents, were Peter Sharkey and Elizabeth Christie. Elizabeth, who was called Betty, was a daughter of Lord James Christie of County Cork in Ireland. Peter was a stable boy on their estate, and in 1837 he and Betty eloped, with the result that Betty was more or less disowned by her parents. In 1849 they emigrated to the United States; the immigration passenger list in New Orleans shows that Peter and Betty brought with them five children. One of them was my great-grandfather John Calhoun Sharkey (Jack), who was then three years old. They moved to Amite, Louisiana, north of Lake Pontchartrain, where Peter owned and ran a pub and where their family continued to grow. Great-uncle Charlie was born several years after these events, but I have no reason to doubt his account.

My mother Hilda was the oldest child and only daughter of Henry and Lovie Sharkey. The second child was James; he was a sergeant in the Army Air Force and was killed in the crash of a military plane over the Aleutian Islands in 1942. The whereabouts of his body is unknown. In 2018 the Army contacted me with a request for a DNA sample to help them determine whether some recently discovered remains were those of James. They were not. I am glad to know that the Army invests money and personnel in trying to locate the remains of soldiers who have died while on active duty in wartime.

The youngest child of my grandparents was Dan, and I knew him and his wife Ede pretty well even though we never lived in the same state. They were the only living uncle and aunt I had. Like his older brother James, Dan served in the Army Air Force during World War II, and afterwards he studied for a brief time at Oxford University before returning to the United States. He had a successful career in retail business, rising to a senior vice-presidency at Dillard's. He and Ede had four children, James, Dink, John, and Bob. They were my only first cousins but, since I am more than a decade older than the oldest of

them and since we never lived in the same state, I never got to know them well.

Dan and Ede lived most of their lives in Arkansas, which was Ede's home state. Her family were involved in public life there. Her brother Joe Purcell was at one time lieutenant governor of the state, but in 1982 he lost the Democratic nomination for governor to Bill Clinton. Following Dan's retirement, he and Ede moved to Florida where they played golf together and Dan dabbled in real estate and other business ventures. They were living in Florida at the time of their deaths.

## Parents

For as long as I can remember, my father Fisher Hugo Humphreys was called "Hugo." However, at his funeral I met some people who knew him when he was in high school and who called him "Fisher."

Daddy was born in Paris, Tennessee, in 1913, but he and his parents moved to Columbus when he was nine years old and he thought of Columbus as his hometown. He attended Lee High School in Columbus. He was manager of the football team and business manager of the school newspaper, and he starred in a school play. After graduating he immediately took a long automobile trip up the East Coast, apparently by himself. Years later, when I graduated from college, three friends and I took a long automobile trip, driving all the way to Mexico City. At that time I didn't know that I was replicating something my father had done when he graduated from high school.



Fisher Hugo Humphreys

In 1931 my mother came to Columbus to attend MSCW, and she and my father met. Because of the Great Depression, she returned in 1932 to her hometown of Columbia, Mississippi, to work. I don't know how often the two of them saw each other over the next few years. In 1937 they were married by the minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus.

Here are some of my early memories of Daddy. He was short and trim and had wavy brown hair. He worked for the Seminole Manufacturing Company, a large company in Columbus that made men's work clothes. World War II was under way, but Daddy wasn't drafted into the military, perhaps because of his age (he was 27), perhaps because he had a child, or perhaps because his company became a war industry, manufacturing uniforms for military personnel.

Daddy's hobbies included photography and oil painting. There were always lots of books in our house. Mother read a lot, and it's possible Daddy did also, but I don't remember that.

I am 17 months older than my brother Hunter, and as children he and I were competitive and frequently argued and tussled. When I was about 8 years old our father, no doubt annoyed by our bickering, bought some full-size boxing gloves and demanded that Hunter and I fight each other, which we reluctantly did. His plan may have worked; my sense is that Hunter and I were a bit less combative after that.

When I was in the sixth grade, I graduated from Cub Scouts to Boy Scouts, and Daddy volunteered to act as an assistant to the Scout Master of Troop 35. He went along on camp-outs and helped me with work toward merit badges.

At about that same time Daddy drove his mother, my Grandmother Ruth, to Indiana to visit some of her family members, and they took me along. There were no interstate highways then, and the trip took several days. In order to make the trip, we had to follow paper maps. When I was young I collected maps, which were available free at service stations. Eventually I became disenchanted with the collection when I realized that they couldn't be fitted together to make one huge map of the country, because they were on different scales.

On the way up we stopped in Paris, Tennessee, and spent the night in the home of my father's aunt Jennie and uncle Adolphus Paschall; Jennie was the only living sister of my father's father. I slept that night upstairs in an old-fashioned feather bed, the only time I've ever slept in a feather bed. As I drifted off to sleep, I could hear the adults visiting downstairs. Later in the trip, after we had left Grandmother Ruth with her family, Daddy and I attended a Notre Dame football game together. That was my first time to see a college football game.



Mother was born in 1913 in Tangipahoa Parish at Genessee near Natalbany, Louisiana. She spent her high school years in Columbia, Mississippi, and graduated from high school there in 1931. Then she moved to Columbus to attend the W.

In my earliest memories she was short and slim and tan and had black hair which she wore close to her head with a bun in back. She was very beautiful. She seemed always to be present when we children were growing up, though in fact she worked away from home for most of those years. It was she who managed our house and our home. She was an avid reader. She told me that when *Gone with the Wind* was published in 1936, as soon she was able to get a copy, she read the entire book in one uninterrupted sitting over a two-day and one-night period. She was a good cook even though she herself ate very little. She always smoked cigarettes and drank beer, as did Daddy. Perhaps smoking kept them from gaining weight; in any case, I doubt if either one ever weighed much more than a hundred and thirty pounds.

I think that initially Mother and Daddy had a happy marriage. I know they had an active social life. We children got to know some of their friends on the frequent occasions when our family and their families gathered, in homes or at a fish camp, for swimming parties, cookouts, and other events. During World War II, as part of the war effort, we raised rabbits in a hutch in our side yard. I remember going to a gathering where several families met together and brought wild game and other meat to contribute to a Brunswick stew that was being cooked in a pot



Hilda Sharkey Humphreys

over an open fire. The pot was black and must have been about 3 feet tall. Our contribution to the stew was rabbit.

Here are some of my early memories of Mother. She taught me early on that sickness is caused by “germs” and that germs are too small for us to see. I must have been about four years old when I found in our side yard a black bug that was so tiny that its legs weren’t visible, but I knew it was alive because it was crawling. I told Mother I had found a germ and showed it to her. She said that

it wasn’t small enough to be a germ, but I couldn’t imagine how we would know about anything smaller than that. I hadn’t yet learned about microscopes. This is my earliest memory of a scientific kind.

Because Mother worked outside our home, she arranged for various African American women to care for us children. Over the years there were several such women who were known as “the help.” One day when I was about five I was misbehaving, and our care-giver, Annie, told me that if I didn’t straighten up the devil would get me. I told her she was wrong because the devil isn’t real. I knew there were stories about the devil, but I thought they were fiction like the stories I read in books. But Annie still insisted there is a real devil. When Mother returned home I asked her to tell Annie that there isn’t a devil, and she did. Since Mother was the highest authority on all subjects, I had been vindicated and had won the argument. That is my earliest memory of a theological conversation.

World War II ended in September 1945, when I was six years old. Everyone was thrilled, and I remember going out to a Chinaberry tree in

our front yard and swinging on a limb and yelling “The war is over!” I did this over and over. I must have been very loud because Mother came outside and told me I needed to celebrate a little more quietly. That is my earliest political memory.

One afternoon when I was about six or seven years old, Mother was sitting in a sling chair in our side yard visiting with some of her lady friends. She asked me to go to the Southern Drug Store to get something for them—Cokes, I think. The Southern was an old-fashioned drug store with a soda fountain and dark wood floors that occasionally had splinters, and despite the splinters we children loved to go there because they made delicious fresh limeades that cost a nickel and they would let us read comic books without buying them. Mother gave me a dollar to make the purchase for her and her friends. I had never before had that much money, and I took the assignment very seriously, jamming the money deep down into my pocket. I walked rather than rode my bike, probably because I would be bringing something home and my bike didn’t have a basket; baskets were for girls. The drugstore was four blocks away, and for two of those blocks I was walking alongside an ornamental iron fence that surrounded part of the campus of the W. I had a stick and was dragging it along the fence as I walked.

When I got to the drugstore, I discovered to my horror that I had lost the dollar bill. I had never before had such an alarming experience of failure. For me, this was a tragedy. I walked back home slowly and carefully, looking on the sidewalks and in the grass and the street for the dollar bill, but I couldn’t find it. When I got home, I burst into tears and began apologizing to Mother for losing so much money. She didn’t scold me at all but hugged me and assured me it was all right. This is my earliest memory of grace and forgiveness.

When I was about eight years old, Mother volunteered to collect money for the Salvation Army during the Christmas holidays. On several days she took me with her, and at the corner of Main and Market and in the middle of crowds of holiday shoppers, I rang a hand-bell and encouraged people to donate to that good charity. That is my earliest memory of trying to help people who were poor.

My family and I were members of the First Methodist Church. My Sharkey ancestors were Irish Roman Catholics, but when Granddaddy Sharkey married Grandmother, he joined her Methodist church, so Mother grew up as a Methodist and was a member of the First Methodist Church in Columbus. I don't remember Daddy ever attending church and Mother attended only occasionally, but we children were there almost every Sunday. Perhaps the only times our parents were together without us children around were Sunday mornings when we children were in Sunday School.

When I was fourteen years old, I attended a Christian camp with some friends. Camp Lake Forest promoted a different version of Christian faith than the one at the First Methodist Church. At the camp I underwent a conversion. Previously I had thought that faith in God was one of many things that matter in life, and now I realized that faith in God is the most important thing in life. Also, faith was no longer just something I had inherited. It was now something I had intentionally embraced, and I had done that because I had awakened to the fact that it was so important. I began to think self-consciously of myself as a Christian.

By this time our parents had been divorced for a year and we children were living at home with Mother. She was not inclined toward my newly acquired intentional version of Christian faith, but she handled the awkward situation beautifully. She listened to me and understood what I was saying, and she took me to meet with our minister at the First Methodist Church to talk about my experience. That conversation went well until I happened to mention eternal life. As if to correct me the minister said, "You mean abundant life." I responded that it's abundant life followed by everlasting life, but the minister wouldn't agree to that. That was my first encounter with someone whose faith was at least partially accommodated to secularism; he wasn't comfortable with my affirming the Christian hope for life after death.

I was disappointed, and afterwards I told Mother I wanted to join the First Baptist Church where the minister wasn't uneasy talking about eternal life and where many of my friends were members. She told me that I could do that, but she asked me to wait for one year to be sure I

really wanted to make the change. I waited, and when I was baptized at First Baptist Church a year later, Mother was present.

I wasn't present when Mother decided to stop participating in the First Methodist Church, but I know what happened. One Sunday the minister preached a sermon condemning divorce. Because divorce was so rare then, Mother may have been the only divorcee in that large congregation. In any case, she was embarrassed. To the best of my knowledge that was the last time Mother ever attended a worship service in any church, though she did continue to attend weddings and funerals.

Despite the fact that her financial situation was precarious, Mother always managed to be present at major events in my life. She was present at my college graduation in 1961, and she seemed to feel very proud, perhaps because she herself had been forced by the Great Depression to leave college without graduating. When Caroline and I were married in 1963, Mother gave a lovely rehearsal dinner at the King Edward Hotel in Jackson, Mississippi. She was also present the following year when I graduated from the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. I still have the present she gave me at that time, a copy of the *Harper's Dictionary of the Bible*. I suspect that if she had still been living when I graduated from Oxford University in 1967, she would have found a way to be there, too.

She and I exchanged letters from time to time when I was away at college and seminary. I remember two letters in particular. During college I had read some stories by William Faulkner and was intrigued by his extremely long sentences, so I wrote Mother a 3- or 4-page letter consisting of a single sentence. My sister Ruth was living at home then, and she told me that Mother was delighted by my letter and showed it to some of her friends.

It was at about the same time that Mother sent me the most remarkable letter I have ever received. It was typed rather than handwritten. Mother had made multiple carbon copies and sent them to various members of the family; my copy was a carbon copy. In the letter Mother said that she wanted us all to know that recently she and her friend Sally Mauck, who was a widow, had flown to New York to go with Sally's boyfriend and one of his friends to the Army-Navy football

game and then to go into the city for a few days of partying. She was about fifty years old at the time. I wish I had kept that letter.

In the late summer of 1965 Mother left Columbus. Only our youngest sister Ruth was still living at home with Mother, and the two of them moved to Tallahassee where Mother's parents were living. Unknown to anyone but herself and her doctor and possibly her parents, Mother had a large brain tumor, and she made that move in order to be near her parents as the end approached. She died on the Ides of March, 1966, and is buried next to her parents in Tallahassee. I was at Oxford and flew back to the United States for her funeral.

Our daughter Stephanie had been born in Jackson in late November of 1965, so in principle it would have been possible for Mother to have seen Stephanie, but she never did. By the time Stephanie was born, I was in England, and it wasn't feasible for Caroline to drive to Tallahassee so that Mother and Stephanie could be together. Also, since we didn't know Mother was terminally ill, there was no incentive to do that. I wish Mother and Stephanie could have met at least once. They were a lot alike, beautiful and free-spirited and very resourceful.

### Brother and Sisters

My brother Hunter was 17 months younger than me. His name, like mine, was a family name. Despite our names, neither of us ever cared much for fishing or hunting, but I like the fact that we had family names.

From a very young age Hunter was extremely independent. He read a lot and usually played by himself, though sometimes he and I played together. We had a lovely experience together when I was about eight or nine years old. Hunter and I had ridden our bicycles toward the southern end of 11th Street near the place where the paved street became a country road. On the east side of the street we discovered a gentle slope covered in lush green grass leading down to a small stream. There were weeping willow trees alongside the stream. We played there for a long time, and then we rode back to the house very excited and begged Mother to come with us to see the "fairy land" we had discovered. Mother came along

and admired the place and never said a word to us about the stream being a drainage ditch or the grassy slope being a muddy mess.

When he was seventeen years old Hunter enlisted in the Army. He served for almost thirty years. The Army was a curious choice for him, since he didn't much like officers or anyone else in authority. At least twice after he had risen to the rank of staff sergeant he was demoted—he called it “busted”—for being disrespectful to some officers.

The Army immediately recognized that Hunter was brilliant, and they moved him into intelligence work. This took him to several different places in the world, most of them in Asia. He never married, but for many years had a long-distance relationship with a woman in Virginia whom he visited whenever he was in the United States.

Hunter and I rarely corresponded during his military years, but we re-connected near the end of his life when he bought a condo adjacent to Eglin Air Force base in the panhandle of Florida for his retirement home. I visited him there a few times, and we stayed in touch until he died unexpectedly in 1990. He was 48 years old. I officiated at his funeral at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington. In my remarks I said that I thought it was appropriate for Hunter to be buried adjacent to the Pentagon so he'd be able to keep an eye on the officers and other authorities whom he so disliked. I like to think that, apart from dying so young, Hunter had been able to do what he wanted to do with his life and was contented with the way things had turned out for him.



Our sister Dale was born in 1943. She had a twin named Hilda who died at birth, and for several years Dale's health was precarious. Our parents had a tiny room constructed in the corner of their bedroom; we called it the incubator. It was heavily insulated, had a large glass window in the door, and was kept very warm, almost hot. That made it possible for Dale to survive her early months.

I remember Dale's birth. I was riding my scooter on the sidewalk across the street from our house. An adult whose identity I don't remember came to tell me that Hunter and I had a new baby sister. I

think I said “Okay.” I know that I rode away unaware that anything special had just taken place.

During her school years Dale lived for one year with Grandmother Ruth and Dee in their beach house in Bonita Springs. After high school she attended Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi. She then moved to Texas to work in a department store; our uncle Dan Sharkey secured the position for her. There she met and married Wayne Banks, and they had a daughter, Suzann. Dale and Wayne eventually divorced, and Dale went through some difficult years personally and financially. She spent one of those years living in Florida with Hunter who had been experiencing some health problems. Later she married a man who cared deeply for her, Garland West.

Dale had a retentive memory, and if she had lived, this book would probably contain more stories about our childhood than it does. She kept up with all the family members and with many of her friends from Columbus. She was a sweet, caring person who seemed to love everyone she knew. She died in 2013, about a year after her husband Garland.

Dale and Hunter, our mother and father, and the three grandparents I knew have all died now, and I treasure the memories I have of them all. They enriched and influenced my life in many different ways. Occasionally I think of things I wish I knew about them or of questions I would like to ask them. Fortunately, there is one other family member with whom I can still talk.



Our parents’ fifth and last child is Ruth, named for our grandmother. She is twelve years younger than I am, but she and I have had a closer relationship than I had with Dale or Hunter.

Ruth was still living at home when Mother died, so she experienced the tragedy of Mother’s death more immediately than the others of us. After Mother’s funeral, Ruth came to live with Caroline and Stephanie and me at Oxford in England. When we returned to the United States in the mid-summer of 1967, Ruth moved to Texas to live with our sister Dale and her husband Wayne. Ruth completed high school a year later and went on to study English at Sam Houston State University

in Huntsville, Texas. There she met her future husband Ronnie Talbot, and following their marriage they settled in his hometown of Mexia, Texas. She had a long career as a social work case worker for the state of Texas. Ruth and Ronnie have two sons, Justin and Warren, and several grandchildren, and—ahead of me—three great-grandchildren.

Like Dale, Ruth has a retentive memory, and she has kept photographs and other reminders of the other members of our family. She is a wonderful sister. Several of the stories in this book are stories she remembered and reminded me of.

## Divorce

Our parents were divorced in 1952. They had been unhappy for many months, and their divorce was not amicable. I am not sure how upsetting this was to Hunter, Dale, and Ruth. To me, our parents' divorce was not nearly as upsetting as their chronic quarreling had been. I was too young to understand what their arguments were about, but I could feel the anger in their voices. After the divorce, life at home became calmer and more pleasant.

In the 1980s I read a remarkable story about two marriage counselors, David and Vera Mace. David Mace wrote the story, and he said that after many years of trying to help married couples address issues such as relating to in-laws, raising children, financial stress, sex, and infidelity, they had come to think that what made these issues so toxic in many marriages was the anger that pervades them all. As a result, the Maces changed their counseling strategy. They began to focus their therapy less on these issues and more on how couples could deal with the anger they naturally feel about these and other issues in such a way as not to be destructive of their marriage. They found that when couples managed their anger wisely, they were often able to work out the other issues. I think that may have been true in my parents' marriage. If they had been able to manage their anger successfully, their marriage might not have imploded.

In my adult life I have been averse to angry conflict, and I assume that in part that is because of the unhappiness that my parents' conflict

caused in our family. Jesus' teaching that peacemakers are blessed (Matthew 5:9) has always seemed important to me, and I expect that is in part because it re-enforced assumptions I had developed as a child.

It may sound odd today when so many marriages in America end in divorce, but, at least in Columbus in the 1950s, divorce was rare and there was something shameful about it. I was embarrassed that I was from "a broken home," as it was expressed at that time. I didn't try to hide the divorce, but neither did I initiate any conversations about it.

Before the divorce our family's financial situation had gone into decline as my father moved from one job to another. Following the divorce it became precarious. Mother worked hard to support herself and us four children, but we never again had the level of income we had in the 1940s.

As a teenager I worked in order to have spending money. My first job was delivering the local newspaper, *The Columbus Dispatch*. Later I worked as a clerk at Pennington's ABC Grocery Store on Market Street. On Saturdays in the fall I sold soft drinks at Mississippi State University football games. During the weeks before Christmas I sold fireworks in a temporary stand on Main Street or Market Street. I enjoyed almost everything about work, except that on Sundays the paper had to be delivered very early in the morning and getting up that early wasn't fun.

Once the divorce was finalized in 1952, we children had almost no contact with Daddy even though he was living in Columbus. Then, in 1960, Dee Cox died. Grandmother Ruth and Daddy moved to Birmingham where they shared a house, and we were out of contact with both of them. After Mother died in 1966, Hunter, Dale, Ruth, and I decided to re-connect with them, so following Mother's funeral in Tallahassee, Florida, we all drove together to Birmingham and spent a couple of days visiting with them. The visit was a little awkward, but I think we all felt good about reaching out to them after so many years apart.

## CHAPTER 3

# SCHOOLS

### Elementary School

I mentioned earlier that my lifelong love for school owes a lot to the fact that my first teachers were exceptionally good. A second source for my love for school is simply that I loved being with the other students. I don't remember feeling lonely as a child, but I certainly enjoyed being with other children.

A third source of my love for school is that for as long as I can remember I have wanted to understand things. I associate the word "curiosity" with the desire to know things, and I have some of that. But what pulled me seemed to be a desire not just to know but to understand. I wanted to comprehend the meaning of things and people and events, their order and relations. I wanted answers to the question, "What's it all about?"

As a child I found school work easy, and I became uncomfortable when things seemed to be moving slowly in the classrooms. It wasn't boredom, exactly. It was more like restlessness. My teachers were aware of it, of course, and a decision was made to promote me directly from the third to the fifth grade. For about two weeks after school began in the fall of 1948, I went for about a half hour to the classroom of the fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Brandon, early in the morning, before the other students arrived, in order to memorize the multiplication tables. Apparently that was what the authorities thought I needed in order to function in the fifth grade. I suppose they were right, since I didn't find the fifth grade any more difficult than the third grade had been. The same was true of the sixth grade. My teacher that year was Virginia Mae Ferrill who was legendary in Columbus for her excellent instruction as well as for being a fair but strict disciplinarian.

Skipping a grade may have been a good way to deal with my restlessness in classrooms, but it was not good for me socially. It meant that I was a year younger and less mature than my classmates. This made me uncomfortable. I felt added discomfort after my parents had divorced and our family's financial situation deteriorated. Perhaps most students in our high school felt uncomfortable in the way I did. I don't know about that. What I do know is that these things made me feel uncomfortable and that my discomfort continued until I went away to college.

### Junior High and High Schools

For me, the biggest change in the transitions to junior high (grades 7 and 8) and then to high school was not academic but social. Friends were becoming much more important to me. When I was fourteen, I began attending the First Baptist Church and participating in the large youth group there, and I joined that church the following year. I was very active, attending five times a week: Sunday School and worship on Sunday mornings, Baptist Training Union and worship on Sunday evenings, and prayer meeting on Wednesday evenings. I also attended the week of revival services in the summer and the weekend of special Bible studies in the winter. I did not do any of this out of a sense of duty. I loved being there.

Some of my friends and I were also in an independent Bible club that met weekly on Saturday evenings, so we saw each other often. There were 132 people in our high school graduating class in 1956, and more than a dozen of us planned to become Christian ministers. Already as teenagers we were finding ways to engage in ministry such as going to the town jail on Sunday afternoons and visiting with the prisoners there. One friend, Charlie, Arnett, was, I believe, the first among us to be invited to preach in a church.



My own sense of calling to ministry arrived simultaneously with my awakening to the importance of faith in God and of being intentionally committed to trying to follow Jesus' way of life. In fact, in the very first week after this happened, I asked our Scout Master if I could give

a devotional at the Scout meeting, and he let me do that even though we had not had devotionals in the past. I remember that I read First Corinthians 13:11 as my text, but I don't remember what I said about it. I suppose that the language of putting away childish things seemed to me to fit with the experience I had just had of awakening to the importance of intentional faith.

My calling to ministry was undramatic. It was simply a sense that this was what I was to do, together with a sense that it was a privilege to be called to do this. In my senior year at Lee High School we had a jobs-and-careers fair in which people with different professions and businesses spoke to us about what it was like to engage in their respective kinds of work. The pastor who came to talk about Christian ministry was not an effective speaker, but I nevertheless felt that what he was talking about was the most wonderful vocation of them all.



As they are for many people, the high school years were emotionally intense for me. In my case this resulted sometimes in good and sometimes in bad outcomes. I will mention just one example which has, I think, a little of the good and a little of the bad.

Throughout my high school years I played football even though I weighed only 120 pounds. The football roster listed me as weighing 130 pounds, but that was hyperbole. As a freshman I received a letter for playing football. I wasn't a good player but I did play briefly in several different games that year, and this meant I was initiated into the C Club (C for Columbus). The initiation took place at night and was sadistic and humiliating. I am confident that it accomplished nothing good whatever.

Once I was in the C Club, I was expected to participate in initiating others who were being inducted into the club. One of the hazing practices was to transport those were being initiated several miles out of town into the countryside at night, take away their shoes and socks, and leave them there so that they had to walk barefoot over gravel roads to get back to town. I rode along when one group was dropped in the countryside, but when I got back to town, I called my friend Luke Platt. Luke was probably the best tennis player in our school and had received his C for

tennis. He had avoided the barbarities of initiation simply by not going to it, nor did he come to any of the initiations after he had received his letter. He had a car, and he and I drove out and picked up the guys who were stranded. We assumed that they'd be grateful that we rescued them and that they would keep quiet about it, but they weren't and they didn't. The next day Luke and I were confronted by some angry C Club members who berated us for interfering with the initiation that way.

A few days later, at a large, tense meeting of the C Club in the school building, I defended what Luke and I had done. I said that the initiation was morally degrading and that it worked against our bonding as teammates. I also said that in any case we hadn't broken any rules because there weren't any rules about initiation and there certainly wasn't a rule saying we couldn't help out the way we had done. I urged the coaches and the student leaders to stop the initiations. I think the initiations did become less barbaric, at least for a time.



As a child I had loved being a part of the First Methodist Church, and I loved being a member of the First Baptist Church even more. It was a large church with a large youth group and a strong youth ministry. Our evening worship services were broadcast on radio, and there was a radio booth in the back of the balcony. On several occasions I worked in the booth. That is the only time in my life when I have felt free to sing loudly in church during worship services; the booth was sound-proof and no one outside it could hear me.

Our pastor, Dr. S. R. Woodson, was very formal. On Sunday mornings he preached in a black cutaway coat and gray, pin-striped trousers. I didn't have many private conversations with him, but one of them was memorable. Our Sunday School class of teen-age boys had a good teacher named Shackleford, so when the church asked for members to nominate persons to serve as deacons, I nominated him. A few days later I received a message asking me to meet with Dr. Woodson, and at the assigned time I went anxiously to his office. He asked me whether I knew that Mr. Shackleford was divorced and whether I was aware that our church's bylaws did not permit divorced men to become deacons. I

told him that I didn't know either of those things, and I said that I would not object if Mr. Shackelford's name was not included on the list of nominees. I was disappointed, though, and thought there was something legalistic about the requirement. I believe that Jesus' opposition to divorce was an effort to protect wives against ruthless husbands who could throw them out with no way to support themselves financially. That would certainly not have applied to Mr. Shackelford. I still think that he would have been a good deacon.

That happened in 1955. In 1964 I had a quite different experience with Dr. Woodson. I had been called to serve as the pastor of a small church in rural Alabama, and, since the First Baptist Church of Columbus was my home church, I asked them to ordain me. In keeping with Baptist tradition, Dr. Woodson called together a group of local pastors to serve as an ordination examination committee. They conducted an oral examination to assess my fitness for ministry.

Almost everything in the examination went well. However, at one point I used the word "church" to refer to all Christians, and one of the pastors—not Dr. Woodson—challenged me. He held the Landmark Baptist view that the word "church" should be used only of an individual, local congregation. "Can you tell us," he asked, "a single place in the New Testament where the word 'church' is used of all Christian people?" My answer was not tactful. I said, "The entire book of Ephesians." That ended the exchange. The committee went on to vote to recommend that First Baptist Church ordain me, but they added that I really ought to study the biblical meaning of the word "church" more carefully.

I have never been drawn to the Landmark view. For as long as I have been serious about Christian faith, I have cared deeply for the entire Christian church, not just for individual congregations or denominations. On the other hand, I also believe that congregations are very important. First Baptist Church of Columbus was certainly very important to me.

In 1965 First Baptist of Columbus made a monumental contribution to my life. My theology professor in seminary was Dr. Samuel J. Mikolaski, and he encouraged me to study theology at Oxford University, his alma mater, after I graduated from seminary. He asked if I knew of any person or group who might finance my study abroad,

since I wouldn't be able to work to support myself there. I told him that some men in the First Baptist Church of Columbus might help. Dr. Mikolaski contacted them and persuaded them to fund my study at Oxford, and they agreed to do that. So, for the school years 1965–67 my family and I were supported entirely by the gifts of generous members of the First Baptist Church of Columbus, and I was able to earn a degree at Oxford University. I was never told the names of all the people who made this possible, but I know that three of them were Bob Caldwell, Luther Wallin, and Dr. S. B. Platt, who was the father of my friend Luke Platt. I owe all the supporters a great debt because going to Oxford made it possible for me to become an academic theologian.

My high school years were defining ones for me. Much of what I know or think I know about being a Christian, about friendship, about church, about Christian ministry, and about being a Baptist, I learned during those years. Some of what I learned then I have had to un-learn, but much of it still seems right and true to me. I am grateful for my friends from those years and for the Christian leaders both inside and outside the church who taught me during those years.

## College

Mother knew that she could not afford to support me in college, and she suggested that I consider military service, after which I would have military benefits to help pay for college. She took me to visit an Army recruiter. I told him that I hoped to be a minister, and I asked what I could do in the military that would help to prepare me for that. He said that I could serve as a chaplain's assistant. That sounded interesting, so I asked what chaplains' assistants do. "Well," he said, "you could hand out hymnals before the worship services begin." I decided not to join.

After high school my friends went in different directions. Several went to Mississippi College, a middle-sized Baptist school located in Clinton just outside of Jackson, Mississippi. The adult leaders of our independent Bible club, Dick Shurtz and Nap Clark, urged me to go to Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, and I decided to do that. I arrived there in the late summer of 1956 with just a few dollars in my pocket. I supported myself by working in the campus dining hall

and also by working at a grocery store downtown. Bob Jones is the place where I have lived where it mattered the least whether you were wealthy or poor. In fact, things were arranged there in such a way that it was almost impossible to tell which students were poor and which were not. I think that says something positive about the university.

And there were other good things, too. Immediately following World War II, Dr. Bob Jones, Jr., the president of the university, had been able to purchase numerous works of art in Europe, and as a result the university had an outstanding museum. It still does today. The president also had a special interest in theater and was himself an actor, and the university had an enormous stage and an outstanding drama program with major productions each semester. Most of the plays were by Shakespeare, but in the spring 1957 semester I had a non-speaking role in a production of "Cyrano de Bergerac." Although my role was unimportant, a friend who worked in the wardrobe room fitted me out with me an eye-catching costume that was much nicer than any other one on the stage including the one worn by Bob Jones, Jr., who was playing the part of Cyrano. But during dress rehearsal the director said my costume would distract the audience from watching the principal actors, so I ended up wearing something dull like the other minor actors.

The university had a shadow side. It was then and still is a major center of separatist Fundamentalism, and the leaders were engaged in a running conflict with non-Fundamentalists. They practiced secondary separation which means that they not only separated from Christians whose theology and ethics were wrong but also from those who, though their theology and ethics were acceptable, refused to separate from those whose theology and ethics were wrong.

While I was there, the university was targeting the evangelist Billy Graham and the Southern Baptist Convention. According to Bob Jones, Sr. and Bob Jones, Jr., both of whom regularly preached in the university's chapel services where attendance was mandatory, Billy Graham was a hopeless compromiser because he allowed Catholics and liberal Protestants to sponsor his evangelistic crusades along with Fundamentalists. One day we students all found in our mailboxes a form letter from L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham's father-in-law, defending

Graham, so the controversy was close to us. The Joneses also said the Southern Baptist Convention was guilty of the same kind of compromise as Graham because it had allowed liberal theologians such as Nels F. S. Ferré to speak in the chapel of its seminaries.

One of the ways the university promoted its message of separation was to require students to stand up during the chapel services as a pledge never to support Billy Graham and never to participate in the SBC. I don't remember exactly how many times they did this during the year I was there, but it was at least three times.

I refused to take the pledge. I remained seated. The person who monitored our section of the auditorium turned my name in to the administration each time, and each time I was required to defend myself before a tribunal of university administrators. I didn't know enough to argue the facts, so my defense consisted of saying something like, I don't know about all that. I just know that Billy Graham is preaching the gospel and that my home church, a Southern Baptist church, is a good place to worship God and to learn about how to live as a Christian.

Because I wouldn't take the pledge, I was at risk of being "shipped," the university's term for being expelled. But, maybe because of my naïvete, I was allowed to stay. Perhaps I should have left when the administration's heavy hand of separatist Fundamentalism first began to come down on me, but I don't like to quit things once I have started them, so I remained at the university through the academic year.

As it turned out, it has been an advantage to me as a professor to have seen separatist Fundamentalism up close for such an extended period. During my 38 years of teaching theology, I had many students who had the same experience I had of being influenced by Fundamentalism at an early age. My freshman year at Bob Jones gave me a good understanding of what my students believed and what motivated them. Not once in my 38 years of teaching was I ever caught by surprise by anything a Fundamentalist student said. Some other professors have had a different experience. I remember one colleague who asked me privately, "Can you tell me what the rapture is?" I believe that my year at Bob Jones helped me to be a better teacher for many of my students.



I returned to Columbus in the spring of 1957 and almost immediately found a well-paying job working as a payroll clerk for the Wilkinson and Snowden Construction Company of Memphis, which was building officers' housing on the air base in Columbus. For the next year I lived at home and was able to buy my first car and to save a little money for continuing college. The year was a good one in that it gave me experience of working full-time in a secular job where I was treated like an adult and not like a student. I also welcomed the chance to be back in First Baptist Church and to spend time with some friends who were still there. I didn't know it at the time, but this also was the last time I would live with or even near Mother.

Even though Mother didn't have money to give me for college, she repeatedly found other ways to help. She had arranged my transportation to Greenville—on an eighteen-wheeler that was carrying dog food! She also had arranged for me to get the job in the grocery store in Greenville. When I returned to college after the year back in Columbus, she arranged a job interview for me with the manager of a television station in Jackson. I began working there in the summer of 1958, and I enrolled at Mississippi College a few weeks later.



Mississippi College is a Baptist college in Clinton, near Jackson. For the first two years I was there, I worked for WLBT-TV. I was able to work forty hours a week while going to college full-time because the station manager, Fred Beard, allowed me to set my own schedule. I usually took morning classes and arrived at the station at about noon and worked until eight o'clock.

I worked as an assistant to the director of traffic. The principal task in traffic was to prepare daily logs for the engineers to follow in order to air the right things at the right times. In our case, we brought together information from multiple sources—NBC, ABC, our national sales agents in New York, our local sales agents, and local programming—to prepare the daily logs. We typed the logs on typewriters; this was years before personal computers existed.

It was responsible work, and mistakes could be embarrassing and sometimes costly. The only mistake I remember making was relatively innocent though it may have cost the station some money. It happened when the director was on vacation and I was preparing the logs by myself. I scheduled a Coca-Cola commercial back-to-back with a 7-Up commercial. We were supposed to keep competitors' ads at least 15 minutes apart. I hadn't known the 7-Up commercial was coming up because the only information I had was that we were to return to the network and the ad came from there. My boss, whose name was Margaret, knew that the network scheduled a 7-Up commercial at that time, but I did not. Still, the associate manager of the station was not happy with me.

I worked at the television station for two years, and I loved it. Once again I was functioning as an adult in an adult world, and I was successfully supporting myself financially while attending college full-time. During the weeks when the traffic manager was away on vacation and later on maternity leave, I had sole responsibility for preparing the logs which were indispensable for the station. It was a good learning experience.



In my first year (1958–59) at Mississippi College I lived in a dormitory, and my roommate was my friend from Columbus, Luke Platt. Luke had amazing powers of concentration and could study for hours without taking a break. He was majoring in English. He didn't seem to read faster than anyone else, but he also didn't seem to forget a single thing he read. Later he changed careers and became a medical doctor.

For my second and third years I shared a garage apartment in Jackson with Gary Fagan who became a lifelong friend. Gary went on to have a long and productive ministry, first as Director of Youth for Christ in Jackson and later on as a professor at Barrington College in Rhode Island and still later as a pastor Massachusetts, Florida, and Alabama. He then served as a missionary to Malawi and then to Brazil, after which he “retired” and served as a pastor near his hometown of Jackson.

Gary died in 2014 at the age of 74. His lovely wife Bertha asked me to speak at his funeral, and I was honored to do that. I did my best to express my appreciation for Gary. He was a strong person of complete integrity and a loyal friend. He was also the first Christian minister I knew who thought carefully about the worldwide state of the church.



Throughout my three years at Mississippi College I was an active member of Calvary Baptist Church in Jackson. On Sunday mornings I taught a Sunday School class for boys, and on Sunday evenings I led a group of college-age adults in what was then called Baptist Training Union. This group grew quite large, and as a result I was invited by our pastor, Luther Joe Thompson, to preach a sermon on the Sunday evening of Youth Week. Dr. Thompson had studied in Scotland and was a good example for me of a knowledgeable, caring, and thoughtful pastor.



My undergraduate major was classical languages, that is, Greek and Latin. I had begun the study of Greek at Bob Jones University, and it was natural to continue it at Mississippi College. Because so many students at Mississippi College were preparing for ministry, the professor of Greek, Dr. A. A. Kitchens, taught the kind of Greek in which the New Testament is written, koine Greek, rather than the classical Greek of Homer and his successors. The Latin was not quite as directly helpful to me at the time, but I enjoyed it, too. Even so, languages were a curious choice of major for me, as I don't have any special facility for learning them.

My other classes were mostly liberal arts. The professor who influenced me the most was the college's one philosopher, Dr. Joe Cooper, who seemed to be interested in everything but especially in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish Christian philosopher. I ended up taking four courses with Dr. Cooper plus another philosophy course in summer school at Millsaps College in Jackson. Dr. Cooper and I have stayed loosely in touch ever since, and I am grateful for his contribution in my life.

I was required to take one course in science, and I chose botany. The principal thing I learned in botany was that I have neither the gifts nor the disposition to be a scientist. I also learned that I do not have good visual memory. One of the tests consisted of our peering through a series of microscopes and writing down what we saw there. It's no exaggeration to say that all that I saw were random colors in no identifiable shapes. I am still not sure how I managed to get a decent grade in that class. Fortunately, I remember words and ideas somewhat better than I do visual objects.

I was required also to take a class in physical education. I chose one in which we played tennis. I had been playing since I was in high school and loved the game. On the opening day of class we were told that for some reason the course also included a few weeks of boxing, to the surprise and consternation of many of us in the class. Most of us handled the situation by moving around the boxing ring a lot and not hitting hard, but one member of the class, a powerfully built young man, mercilessly pounded one of the un-athletic students in the class. This outraged me and I arranged to box the bully at our next session. As soon as the match began I started hitting him furiously over and over, though he was so big that I wasn't doing him much harm. He certainly could have beaten me, but he was so startled at my vigorous assault that he didn't seem to know what to do. My attack on him was so energetic that the other students stopped what they were doing and watched us. Afterwards some of them asked me what going on. Before I could answer I had to rush outside and vomit. I had eaten breakfast a few minutes before class, and my extreme exertion had nauseated me. I have felt an aversion to bullies for as long as I can remember.



Four other students and I spent the summer after my second year at Mississippi College working with young people in three Baptist churches in Puerto Rico. The others were Chuck Longino, Wayne Evans, Fred Funches, and Paul Nix. My assignment was at the Borinquen Baptist Church in Aguadilla, just outside Ramey Air Force Base. The others worked at churches in San Juan and Ponce. Our collective ministry that

summer was, at least numerically, a big success. We recruited many of the English-speaking youth from around the island to participate in programs of Bible study and discipleship training. A large number of youth from all three of the churches came to a camp that we organized.

Borinquen Baptist Church comprised two congregations. The pastor of the English-language congregation was Charlie Clark, and the pastor of the Spanish-language congregation was Enrique Perez. Near the end of the summer Enrique Perez asked me to preach for his people. I had taken two years of Spanish in high school and being in Puerto Rico had given me what amounted to a refresher course, so I gave it a try. My sermon was very brief, and it was punctuated by a lot of amused but kind laughter from the congregation. The reason for the laughter was not that I was saying funny things but rather that my Spanish was laughable.



I had stopped working at WLBT in order to work in Puerto Rico. In my final year of college I began working for the Christian camp I had attended when I was in high school. During the school year my responsibility was to try to start new Bible clubs in towns around Jackson. I met some nice high school students, but I didn't get any new clubs started.

For the summer of 1964 my responsibility was to be director of the camp. I enjoyed that very much. The camp counselors were sincere Christians and competent at what they were doing and really cared about the campers, and the business side of things was easily managed. What I didn't know then was that this was the last time I would have the opportunity to work alongside the Fundamentalist folks who had been so important in my life for the previous seven years. I am indebted to them and wish we could have remained in touch, but their commitment to secondary separation made that impossible. Because I had gone to a Southern Baptist college and was going on to a Southern Baptist seminary in the fall, I was not properly separated from suspect theology. I had gone over to the dark side.

At the end of the summer three of the young men whom I had come to know at the camp and I took a driving trip in my car to Mexico City. It

was, I suppose, a daring thing to do, especially in those years before the Interstate Highway System had been built. One evening somewhere in Texas we were all sleeping in our sleeping bags not far from the highway, and a Texan stopped his big Cadillac and warned us that the area was full of rattlesnakes who would crawl into our sleeping bags during the night in order to stay warm. We packed up fast and took turns driving through the rest of the night. We found an affordable hotel in Mexico City and enjoyed being tourists for a few days.

On the return trip my car, a Chevrolet convertible, began making ominous noises. We stopped at a rural intersection where there were just two buildings, a wooden automobile garage and a cinder block house. The problem was that the U-bolt on my car had broken. Remarkably, that little garage in that isolated area in Mexico had the right U-bolt in stock, and the mechanic needed only a couple of hours to repair the car.

While we were waiting for the car, a man walked up to us and began speaking to us in English. He was wearing a dark suit and a white shirt and a tie even though the temperature was at least 90 degrees. It turned out that he was a missionary with the Wycliffe Bible Translators and was working on translating the Bible into a language spoken by Mexicans of Native American heritage who lived in that area. He invited us into his cinder-block house and gave us cool soft drinks, a real treat. The house was constructed so that some of the rooms were below ground level, and they were cool. For me, this serendipitous visit was a highlight of our trip. I have immense appreciation for the work that the Wycliffe translators do.

## Seminary

In my senior year at Mississippi College I considered two possible routes to take after graduation. Joe Cooper had influenced me so much that I seriously considered graduate studies in philosophy, and I was accepted into programs at the two universities at which I applied, Ole Miss and Tulane. Those programs were expensive, and of course philosophy wasn't directly related to Christian ministry.

So I chose the practical route and went to the very affordable New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Theological seminaries, also

called theological schools or divinity schools, are graduate schools that train people to be Christian ministers. They also are important bearers of the ancient Christian theological and moral traditions. Most seminaries are owned by particular churches or denominations. The one I attended was owned by the Southern Baptist Convention. It had been founded in 1917.

Seminaries usually share the theological beliefs of their denominations. Their educational philosophies range from indoctrination (transmit the church's tradition and never criticize it) through exploration (transmit the tradition and also explore ways to make it more faithful to the gospel of Jesus) to relativism (describe the tradition with the understanding that its truth, like all truth, is relative). The Baptist seminary in New Orleans operated on the philosophy of exploration, and I share that philosophy.

The seminary was located in what was then near the eastern edge of New Orleans. It had recently moved from an uptown location in the Garden District adjacent to a famous restaurant called Commander's Palace. Its new location was large, about 75 acres, and the principal buildings were Georgian in design. The buildings and grounds were beautiful.

The seminary was organized into three sections: a school of theology, a school of religious education, and a school of church music. There were several hundred students, and the great majority were in the school of theology. Most of the students were studying to become pastors, but some planned to have educational or music or youth ministries in churches, or to work with college students or as missionaries. There were few if any students who were not planning to engage in some kind of Christian ministry. Some students were already serving in various roles in churches, including the role of pastor. Baptist churches are free to call whomever they like as their pastors, and sometimes they call people who haven't yet attended seminary.

It was conventional for people preparing for Christian ministry to move on from a Baptist college to a Baptist seminary the way I was doing. The Southern Baptist Convention owned and generously funded six seminaries, and tuition for Southern Baptist students was very low.

The basic degree in the school of theology required three years of work, so I spent the years 1961–1964 in New Orleans. Several of my friends had gone to other Southern Baptist seminaries, but this one was close and affordable and some of my college friends were going there, and I had liked the city of New Orleans since I first visited it during my high school years.

The seminary displayed its name on a large sign on campus. The sign consisted of large individual letters set onto a frame. While I was there some students removed one of the letters so that the sign read “New Orleans Baptist The logical Seminary.” It was that for me, and being there had two life–altering consequences, one related to my career and the other to my personal life.



One of the first classes I took when I arrived in New Orleans in August 1961 was systematic theology. The professor was Dr. Samuel J. Mikolaski. On my first day in his class, I had what amounted to an epiphany.

This is what happened. I had loved Bible study since I was a teenager, and in college I had come to love philosophy. The class in systematic theology brought those loves together. Dr. Mikolaski loved the study of the Bible and also welcomed the dialogue with philosophy. That first day in his class, I felt as if I had come home. I still feel that way today.

Across the centuries, Christian theology has had many conversation partners, including, for examples, other religions and science, but Christianity’s principal dialogue partner has been philosophy. In that sense Dr. Mikolaski’s theology was classical Christian theology. It was also systematic theology, that is, an organized, orderly account of what Christians believe about God and the world and human beings.

I continued to take Dr. Mikolaski’s classes in systematic theology throughout my three years at New Orleans, and during the third year I served as his teaching assistant. By the end of my seminary work I knew that Christian theology would play a large role in my ministry, though I wasn’t sure whether the ministry would be in a local church or in an educational institution.

I also took a helpful class with the other systematic theologian, Dr. Robert Soileau. And I took a class in Old Testament theology with Dr. J. Hardee Kennedy and a class in New Testament theology with Dr. Frank Stagg. These were all immensely helpful classes for me, but none of the three was engaged with philosophy. What the engagement with philosophy did for me was to encourage a kind of theology in which we weren't talking just about the Bible; we were also talking about what the Bible talks about, namely, God and the world and ourselves in relation to God. That seemed right to me then and still does today.



The second event was even more life-altering than the first. When I was a sophomore in college, I had met Caroline Nan Toler of Jackson, Mississippi, through a mutual acquaintance, Don Hudson. For about two years Caroline and I dated occasionally but not exclusively and without any long-term plans. After I moved to New Orleans in 1961, I began occasionally to take a train called “The City of New Orleans” on weekends up to Jackson to visit her. We became engaged shortly before she graduated from college in December 1962, and we were married at the First Presbyterian Church of Jackson in June 1963. Following a brief honeymoon in Memphis, we moved into Willingham Manor, a new apartment building on the seminary campus in New Orleans. During the following school year Caroline taught school and I held several small jobs in addition to my studies.

Caroline and I have been married now for 58 years. She is and has been from the time I first met her the loveliest person I have ever known. I am extraordinarily blessed that she is my wife and that we have been together for such a long time. Much of what has been best in my life has been because of her.

I think that we human beings are all pulled along in life by several different impulses. For me two impulses have been especially urgent, love and understanding. I think that we all need to love and to be loved; I know that is true for me. The most important thing in my life has been the people whom I love and who have loved me, Caroline foremost among them.



Fisher and Caroline Toler at about the time they first met.

The second most important impulse for me has been to try to understand the world and our life in it. We who are Christians believe that Jesus gives us the best clue for understanding God and the world and our lives. To change the metaphor, Jesus is the place we stand from which to view everything above us and around us and within us. In that first theology class I felt immediately that Christian theology is a good way to do this. This has proved to be the case for me, as it has for many others, though of course I realize that it is not for everyone.



Theology was not the only subject that influenced me during my seminary years. The degree program included required courses in pastoral ministries, church history, Christian ethics, and most of all, Bible and the biblical languages. All of these were worthwhile, but not all of them interested me equally. Before I came to seminary, I had studied Spanish, Greek, and Latin, and in seminary I added Hebrew, but it appealed to me less than the others. Maybe that was because my Hebrew class met at eight o'clock in the morning at a time when I was working from eleven o'clock at night until seven o'clock in the morning.



I worked to support myself in seminary just as I had done in college. My first job was as night manager of a restaurant on Chef Menteur Highway, and it had some interesting moments. My responsibilities were to seat customers when they arrived and give them menus, and then to take their money when they paid the bill. I also had to prepare mixed drinks for those who ordered them. This was tricky because I had never tasted alcohol and didn't know Scotch from bourbon. I had a book of recipes to follow, but it didn't help much. One evening a customer sent his drink back saying I had done it wrong. I tried again, and he sent it back again, saying, "Gin is the colorless one."

I decided I wasn't qualified for that job, so I resigned. I then became the night manager of a motel on Tulane Avenue, working from 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. It was uneventful except for an occasional visitor who dropped in to talk.

My third and most interesting job was operating computers for the telephone company in a large building on Prytania Street. It was also an 11-to-7 job, and just two of us were working those hours, my seminary friend Jerry Oswalt and I. Our task was to prepare and print bills for customers. It involved using three different machines. One punched holes in cards. When customers made long distance calls, the operator marked information with a pencil onto cards, and this machine read those pencil marks and punched holes that contained that information. The second machine sorted the punched cards so that those with the same originating number were together and in chronological order. The third, called a "word processor," read the punched cards and transmitted the data via cable to a printer which then printed out telephone bills to be mailed to customers.

The word processor and the printer were housed in a very large room where the temperature was kept in the 60s to prevent the word processor from being damaged by the heat it generated. The cables connecting the processor to the printer were about eight inches in diameter. I have always been glad that early in the 1960s I got a good look at computers. Of course, I never imagined they would change in the way they have. My i-Phone has vastly more computing power than those huge machines that Jerry and I operated for the telephone company.

Caroline and I were married after my second year in seminary, so I changed to daytime jobs so we would have our evenings together. On campus I served as a grader for Dr. Mikolaski and kept the accounts for the seminary cafeteria. Off campus, I delivered bills for the power company for which I should have received combat pay since in some New Orleans neighborhoods walking up to people's doors unannounced can be risky. I was once bitten by a snake while taking a bill to a house, but it wasn't very poisonous and the swelling went down after a few hours.

Before our wedding Caroline and I had agreed that we would follow Dr. Mikolaski's advice and, once I had graduated, go to Oxford so that I could continue my theological studies there. However, it seemed prudent for me to have some experience as a pastor before going. So, in 1964–1965 I served as pastor of the Frankville Baptist Church of Frankville, Alabama.

### Pastor and School Teacher

In the third and fourth centuries the great Christian theologians in Alexandria, Clement and Origen, referred to the church as “the school of Christ.” This chapter is about the schools I attended. Frankville Baptist Church was certainly a school for me, and I had a lot to learn.

And I had to learn fast. One of the patriarchs of the Frankville church died almost immediately after I arrived there. I don't think I had ever before attended a funeral, and I certainly had not officiated at one. Fortunately, the family invited two ministers who were long-time friends of the deceased to conduct most of the funeral. I think my role was to read Scripture.

Frankville Baptist Church had been founded in 1845. The original building had burned down, and the building in which we met had been constructed in 1905. It was a lovely white wooden structure with two intentionally asymmetrical towers at the front. The windows in the sanctuary ran almost from the floor to the quite high ceiling.

It was located at the intersection of the only two paved roads in the community, one of which ended at the nearby Tombigbee River, the same river that ran through my hometown 150 miles to the north. The

commerce in the community consisted of a large and a small general store, a beauty shop, and a small automotive repair shop.

Caroline and I experienced more culture shock when we moved from New Orleans to Frankville than we had done when we moved from Mississippi to New Orleans. Neither of us had ever lived in a rural area, and we didn't know how to get things done there. What do you do with trash when no one comes by to pick it up? I tried burning it and burying it, but neither worked well. My neighbors took their garbage to a dump in their pickup trucks, but I drove a VW beetle. It was the by the kindness of the church's members that we managed to cope with life in the country.

Caroline and I threw ourselves into the work of the church. Our principal ministry was with teenagers which was understandable since we were so young ourselves. Caroline did wonderful work with the young girls in our church and, as it turned out, with quite a few of the girls from the entire community. There was nothing for kids to do in the community on weekends, so we organized volleyball games for them at the church.

I worked hard to prepare sermons for Sunday morning worship services. On Sunday evenings and again on Wednesday evenings I taught Bible studies; I felt more surefooted with the Bible studies.

The spirit of the church was good, but after a few months one lady in the congregation became unhappy with me for reasons that weren't clear to me. I thought she and I should talk things over, but when I went to her home to see her, though her car was in the driveway, she did not come to the door. I went to her husband's workplace and asked him if he knew where she was. He asked why I wanted to know, and I said I wanted to talk to her about what was troubling her. His response was, "Aw, preacher, don't pay no attention to her. I never do." I didn't hear any more stories about her being unhappy with the church after that.

Many of the church members were marvelous cooks, and we were regularly invited for meals in members' homes, especially on Sundays after the morning worship service. In warmer months we had dinners at the church following the morning worship services. We ate outdoors at raised tables, and the food was delicious.



Although the position of pastor was a full-time one, the salary of \$75 a week was not enough for Caroline and me to live on, so I took a second job teaching at nearby Leroy High School. This was perfectly all right with the church. My subject was math. Teaching math is easier than teaching other subjects because a math teacher doesn't have to keep studying the subject the way a history teacher or an English teacher needs to do. You already know the subject, so you can give your attention to the students and to figuring out how to help them learn the math. This was another good learning experience for me.

High school teachers also have to figure out how to create order in a classroom of hormone-charged teenagers, and that's not always easy. In fact, I got the job because at the start of the school year the woman who was teaching math wasn't able to maintain order in her classes. After about two weeks she resigned in tears. The kids just wouldn't listen to her, and in fact one of them had actually hit her in the head with a small board. These were tough kids.

As her replacement, my first and most urgent task was to bring order out of the chaos. I did it by being harsh and intimidating. As I look back on it, I am embarrassed by how harsh I was. On the other hand, even now I do not know how else I could have created order in those unruly classes. After two or three weeks the students settled down, and I became friendly and supportive. I liked that better, and so did they.

One day the high school football coach asked me if I would offer a prayer at the football game on the coming Friday evening, and I said that I would. A half hour or so before the game was to begin, I went up to the broadcast box at the top of the stadium and told the announcer that the coach had told me to offer the opening prayer. The announcer said that was fine, and he announced that I would be leading a prayer. I did that, and my prayer was broadcast to those in the stadium.

The following Monday morning the coach came by my classroom again and asked why I hadn't offered a prayer before the game. When I told him that I had done that from the broadcast box, he said, "Oh, I meant for you to go to the locker room to pray for the team before they

went out onto the field for the game.” It made me wonder what you could get away with if you just act like you know what you’re doing.



As the school year came to a close, Caroline and I decided to go ahead with our plans to go to Oxford. We had intended to stay in Frankville through the summer, but we had to leave sooner because in late May our car engine overheated and needed to be rebuilt. We calculated that it made better financial sense to sell the car than to repair it and then sell it three months later. We spent the summer back in Jackson, and I again worked at the television station, filling in for people who were on vacation. We lived in a downtown apartment owned by the TV station, which meant that we didn’t need a car that summer.

Caroline was pregnant with our first child, and she wisely decided to remain in Jackson with her parents until our baby was born. This gave her about three additional months with her parents. This was fortuitous because, as it turned out, this was the last time she would be with her father before he died. So I went to Oxford alone in late September 1965, and our daughter was born in Jackson in late November. We named her Stephanie Caroline. We liked the name Stephanie, and we wanted her to have her mother’s name as well. Caroline and Stephanie joined me in Oxford just before the end of the year.

## Oxford

My first task at Oxford was to find a place for our family to live. I chose a lovely cottage in a small village called Begbroke. It was seven miles from the center of Oxford but there was a stream of buses to and from the city, so it was convenient. The cottage was charming and had a garden from which I harvested Brussels sprouts and other winter vegetables. On the other hand, the house was cold, and I never got the hang of building charcoal fires to heat the house. Caroline told me later that one of her favorite activities in that house was washing the dishes, because it got her hands warm. In the spring we moved from Begbroke into Summertown House, a set of new graduate student flats in north

Oxford which had electric underfloor heating. We lived there for the remainder of our time in Oxford.

Oxford today comprises thirty–nine colleges. My college was Mansfield, a college of the Congregational Church, now the United Reformed Church. Mansfield was the first non–Anglican college in the university. It was established to train ministers, and across its distinguished history its faculty has included world–class theological scholars such as C. H. Dodd, A. M. Hunter, Eric Routley, G. B. Caird, and John Marsh.

Despite the fact that I already had earned two degrees, I began my work in an undergraduate program. The lectures and tutorials were splendid, but after a week or two I realized that the subject matter overlapped too much with what I had already done in college and at the seminary in New Orleans. I met with our Principal, John Marsh, to tell him the problem, and he immediately said that I should transfer to a research degree program. He asked if I had any ideas about a subject for research, and my reply was one of the most opportune of my life. I told him that I was interested in kenotic Christology and that I would like to research what had been done with it by British theologians.

The word “kenotic” derives from the Greek verb *ekonosen*, which is used just once in a theological sense in the New Testament. Paul wrote that Christ Jesus “*emptied* himself, taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7). For most of church history, orthodox Christian theologians had ignored and sometimes virtually denied the fact that in order to be fully human the Son of God had accepted limitations like those of other human beings. Beginning in the mid–nineteenth century, however, some orthodox theologians fully embraced the idea that the Incarnation included the acceptance of limitations, and they understood Paul’s language of “emptied himself” to refer to that acceptance.

By the time I got to Oxford in 1965, a lot had been written about the kenotic Christologies of some French, German, and Scandinavian theologians, but no one had written a survey of the British theologians who had accepted kenoticism or of the responses which their ideas elicited. When I told Dr. Marsh that I would like to do this, he immediately agreed and made the arrangements.

The Regius Professor of Divinity, Henry Chadwick, agreed to supervise my research. Professor Chadwick was a widely respected scholar best known for highly original and authoritative studies in the church fathers, but he was also interested in later theology. I began meeting with him in his home in Christ Church, another of the university's colleges whose chapel is the cathedral of the diocese. He assigned me some books to read and review as background for my research. When I finished those, I began to do the research into British kenotic Christologies. Over two academic years I met with him about fifteen times. At our meetings he read what I had written. Sometimes he pointed out omissions or offered corrections, but usually he simply accepted what I had written and we discussed what I would do next. He was a master supervisor, always supportive of what I was doing, occasionally pointing me on to other things, and never imposing his own theological vision on me. In person he was a tall, lean, aristocratic man with an urbane but courteous manner and a brilliant mind. I was extremely fortunate to have this great scholar supervise my research.



Once our family moved in our flat at Summertown house, I settled into a routine of work. If the weather was good, I walked into town to the university library, the Bodleian. The distance was 2.3 miles and walking gave me time to reflect on my research and writing. If the weather was nasty, I rode a red, double-decker bus into town. I arrived at 8:00 a.m. when the Bodleian opened, and I left in time to be home for a late supper. For lunch I ate at a nearby pub, the King's Arms, or at the city market, and on a few occasions in my college. Almost every day, to fend off sleepiness, I took an extended walk through the gardens of the colleges and of the university before returning to the library. Walking was a special pleasure because Oxford is the most beautiful city in which I have ever lived. I suppose it must be one of the most beautiful in the world. I did more walking while in Oxford than at any other time in my life.

My method of research was simple. Before I began, I was familiar with a handful of books that dealt with kenotic Christology, both pro

and con. I got those books at the Bodleian and read them carefully. I did all my reading in the Radcliffe Camera, one of the buildings that make up the Bodleian. The Bodleian is not a lending library. It is, however, a copyright library, so it had everything I ever needed with one exception. At one point I needed to read a book that had been written by an American theologian, Lewis Smedes, and published in the Netherlands. I found it across town in the library of Pusey House.

As I read, I took careful notes by hand. There were no personal computers then, and the Bodleian did not have rooms where students could type up notes. I made a note about every book and writer mentioned in the footnotes of the books I was reading. I then got those books and read them and made notes on the books to which they referred. In the end I read all of the books I was able to locate that were written by British theologians either for or against kenotic Christology.

Kenotic Christology became a cause célèbre in England in 1889 with the publication of a book entitled *Lux Mundi*, but I found some examples of it more than a quarter-century earlier. I ended my research with books published in 1930 because by then kenosis had become a conventional idea for many theologians. I also read a few books on the subject by writers on the Continent and a few other books in order to understand the context in which the public discussion and controversy about kenosis in Great Britain had taken place.

There was a moment in my research and writing in which I experienced anxiety about my work. One of the principal non-Anglican theologians who embraced kenotic Christology was P. T. Forsyth. In 1907 he had given lectures on Christology at Mansfield College, and they were published as *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*. Professor Chadwick suggested that, since Forsyth had been a Congregationalist, I ask my Principal, John Marsh, who was himself a Congregationalist, to read over what I had written about Forsyth and his book. I did this, and when he had read what I had written, J. M. (as we called the Principal) called me to come to his office for a conference. He told me that what I had written about Forsyth did not communicate his theological vision well. I thanked him and left, not knowing what to do. The next time I met with Professor Chadwick I told him what J. M. had said and waited

anxiously to see how he would respond. He simply asked me, “Did you get Forsyth right?” I replied, “On the subject of kenosis, yes, I think I did.” “Then,” he replied, “carry on.” That was that.

When I had finished writing the thesis, I arranged to have the manuscript typed. I entitled it *English Kenotic Christology, 1889–1930*. I submitted it to Professor Chadwick, he approved it, and I submitted it to the Faculty of Theology of the University. The Faculty appointed two examiners. They were the immensely learned F. L. Cross and a younger theologian named David Jenkins who the year before had given the Bampton Lectures in Oxford on the subject of Christology.

My oral exam, which at Oxford is called a *viva voce*, took place in mid-June in a large room at Christ Church. Only the three of us were in the room. My most vivid memory is that Professor Cross asked about an Irish bishop, J. T. O’Brien, whom I mentioned early in my thesis. In a charge to the clergy of his diocese of Ossory, Ferns, and Leighlin in 1863, Bishop O’Brien explained and endorsed kenotic Christology. This was a quarter of a century before it was widely accepted or discussed in Great Britain. Apparently, I had discovered an important but forgotten proponent of kenosis who wrote about it earlier than anyone else in the United Kingdom.

The day after the *viva* I went to Christ Church to see Professor Chadwick. He was walking across the quad, and when he saw me he turned two thumbs up. I had passed, and no changes in the paper were required.

On June 22, following a celebratory meal in my college with others who would graduate that day, I was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Letters. The ceremony, which was conducted partly in Latin, took place in a magnificent Christopher Wren building called the Sheldonian Theatre. In 1979 the university changed the nomenclature of the degree to Master of Letters and sent me another diploma signifying that I now held that degree.

My experience at Oxford confirmed my sense that theology is important to the life of the church and that theology would be an important part of my ministry. I learned that I was able to do independent research,

that I could write a book-length document, and that I liked doing these things. I also felt confirmed in my intuitive sense that theology does not have to be obscure but can be expressed in clear English prose. At that time, I still was not thinking of a career in higher education. I assumed my ministry would probably be in churches, but I felt it would include theological teaching.



There was, of course, much more to our life at Oxford than my academic work. Caroline and I and our infant daughter Stephanie were regular attenders at New Road Baptist Church. The associate pastor there was a woman, and we were delighted to be in a congregation with a woman as one of our three ministers. We became friends with other young parents at Summertown House. Caroline belonged to the Newcomers Club at Oxford, and I had friends at the college.

When we were living in Begbroke, we had become friends with a couple who lived across the street, John and Margaret Houghton. Like us, they attended New Road Baptist Church. Margaret was a physician, and John was the University Reader in Atmospheric Physics, and they were parents, so they must have been very busy, but somehow they found time to have a Bible study in their home, and they invited us to attend. We continued to attend even after we moved into town. We met fortnightly and took turns leading the studies, though I think that John led most of them. In addition to the Bible study, John and Margaret had us over for meals again and again during the two years we were there. I learned from them how important Christian hospitality is to people who are far away from their homes. I will say more about John's work later in this book.

We bought a Lambretta motor scooter that allowed us to see more of Oxford than we could otherwise have done. Occasionally Caroline and Stephanie and I would ride the scooter together to shop for groceries. Caroline carried Stephanie in a baby carrier sling in front of her, and on the trip back home I would hold the grocery bags on the floor between my feet. Fortunately traffic in Oxford then wasn't frenetic the way it became a few years later.

Our entertainments had to be affordable because our income was just \$200 a month. While we were there Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor came to perform in a play. The tickets cost a guinea, about \$3.00, and we decided that our budget didn't allow for that, but there were many opportunities for inexpensive entertainment such as visiting Stonehenge, visiting the Cotswolds, and visiting cathedrals (we loved Ely and Salisbury especially). We attended the regatta at Henley-on-Thames, and once we took a train into London for the day.

It was my practice to study five days a week plus Saturday mornings, but not to study in the evenings or on Sundays. Caroline and Stephanie were back in Jackson for about six weeks near the end of 1966, and I had a lot of free time on my hands. I decided to join the university chess club, and in November I signed up to play in a tournament. I assumed that there would be dozens of participants, as there were at the club meetings, but I was wrong. Only a dozen or so signed up for the tournament. They were, of course, the very best players—and me. Remarkably, I won my first game, but I was crushed in my second. I later learned that the young man who defeated me was at that time a member of the team that held the title British Universities Chess Champions. His name was Kendall, and he was an undergraduate student at Pembroke College. Later I saw him play the world champion, Mikhail Botvinnik, to a draw.

Unsurprisingly, Mr. Kendall defeated me very quickly, in about a dozen moves. It was embarrassing. We had kept notes of our moves, and he kindly asked if I'd like to replay the game, so we did. He said something like this: Your first move was fine. Your second move was not the best one available but neither was it a disaster. On your third move, you lost the game. I replied that I hadn't really lost the game until the twelfth move when he checkmated me. He said that in fact, once I made the third move, no one could have prevented him from defeating me.

A few years later it occurred to me that the Christian gospel says something similar. In some way that we do not understand, God has defeated evil by sending Jesus into the world. We are, of course, still waiting for God to checkmate evil, but the outcome of the world's history has been determined. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus shared flesh and blood with all human beings “so that through death he might destroy

the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14–15). God’s kingdom is going to come and God’s will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven. That is our Christian hope, and it is predicated on the conviction that in some mysterious way God has already defeated evil through the work that Jesus did.



In Oxford we had one of the most mysterious experiences of our lives. Caroline had a dream in which she heard her mother calling for her. It was so vivid that Caroline wanted to telephone her mother. We couldn’t really afford for her to do that; trans–Atlantic calls were very expensive. But as we continued to talk about it, we both sensed that we needed to do it anyway. We didn’t own a phone ourselves, of course, but we had friends who did, and they agreed to let us make the call on their phone and to pay them for it when the phone bill arrived. When Caroline called, her mother confirmed that she had indeed been calling for Caroline. She had been sick and in hospital and had needed to be in touch with Caroline.

I learned to take Caroline’s intuitions very seriously. They weren’t infallible, but they were often right. I also learned not to be dismissive of experiences for which there is no rational explanation. I have no idea how Caroline came to have that dream, but Shakespeare was surely right when he wrote, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” That said, my own theology is more a product of empiricism and reason than of intuition or mystical experiences.



We had two very sad experiences while we were at Oxford. In March 1966 my mother died. I flew home for her funeral in Tallahassee, and afterwards my 15–year–old sister Ruth returned to Oxford to live with us. Ruth was active at Wesley Memorial Methodist Church while she was in Oxford. She and our infant daughter Stephanie were both born on November 24, fifteen years apart. Ruth loved Stephanie, and we loved having Ruth with us and appreciated her helping us to care for Stephanie.

After she arrived, we sold the Lambretta and bought a small English Ford so that we could all tour Oxford and nearby places together.

In the fall of 1966 Caroline was hospitalized at the Radcliffe Infirmary with kidney stones. Ruth helped me to care for Stephanie during those difficult days. Then, on October 17, Caroline's father Kenneth Toler died unexpectedly. He was a respected correspondent who covered the news about Mississippi for *The Commercial Appeal*, a Memphis newspaper. Caroline and Stephanie flew home to Jackson for his funeral. While they were in Jackson, Caroline underwent surgery for kidney stones. They returned to Oxford in early December. It was during their absence that I played in the chess tournament.



As our time in Oxford was coming to a close we tried to think through what was next for us. It wasn't easy to search for work when we were across the Atlantic. Trans-Atlantic communication was slow then. There was no internet, of course, and trans-Atlantic phone calls were expensive. Almost everything had to be done by air mail which could take a week in each direction.

I still hadn't found work when it was time for us to leave Oxford. On June 29 we flew home on a turbo-prop plane, a plane with propellers that were powered by a turbine engine. Ruth flew to Texas to be with our sister Dale and her husband Wayne. She finished high school the following year and went to college in Texas, and she has remained in Texas ever since. Caroline, Stephanie, and I went to Jackson and spent the remainder of the summer with Caroline's mother. I drove up to Columbus to express my thanks to the men in the Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church who had funded our two years at Oxford and to report on my work there. When I asked them about a plan for repaying the loan, they said they had decided to make it a gift rather than a loan. They were very generous people.

I had conversations with the pastor of a large church in Jackson about coming on as his associate pastor but backed away when I learned that my principal responsibility would be to visit church members who were in the hospital. I enjoy that kind of pastoral ministry and think it is very important, but I do not have the gifts or the desire to do it fulltime.

## School Teacher, Again

One of my friends from seminary days, Bill Blase, told me about a teaching position in a high school in Illinois. The school offered me the position, and I took it. In the late summer of 1967, Caroline and Stephanie and I rode a train to Decatur. At the station we were met by the principal of the high school who drove us out to the small town of Argenta. We rented a house that was a block from the high school. For the next year I taught 9th and 10th grade English classes at Argenta–Oreana High School. It was my first fulltime teaching position.

I was offered the position in part because of a misunderstanding. My degree from Oxford was in theology, but the abbreviation for the degree Bachelor of Letters is B.Litt. A few months after I arrived in Illinois, I discovered that either the administrators or the school board has misinterpreted B.Litt. to mean Bachelor of Literature and so assumed that my work had been in the study of English literature. In any case, I had read fiction for years—at that time my favorite novelists were Ernest Hemingway and John Updike—, and I welcomed the chance to teach it.

The school supported teachers who chose to engage in continuing education, and I had an opportunity to do that. A non–credit course was being offered at the University of Illinois in nearby Urbana–Champaign. The subject of the course was how to lead discussions about literary texts. We discussed an abridged version of the Great Books Curriculum associated with the University of Chicago. The curriculum was a collection of classical and other influential texts, and I welcomed the opportunity to read the selections and to learn ways to lead discussions about them.

The most meaningful insight for me was that it is interpretive questions rather than opinion questions or factual questions that generate the most thoughtful discussions. For example, opinion questions about Jesus can be answered without referring to the Bible. “How do you feel about the teachings of Jesus?” “I like the teachings of Jesus.”

Factual questions about Jesus can be answered by pointing to a particular passage in the Bible. “What was the name of Jesus’ mother?” “Matthew says that Jesus’ mother was named Mary.”

In order to answer interpretive questions about Jesus, you have to know what the Bible says but you also need to reflect thoughtfully on what it says. For example, in answer to the question, “Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem?” you might say things such as: Jesus went to Jerusalem even though he knew he would be killed because God called him to this mission. He also went because he needed to confront the national leaders with his message. He also went because by being crucified he could draw all people to himself. He went because he had to die to protect his followers the way a shepherd may have to die to protect his sheep, and because he had to give his life as a ransom to set people free.

I had another opportunity to learn about teaching literature. A book by Daniel Fader and Elton McNeil had recently been published. Its title was *Hooked on Books*, and its premise was that the best way to teach students to read is not to give lectures about books but to allow students to read as much as possible, and the best way to teach them to write is not to give lectures about writing but to allow them to write as much as possible. The authors encouraged teachers to allow students to select things they wanted to read and to write about subjects they wanted to write about. It also encouraged teachers not to correct students’ writing too quickly because that can stifle their desire to write. It is more effective to offer just an occasional comment about spelling, grammar, usage, and the like, while encouraging them to keep on writing.

All of this felt right to me so, supported by the administration and a grant that the school had received from the state of Illinois, I moved the students’ desks in my classroom back against the walls. In the center of the room were several waist-high, three-shelf bookshelves, filled with hundreds of paperback books. In class the students sat at their desks and read books of their choosing. When they finished a book, they wrote a review of it. The only guidance I gave them was a list of information about the book to include in their reviews, information such as title, author, and so on. When they finished writing their review, they brought it to me at my desk. As I read it, I asked questions about the book and offered comments about the review. I then told them their grade for that book, and they moved on to their next selection. When no one was at my desk, I did the same thing the students were doing. I read a book. Example is better than precept.

There were remarkable outcomes to this unusual process. My favorite concerns a boy who was repeating the tenth grade because the previous year his teacher had thought he had not done the assigned work successfully. When the year began, he was understandably sullen about having to re-take the class. Like many of the boys in that part of central Illinois, he spent much of his spare time doing mechanical work and body work on cars. Several of the paperbacks I had chosen were books of fiction centered around cars, so one day I asked him if he would like to read one of those and report on it. He replied, "I've read all of them." I was doubtful, and we went to the bookshelves and looked through the books about cars. He had in fact read them all on his own, outside of class, before he came into my class. He began making comments about the ones he had read. "This one is part of a series, and you need to get the other two books in the series," he said. "The action in that one is way too slow." "That writer doesn't appreciate vintage cars, just new ones." I realized that he knew a great deal about books about cars, and that he was virtually a bibliophile of the genre. In the end he helped me to order some additional books about cars, good ones, as he said, and he wrote reports on those. His grade in my class was A.

I also sometimes offered traditional lectures and traditional quizzes for students who preferred that, but it was that innovative program that made teaching especially enjoyable.



Soon after we arrived in Illinois, I was invited to become the part-time pastor of a small Baptist church in the nearby town of Weldon. I did this and found it very rewarding. We had not yet bought a car, so church members took turns driving us to and from the church building on Sundays. The members were lovely people, and we were invited to Sunday dinner most weeks.

Immediately after we arrived, I asked some of the members when the church had last observed the Lord's Supper. They looked at each other sheepishly and said they thought it had been a year or more. I suggested that we have it the following Sunday, and they were happy to do that. We continued to have it regularly in the following months.

We had one unnerving experience while we were at the church. In the spring of 1968, I officiated at the wedding of a couple who were in their thirties and active in the church. I knew that the woman had been married before, but that didn't bother me; I have never accepted the idea that the Bible's teaching about divorce means that no divorced people are ever to re-marry.

A few weeks after the wedding, I received a letter from an inmate at a federal prison in upstate Illinois. He was the bride's former husband, and he was enraged that I had officiated at her wedding. He wrote that he was soon to be released from prison, and he threatened to take revenge for what I had done. I took his letter to the FBI, and they went to the prison and informed him that he must not have any further contact with me. I never heard from him again, but I was relieved when at the end of the school year we said goodbye to our friends in Illinois and began the drive back to the South. It was time for me to go back to school.

### Seminary, Again

While we were in Illinois I looked into schools where I might do doctoral studies in theology. Several fine ones were available, and I almost went to the Divinity School at Duke University. In the end I was guided by financial constraints, and I returned to New Orleans to study again at the Baptist seminary there. Caroline, Stephanie, and I moved into on-campus student housing in the summer of 1968.

At Oxford I had attended several lecture series even though my degree did not require attendance at lectures. The seminary granted me credit for those lectures. This meant that instead of having to have eight semester-long seminars at New Orleans, I would need only five. I got four of those in the first year by taking two year-long seminars. One was taught by Samuel Mikolaski and the other by Clark Pinnock.

Both of the seminars were excellent. Mikolaski's seminar was on the love of God, and in it we worked our way through biblical texts and numerous monographs, the most important of which was *Agape and Eros* by Anders Nygren. I think that all of us came to agree with Dr. Mikolaski that Nygren had exaggerated the difference between the two kinds of love, agape and eros.

Pinnock's seminar was a survey of recent Christian theology. Pinnock's doctorate was in New Testament, and he was at that time making a transition from teaching New Testament to teaching theology, so his choice of subject for the seminar may have contributed to his making the transition. At that time he was spending his mornings reading Christian theology and doing his teaching in the afternoons. I did not share his Calvinism or his Fundamentalism, but the seminar was excellent. In later years, while insisting that he remained an evangelical, Pinnock gave up Calvinism and Fundamentalism and became much more irenic. The nearest he came to writing a systematic theology was a 1996 book entitled *Flame of Love*. It is the most beautiful book of theology I have ever read that was written in my lifetime. In the years since I took those seminars I continued to enjoy friendship with both Mikolaski and Pinnock, though I have been much closer to Mikolaski. One of the students in the two seminars was Paige Patterson, who went on to lead a campaign that caused the Southern Baptist Convention to make a radical shift to the right in the 1980s.

Near the end of the fall semester, Robert Soileau was forced to resign from the faculty. He had been out of favor with the trustees and the administration for several years, so his resignation was not completely surprising, but the timing was. I never learned how he was compelled to resign. I hope he was paid a generous compensation to do so.

The president invited me to teach a class that Soileau had been scheduled to teach in the spring, and I accepted. The students who had been in Soileau's classes in the fall may have experienced a sense of whiplash, since my theology was different from Soileau's. The classes nevertheless went well and I got my first taste of teaching theology at a graduate level.

That spring semester may have been the busiest time of my life. In addition to taking the two demanding seminars and being a husband and father, I had six part-time jobs. I was teaching the theology class. I was both secretary and grader for Dr. Mikolaski. I worked for an hour a week at a bookstore across the street from the seminary; this gave me a big discount on any books I bought there. I kept the accounts for the seminary's cafeteria.

I also taught two math classes a private junior high school. That was an interesting experience. One of the students arrived in my class one morning wearing a khaki shirt and an armband with a swastika on it! When I asked him about it, he said that he was a Nazi and hated various groups of people. I told him to take off the armband and not to wear the uniform again in my class. I was never told whether this caused problems for the administration of the school.

At the close of the semester, the president of the seminary invited me to continue as an adjunct teacher in the fall semester, but I couldn't support my family by teaching adjunctively. Instead, I accepted a call to become pastor of the Lula Baptist Church in the small town of Lula in the Mississippi Delta. Caroline, Stephanie, and I moved there when classes ended in May 1969.

### Pastor, Again

The members of the church welcomed us warmly, and it wasn't long before we had met them all and begun to get to know and love them. We lived in a nice parsonage next-door to the church. There were no conflicts in the church.

The church had a good standing in the community, and as a consequence I was invited to do things that I hadn't been doing in my two previous churches. I was invited to speak at a high school graduation. I was asked to lead a retreat for Presbyterian ministers. People who were members of other churches initiated conversations with me about various matters. A Methodist layman tried to recruit me to lead an effort to merge the Methodist and Baptist churches in Lula. An Episcopalian asked to talk to me about some civic concerns. One of our own members, Percy Scruggs, urged me to sign a petition to prohibit the sale of alcohol in the county.

On another occasion I learned an important lesson from Percy Scruggs. One of our elderly members was very poor and was living on a Social Security retirement pension of about \$80 a month. I once visited her during the evening, and there were no lights on in the house; she was saving on electricity. She was in such poor health that she was unable

to attend worship services, but once a month someone brought a check from her and put it in the offering plate. It was for about \$8, a tithe of her income. It has been my practice never to check up on what church members give to the church, but Percy Scruggs happened to mention that her check had come in the previous Sunday. I was appalled. I said that I thought we should thank her for her generosity but insist that she keep the money, as she certainly needed it more than the church did. Percy responded, Oh, no, pastor, it's important that we accept her money. She is so weak that there is nothing else she can do now except support her church, and we must allow her to do that. Only later did it occur to me that she was exactly like the woman in the Temple who, in Jesus' estimation, gave more than all the wealthier people (Mark 12:41–44).

Some of our members came to me asking for counsel regarding troubling issues in their lives. One of the requests was very sobering. One of our senior adults was in a small hospital in a nearby town. She had become non-responsive and was being kept alive by life-support machines. Her adult son told me that the doctors had said that his mother probably would not regain consciousness, and he asked me if it would be morally acceptable to turn off the life-support machines. I replied cautiously: Why don't you give it a few more days? After a few days his mother woke up and as soon as she was able to speak said to a nurse, I'm hungry—don't you serve food to your patients here? She lived for several more years with almost no side effects from her illness. That experience has influenced my thinking about end-of-life issues. I accept that in some cases there comes a time to turn off life-support machines, but I also think that in most cases the decision shouldn't be rushed.



All of our church members were white. There was another Baptist church in town whose members were black. I don't remember hearing a single racist comment or joke while I was there. Some of our church members were farmers who grew cotton or soybeans on vast tracts of land and worked side by side with black men through the week. They spoke to me of their appreciation for Blacks as good farmers, but they did not invite them to our church. In my sermons I talked about Jesus' teaching

that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Everyone agreed, and they loved their black neighbors in the sense of enjoying working with them, being friendly to them, and desiring their well-being. But they did not think that loving their neighbors included integrating our church racially. I regret that it wasn't possible to welcome everyone to our church.



Our church's worship services were traditional for small Baptist churches. We had a choir and an electronic organ, and we sang traditional hymns and gospel songs. I didn't wear a robe when I preached, but I did wear a suit and tie, and several of the men in the congregation dressed the same way.

Gradually I came to see that our quasi-formal style of worship did not appeal to all of our members. One of them told me that he would have preferred that we sing a different kind of music and that our singing be accompanied by a guitar rather than the organ. He said that there are only two kinds of good music, country and western.

I was sympathetic. I sometimes find it difficult to worship God in some kinds of worship services. I am helped by worship services that are quiet, orderly, thoughtful, and reverent. I realize that is not true for everyone and that many people need worship services that are energetic and exciting. I wish that there had been some way to provide worship services that would have helped all of our members to worship God.



Our members who wanted a different style of worship service were gentle in their requests, but a few years later differences in worship style became hotly contested in churches throughout America. The principal choices were traditional and contemporary, but in fact there are several other styles as well, styles such as liturgical and seeker-friendly. My friend Paul Basden has studied this issue carefully and written two books about it, and he is convinced that in the end the differences aren't theological or religious but cultural. He has convinced me.

I once had a conversation about "the worship wars" with my friend Joe Cothen, a dean of the theology school in the seminary in

New Orleans. Like me, Joe was able to worship God better in services that are traditional rather than contemporary. Our conversation became fairly animated, and he wrapped it up with humor. He said, I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Fisher. There's a church outside of Slidell that has closed down, and the building is for sale. I'm going to buy the building. I'm going to put a sign over the front door that says "Ordinary Baptist Church." We're going to do everything exactly the way we've always done it. If you don't like it, you can leave, because I own the place!



The most important event in our family life while we were in Lula was the birth of our son Kenneth Fisher Humphreys. He was born at a hospital in Clarksdale on November 1, 1969. We named him for Caroline's father Kenneth Toler and for me.

In the fall and winter of 1969, I commuted weekly from Lula to New Orleans in order to complete the final semester of my seminar work. The church had agreed in advance that I could do this, and since I needed to be at the seminary only one day a week, it didn't interfere with my ministry in Lula.

The car we owned when we moved to Lula was old and undependable. To try to ensure that we would be able to get to the hospital when Caroline went into labor, and because I was commuting to New Orleans weekly, we decided we needed to buy a new car. We chose a Volkswagen hatchback. VWs were famously dependable.

But this one wasn't. The engine was air-cooled rather than water-cooled, and something was wrong with the design of the cooling system. In less than a year the engine had overheated and had to be rebuilt five times. On the morning that Caroline went into labor, the engine wouldn't start at all, and we had to borrow the car of the church member who had come to stay with Stephanie when while we were at the hospital. It was a close call. We got to the hospital and Caroline was taken straight to the delivery room. I was still filling out insurance forms when a nurse said to me, Would you like to know whether you have a boy or girl? I said she must have the wrong expectant father, as I had just arrived. She said, It's a boy.



After the semester ended, I was required to take an oral exam on all my seminar work. The car engine overheated when I was driving to New Orleans for the exam. I called the VW dealer in Hattiesburg to pick up the car and then began hitchhiking—there were no rental cars available—to get to New Orleans for the exam. Finally an older, kind-hearted, black man driving a lumber truck picked me up. He drove more slowly than I would have done, but he generously left the highway so that he could drop me off at the guest room on the seminary campus. I had very little time before my exam was scheduled to begin. I arrived for the exam shaken but full of gratitude for the kindness of a man whom I have never seen again. I understand what Tennessee Williams meant about depending on the kindness of strangers.

My fifth and final seminar had been on the theology of the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century. For the seminar I wrote a research paper about Renaissance influences on the theology of the Lutheran reformer and theologian, Philip Melancthon. It was welcomed by our professor, James Mosteller. Early in 1970 the president of the seminary resigned, and on March 1 Dr. Mosteller became the acting president. He called me in Lula and asked if I would come to teach theology as a regular member of the faculty at the seminary, and I happily accepted.

## CHAPTER 4

# PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY

In May 1970, Caroline, Stephanie, Kenneth, and I moved to New Orleans, and our nomadic life of the past seven years finally came to an end. For the next 19½ years we enjoyed a settled life together in New Orleans.

### Dissertation

I began the full-time teaching of theology ABD, that is, having completed “All But the Dissertation” of a doctoral degree. This meant that I was not only teaching theology full-time for the first time but also still working to finish my dissertation. It was imperative that I put my best efforts into my teaching. As a consequence, the teaching slowed down the writing, and I did not complete the latter until two years later.

I appreciate the fact that the seminary employed me before I had completed my doctorate. In my case, it worked out pretty well. But over the years I have come to doubt the wisdom of institutions offering tenure-track positions to graduate students who are ABD. The first years of teaching are intensely demanding and time-consuming, and this causes delays in writing the dissertation. A great deal of pain is caused for both the graduate students and the institutions when the graduate students fail to complete their doctorates and have to be dismissed. It seems to me that the entire arrangement is unhelpful to the institutions, to the ABD students themselves, and to the students in their classes.

I think that a wiser arrangement is simply for institutions to pay ABD students a good remuneration to teach a single class for a single semester with no promise of anything further. If that class goes well, the ABD student can be offered a chance to teach another class for another semester. This will not interfere with the writing of the dissertation as much as if students teach a full load, serve on committees, and begin preparing for tenure review. Also, if the class doesn't go well or if

the student doesn't make progress on the dissertation, institutions can simply not offer the student a teaching position for the next semester. This is better for everyone than firing them. It gives ABD students the opportunity to get important experience in teaching. If the compensation is good, as it should be, it helps students financially, too. I think it's a win-win situation.



The title of my dissertation is “God in the Theology of Leonard Hodgson.” Hodgson was an Anglican theologian, born in 1889, who was predecessor to Henry Chadwick as the Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford. While I was at Oxford I had two contacts with Hodgson. Caroline and I had heard him preach at Hertford College. Later Professor Chadwick had arranged for me to spend a memorable afternoon with Hodgson who was living in Leamington Spa.

I had admired Hodgson's work since I first encountered it in 1961. His books have influenced my theology more than those of any other theologian who lived in my lifetime.

Hodgson was an Anglo-Catholic, a high church Anglican. He played an important role in the ecumenical movement. He served as secretary for the Faith and Order Movement before it was merged in 1948 with the Life and Work Movement to create the World Council of Churches. Stephen Neill, in his history of the ecumenical movement, suggested that during World War II the ecumenical movement essentially resided in Hodgson's files in his home at Christ Church. There is an often-told story, which may possibly be true, that Hitler did not intend to bomb Oxford because he wanted to use it for his capitol once he conquered Great Britain. I don't know whether that story contributed to the decision to keep the files in Oxford, but in any case Hitler did not bomb the city and the files were safe.

Hodgson wrote the most lucid prose of any theologian I have ever read, and this inspired my conviction that Christian theology can be presented in clear language. There is a profound mystery about God that will always remain no matter how clear one's prose, but that does not excuse theologians from writing clearly about what we do know about

God. In the closing sentences of the preface to one of his later books Hodgson wrote, “If in some passages I seem to be plagiarizing from myself in different volumes, the explanation is simple. When I have found a form of words that seems to me best to express my thought, I see no reason why I should go out of my way to inflict on any of my readers an inferior version in order to avoid infringing on my own copyright.” In other words, I am repeating myself because I got it right the first time.

Hodgson had the courage and self-confidence to “follow the argument where it led,” as he liked to put it. As a result, on some issues such as Incarnation and Trinity his theology was orthodox, while on others such as the nature of God’s self-revelation and universalism it was untraditional and even radical. I appreciated this. I am a little uncomfortable with people who are always conservative or always liberal or always radical, no matter what the issue. It seems to me that people who are thinking for themselves will probably depart from the consensus in their parties at some point.

I chose to write about Hodgson’s work because of his ecumenism, the clarity of his prose, and his willingness to follow the argument where it led. And I chose to write about his doctrine of God because I feel that theologians should attempt to write and speak about the most important subjects and not just nibble around the edges of the Christian faith, and God is of course the most important subject of all. The novelist Saul Bellow once commented that theology is nice work if you can get it but sooner or later you have to talk about God. I’d rephrase the second part of that sentence as “and you get to talk about God.” And sooner is better than later.

In 1972 I submitted the dissertation to the faculty and underwent an oral exam on it. It was interesting to be given an oral exam by my colleagues on the faculty. As always they were collegial and gracious. Once the degree was conferred in May, I had more time to devote to preparing lectures for my classes.

## Students

There were a few hundred students at the New Orleans seminary when I began teaching in 1970 and more than a thousand by the time I

left in 1990. All of them had already completed bachelor's degrees. The only degrees offered by the seminary in 1970 were master's degrees and doctorates. Most students were in the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree program. Later the seminary would create an undergraduate division called Leavell College, but I did not teach in it.

Seminaries are unlike other graduate schools in that they admit students no matter what course of study they followed in their undergraduate work. Because many of the students have not done any undergraduate work in religious studies, the M.Div. degree requires three years of work. This is a year or two longer than is required in other master's degree programs.

Many of the students at the seminary were second-career students. At different times the students in my classes included a tugboat captain, a highway patrolman, a jazz musician, a male model, a professional athlete, several lawyers, several doctors, several businessmen, several college professors, and so on. The seminary had admitted women students from its founding in 1917, and there were many women in the student body. Most students were white, but there were many African Americans and some students of other races and ethnicities.

Some students had done their undergraduate work at colleges or universities where they had been influenced by Baptist campus ministries. Because it was the early 1970s when I began teaching, some students came out of the movement known as the Jesus People. Some had been heavily influenced by para-church groups such as Youth for Christ and Young Life. Although the primary mission of the seminary was to train ministers for Baptist churches, the seminary welcomed applicants from other churches and denominations.

Very few students came to the seminary for what might be called personal enrichment rather than to prepare for ministry as a vocation. Many students came with the intention of becoming missionaries, music ministers, youth ministers, ministers of education, or campus ministers, but by far the largest group came with the intention of becoming pastors of churches. In fact, some were already experienced pastors and were studying to become better pastors.

## Classes

At the seminary the academic year consisted of four 8–week terms rather than two 16–week semesters. Classes met four days a week, Tuesdays through Fridays. The practice of not having classes on Mondays apparently went back to a time when students who were already pastors would ride the trains from New Orleans to their churches on Saturdays, work in the churches on Sundays, and ride the trains back to the New Orleans on Mondays. I never knew anyone who did that, but I welcomed the free Mondays as times for class preparation and for writing.



When I began teaching, all of the seminary’s classes were taught on campus. After a few years that began to change. The seminary established centers in other cities including Shreveport, Jackson, Birmingham, Atlanta, Miami, and San Juan, Puerto Rico. Most of the centers were located in the facilities of local churches. Most of the teaching in the centers was done on Mondays by faculty who flew to the center for that purpose, but some was done by local persons who held doctorates and were qualified to teach their subjects.

There were at least two reasons for establishing the centers. One was that there were thousands of ministers in Baptist churches who hadn’t been to seminary and who couldn’t leave their churches and move to New Orleans to study. The centers made it possible for hundreds and possibly thousands of them to get a theological education and a degree in theology. Some faculty members were hesitant about the centers because they said that an education on campus is superior to one at a center. They were right, of course. An on–campus experience is better. But for many of these students the issue was not whether to study at a center or on campus. The issue was whether to study at a center or not study at all.

A second reason for creating the centers was financial. The Southern Baptist Convention has six seminaries. Most of each seminary’s funding came from the Convention, and the amount the Convention gave to each seminary is determined by the number of students who are enrolled.

The more students, the greater the funding, and creating new centers increased the number of students.

Over the years I taught many times in the centers at Atlanta, Birmingham, and Shreveport. I flew out on Monday mornings, taught during the day, and flew back on Monday evenings. I regret that I wasn't available to talk to students on other days, but, other than that, teaching at the centers was a good experience.

After a time I became concerned about how much the seminary was having to pay for my airplane tickets, so I looked into the wildly irrational way that plane tickets were priced. I discovered that round-trip tickets in which you stay over a weekend were much cheaper than round-trip tickets in which you go and come back the same day. So instead of buying a day-trip ticket, I combined tickets from two trips. For example, if I was going to teach in Atlanta on the 1st of the month and again on the 8th of the month, I didn't buy a round-trip ticket for the 1st and another round-trip ticket for the 8th. Instead, I bought a round-trip ticket leaving New Orleans on the morning of the 1st and returning on evening of the 8th. Then I bought a second round-trip ticket leaving Atlanta on the evening of the 1st and returning on the morning of the 8th. Since both tickets included a weekend stay, they were hundreds of dollars cheaper than day-trip tickets would have been. The only nuisance was that I always had to take the two tickets with me when I traveled. When I explained my money-saving project to one of our administrators he asked, "Is that legal?"



Many classes on the seminary campus had twenty or so students. The largest classes had about a hundred students. The curriculum included a one-term introductory course in theology that was required of all students including those in the schools of music and religious education as well as those in the school of theology. It was always a large class, and I loved teaching it. My colleague in the discipline of systematic theology, J. Terry Young, also taught this course, so some students graduated without having taken a class with me. Even so, I taught thousands of students in the 19½ years I was there.

Across the years I have met teachers in various disciplines who did not like to teach introductory classes, preferring instead to teach advanced classes. I understand that. Advanced classes are usually smaller, students already have some understanding of the subject, and there is a more informed exchange of ideas in the classroom. By designing advanced classes on subjects of special interest to themselves, professors can get feedback on their ideas and perhaps on their current writing.

I enjoyed teaching advanced classes, of course, for just those reasons, but I preferred to teach the large introductory classes. I welcomed the opportunity to be for many students the person who introduced them to the academic study of Christian theology.

There was something else, too. The subject matter of theology is God and the world and relationships between God and the world. To me, this is a subject of endless fascination. I cannot imagine becoming bored with it. I mean that literally; I am incapable of calling up a mental image of what it would be like to be bored when teaching about God. I suppose that teaching an introductory course in some subjects, say, arithmetic, might become boring, but I doubt that teaching theology could ever become boring. God is not only the most important subject but also the most interesting.

I taught several advanced courses as well as the introductory one. The advanced courses I most enjoyed were those on the doctrine of God, the doctrines of Christ and of his atoning work, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of salvation, and the doctrine of the church.



I also taught two courses that were not part of the systematic theology curriculum. One was philosophy of religion, and the other was Christian apologetics. My background in these subjects was adequate for teaching introductory classes but not, I think, for teaching advanced classes, so I never did that. I had become interested in philosophy as an undergraduate at Mississippi College, had taken courses in it when I was a seminary student, and had gone to lectures about it at Oxford, most memorably with Ian T. Ramsey.

Across the centuries Christian theologians have engaged in conversation with other disciplines. The first conversation partner was the Jewish theology that the church inherited from her spiritual ancestors, the Jews. That conversation is visible throughout the writings of the New Testament as when, for example, the author of Hebrews writes about the death of Jesus and its relationship to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Christian theology's next conversation partner was philosophy. There are hints of this already in the New Testament, as when John writes of Jesus as the Logos (Word) of God. Logos was an important concept in Stoic philosophy. The conversation with philosophy has influenced Christian theologians so much that books of Christian theology often seem like books of Christian philosophy. I believe that philosophy benefits Christian theology best when it plays the role of servant rather than master.

Modern theology has been in conversation with numerous other disciplines including history, physics, politics, sociology, and psychology.

I understand apologetics to be an effort to remove intellectual barriers, or barriers that people think are intellectual, to the Christian faith. For that reason I taught the course more like a sub-category of evangelism than of philosophy. Even so, much of the content of the course was philosophical. This has been true for Christian apologetics across the centuries.

It seemed to me then and still seems to me today that the two principal intellectual barriers to Christian faith are evidence and evil. What evidence do we have that the Christian faith is true? What help can we offer to those who say that the massive evil and suffering in the world make it impossible for them to believe that there is a God who is all-good and all-powerful?

From the beginning I was fairly certain that there are no knock-down arguments on either issue. We can't prove the existence of God, and we can't explain why God, who is all-good and all-powerful, allows so much relatively innocent, pointless, involuntary, human suffering.

I also thought that atheists cannot prove that there is no God or that vast suffering excludes the possibility of God's being good and powerful.

The fact that we don't have knock-down arguments does not mean that there is nothing to be said. I think there are things to be said to help people who are seeking evidence for God and people who are troubled by the evil and suffering in the world. In my apologetics classes I tried to review some of the things that I have found to be helpful about both of these issues.

## Lectures

In all of my master's degree classes I gave lectures. During the 1970s and 1980s some educators came to doubt the value of lectures. They thought that what students needed was to engage in discussions, not listen to lectures. I agree that discussions can facilitate good learning, and I always welcomed discussion, stopping repeatedly during each lecture to ask students for their comments or questions about what I had been saying.

I can go even further. When the subject matter is something internal to students' lives, lectures may not be as helpful to students as discussion. When the objective is for students to understand their feelings, for example, then having a discussion may be all that's needed, but when the subject is Christian theology, then, in my opinion, lectures are valuable. I think better learning takes place when we give a lecture about, say, the Holy Spirit, and then allow students to respond to it, than simply to say, What do we all think about the Holy Spirit?

So I do not agree that lectures are a poor form of teaching. In fact, before I began teaching I knew that lectures were good teaching because across the years I had heard many lectures that had informed me and helped me to understand things. I think that the right antidote to bad lectures is good ones, not getting rid of them all. We shouldn't throw out the baby with the bath water.



From the beginning I wrote out my lectures. I didn't want students to record them verbatim, so I spoke at a normal pace. In class I would read a paragraph or two, often adding comments to what I had written. Then I would stop and ask for comments or questions about what I

had just said. Students usually had things to say. Their questions and comments ranged from brilliant to not–really–germane. I listened to the students carefully and tried never to interrupt while they were speaking. This could be challenging, because some of the comments and questions were rambling.

I tried very hard never to embarrass a student who asked a question or made a comment, and so far as I'm aware, I succeeded in this. I felt that as a teacher I had a moral responsibility to take students' comments and questions seriously, however imperfect they were, and to try to give responses that would be true and of value to the students. I found it easy to respect students who asked questions or made comments that were less than brilliant, because I knew that across the years I had sometimes done the same thing. I think it is part of the learning process that we sometimes ask less than brilliant questions.

It wasn't unusual for me to misunderstand what students were asking, so I frequently ended my response by saying, "Did I get at what you were thinking about?" If they said that I didn't, I would say something like, "Well, I see I answered the wrong question. Can you ask your question again?" I think that when that happened, students were able to understand the subject more fully.

The German–American theologian Paul Tillich has written that human beings could be defined as the creatures who ask questions. To ask a question is both to know and not to know. You must know there is a subject about which you are asking a question, and the fact that you are asking a question about a subject means that you don't know everything about the subject and want to know more. I agree, and I think that in that sense there are no bad questions. Of course, on rare occasions some students' questions included things that were ugly, but those aren't genuine questions. I usually tried not to embarrass those students but simply to move on because it was unlikely that they realized what they had said was ugly. Theology is a controversial subject, but, at least in my classes, the controversies did not create animosity.

And there was something else. I learned from students' questions and comments, even the ill–considered ones. Listening to my students

helped me to see things from points of view other than my own. It also helped me to find clearer, more effective ways to formulate and to express my ideas.

For example, in a small class I was commenting on the Lord's Prayer. I said that we all pray for God's kingdom to come and for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. I added that we can do this in good faith because someday this prayer would be answered fully and God's kingdom would arrive on earth. A student from Africa responded, You're really an optimist, aren't you? I said, No, I am not an optimist. I am a Christian. I have Christian hope. I trust that God is going to complete the project of saving the world.

I cannot remember a single time when I regretted soliciting questions and comments from students. I appreciate every bit of feedback I got from them.



In more than sixty years of ministry I have delivered several thousand lectures and preached several thousand sermons. Sermon preparation was difficult for me. Preparing lectures energized me, and I found it easy to devote as much time as possible to it.

I learned from writing lectures. It's not only that we learn and then write down what we have learned; we learn as we write. I agree with the saying, I don't know what I think until I read what I have written. There is a level of understanding that we can reach only by writing out our ideas. Of course, it is possible to understand something without being able to put it into words, but we understand it better when we have put it into words, preferably written.

I didn't use lecture notes twice. Each time I taught a subject, I revised and rewrote the lectures. I hope that meant that the lectures became better over time. I know it meant that I kept trying to understand things better.

In my lectures I tried to make references only to books that I had read in their entirety. I think that lectures begin to feel superficial when a lecturer refers to books that he or she hasn't read. On one occasion I attended that kind of lecture with a wise friend. Afterwards he commented

that it sounded as if the lecturer had read a lot of book reviews. He was right; that's exactly what it sounded like.

I did make some exceptions to this rule. For example, I sometimes referred to something Karl Barth had written in *Church Dogmatics*, and I have read only a couple of volumes in that massive work which runs to more than 2 million words. But ordinarily, if I referred to a book, I had read it.



In my first years of teaching I gradually became concerned about how much class time students needed just to write notes on the lectures. Sometimes I addressed the problem by using handouts. Many of these were a single page. I have continued to use handouts in my teaching both in schools and in churches. In my classes I almost never used overhead projectors or, later, Power Point. I think that handouts have three advantages over audio-visuals. Students don't have to take notes on the handouts the way they do when material is presented on screens. Students can take the handouts with them when the class ends. If I don't finish a lecture, students can see on the handouts how it would have been finished.

Handouts were helpful, but they were only a partial solution to the problem of taking time-consuming notes. In 1974, after I had taught 4 years, I wrote a book entitled *Thinking about God*. It contained the things I most wanted to communicate to students in the introductory classes. I told students that they no longer needed to take notes in class; for the price of the book they could buy all the notes they would need.

Initially students were delighted—No more note-taking! But after a year or two, their attitudes shifted. They asked (or complained), If all the important things you are going to say are already in the book, why do we have to come to class? Why can't we just read the book?

I understand the questions, but I think they overlooked two things. One is that we learn things better when we both read and hear them than when we just read them. The other was that with the book in hand, they were able to discuss things in the book and to ask me about things that they overlooked or didn't understand when they read the book.

There was also the quirky fact that in my first few years of teaching I didn't in fact require students to attend class. For several years I didn't check on attendance at all. So far as I was aware, the written policies of the seminary did not state that class attendance was mandatory. No one had ever told me that I was required to check attendance. I told students that if the only reason they had come to seminary was to get a degree, like a union card so that they could work in churches, I wasn't going to force them to attend my classes. If they could write the essays and pass the tests, they could get credit for the course. They should come to class only if they wanted to learn more.

That situation didn't continue, however. After a few years our dean, J. Hardee Kennedy, gently hinted during a faculty meeting that class attendance was mandatory and that faculty should check on attendance, so I began to do that.

### Essays and Exams

There is more to teaching than preparing and delivering lectures and leading discussions. I also had to grade students' essays and prepare and grade exams. Giving grades was my least favorite part of teaching, but I tried to do it conscientiously because I knew that grades are an incentive to students to work.

I held a minority position on essays and exams. Initially I included on exams questions that had to be answered with brief essays. Grading those was frustrating for two reasons. One was that many students' handwriting was barely legible. The other was that I knew that students were capable of writing better essays than they gave me on their exams, because an exam does not allow time or space for students to rewrite and edit.

Because I believe that writing is such an effective means of learning, I gave writing assignments in my classes. I made the assignments on the first day of class and collected the essays about half-way through the term or semester. This made it possible for students to type their essays and then edit and rewrite and re-edit them, and so do the best work they were capable of doing. It also made it possible for me read typed rather

than hand-written essays. It also meant that I had days or even weeks to grade them, though my policy was to return essays and exams as quickly as possible.

I graded the essays that my students wrote. I had teaching assistants who helped with other things, but I graded the essays myself. I wrote notes in the margins of students' essays. I marked things in the essays that I thought were especially good, and if I judged an essay to be poor, I tried to explain why I thought that. I was always willing to talk to students privately if there was something unclear or troubling in the responses I made to their essays, but students almost never asked to talk about that with me.

I required that students write essays that were relatively brief, usually in the range of 1,000–3,000 words. I am convinced that important things can be said briefly and that students benefit from attempting to do that. With a limit on their words, they must try not only to learn what is true and important but also to discern what is most important. They have to organize things carefully, and they have to resist the urge to elaborate things unnecessarily. I urged them to read good theological dictionaries to see how much valuable information can be presented clearly in a brief space. I introduced them to books that did this masterfully; my favorite was and is the magisterial *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* edited by F. L. Cross who had been one of my examiners at Oxford. (For many years my good friend Philip Wise and I had a running contest to see who could spot a mistake in this great reference work. We didn't find many. I was proud when I discovered that the title of St. Anselm's great book, *Cur Deus Homo?*, was written with a question mark in one article and without a question mark in another.)

In my introductory classes I assigned a special essay. It was not a research essay but a confessional one. I called it a credo, a statement of each student's personal beliefs. I required that it be turned in a day or two after the class began so that the class would not have any influence on what the students wrote. I did not offer any suggestions about how to organize the essays or what to include in them. I told the students not to read anything or to research anything but simply to summarize their beliefs as Christians. I read these essays carefully and wrote notes on

them, but I did not grade them. I told the students that they were the world's leading experts on what they believed.

I learned a lot from reading the essays. For example, I estimate that about half of the credos were written in the threefold structure of Father, Son, and Spirit. I think this is interesting, given that most students were Baptists and Baptist churches don't emphasize the Trinity in their worship services the way that liturgical churches do.

I had an insightful experience with a student from Africa. As I read his credo, I realized that most of it was taken verbatim from the Baptist Faith and Message, the document that the Southern Baptist Convention had adopted in 1963. Since I had emphasized that the credo must be a personal statement, I thought that quoting a document at length was inappropriate, and I asked him to come by my office after class. In my office I told him that I had noticed that he was mostly quoting that document, and he replied with great sincerity, Yes, I am a Baptist.

This was the most vivid example I ever encountered of how fully people in some societies can identify themselves with their group. It is not easy for us Americans, with our emphasis on individualism, to understand this. This student was a very bright adult who was capable of doing good graduate work but who thought of himself less as an individual than as a member of the Baptist community. I thanked him for coming by and accepted his credo as he had written it.



Usually I gave two exams in each class, a mid-term and a final. The exams included questions about two things. One was the assigned readings; these were from books, selected journal articles, and selected articles from reference works. The other was the classroom lectures and discussions.

From these exams I learned three things. I learned whether the students had read or heard the material, I learned whether they had understood it, and I learned whether they remembered it. I did not need essays to tell me those things.

The essays were much more important than the exams. Students acquire more understanding from writing essays than from studying

for exams. But the answers given on exams displayed whether or not students had been in class and had read the assigned materials, whether they remembered what they had heard and read, and whether they understood what they had heard and read. Those things matter, too. Or so it seems to me.

Theology is different from some other subjects. There are subjects about which students know nothing and know that they know nothing. A good example in a seminary curriculum is Hebrew language. Almost no students come into a Hebrew language class thinking they already know a lot of Hebrew language.

However, many students came into a theology class thinking they already know a lot of theology, and in a sense, they're right. They do have an understanding of God and of the world and of God's relation to the world. Some of them had read books of theology, but even those who hadn't done that already knew some theology. I hoped that by hearing my lectures and the class discussions and by reading the materials, students' theology would be enlarged and enriched and in some cases, revised. Both the exams and the essays allowed me to assess whether that had happened.

## Counseling

Another component of teaching is providing counsel to individual students. I did not advertise my availability to do this, but across the years dozens of students came to my office looking for counsel. Some wanted to talk about theological matters or matters related to ministry or church life, and I enjoyed those conversations immensely.

Others wanted to talk about personal matters. I was not well prepared for this part of the work. When I was a seminary student, I had taken a course in psychology and counseling. In my work as a pastor, especially at Lula, I had occasionally been asked to provide counseling.

In addition, shortly after I came onto the faculty, I took an initial course of training in Clinical Pastoral Education. This is an excellent program that draws upon current understandings of psychology to inform pastoral care and counseling. Most of these programs are taught

in hospitals, but mine was offered through a church, and I found it very helpful. There were just four of us in the CPE group. The supervisor was Arnold Holley, and the other students were Joel Richardson and Philip Wise. Joel and Philip were both students in my classes at the seminary, and they both became good friends. Joel was married to my wife Caroline's sister Ingrid, and I had been in his wedding. Philip had a special interest in theology, and he and I later wrote two books together. At the end of our training Arnold privately gave us his assessment of our work. I don't know what he said to Philip. He told Joel that he had a special gift for counseling, and he was certainly right about that. He told me that I had no gift for counseling, and he was right about that, too.

But all this work was not really enough to equip me to provide helpful personal counseling. On the other hand, it did teach me three important things. The first was that I do not have the gifts to be a good counselor. The second was that sometimes it helps people just to have someone to take an interest in them, to listen to them, and take them seriously. The third is that it is very important to refer people to gifted, trained, experienced counselors. I tried to listen carefully, and I was happy to refer students to competent counselors. This was easy to do because there were several highly trained and very experienced counselors on the seminary faculty.



Across the years I initiated person-to-person conversations with some students outside of class. Initially I did this by inviting individual students to meet me for coffee on campus. Later I invited individual students to join me for lunch. I frequently invited students who had expressed an interest in getting to know me or a special interest in theology. Sometimes I invited students whom I simply wanted to get to know better; many of these were second career students or students who were already engaged in interesting ministries.

Caroline called this my ministry of lunch. She was right, it was ministry, but until she used the phrase I had not thought of it that way. I thought of it simply as an effort to connect with students personally, not as an effort to provide counsel. After all, I had to eat lunch and take

coffee breaks, and New Orleans is famous for its great restaurants, so it seemed natural to share coffee or a meal with students.

I did this only with male students. It would have been inappropriate and I would not have been comfortable having private conversations with female students except in my office when my secretary was in the outer office. I know that's terribly old-fashioned, but the payoff was that no one ever accused me of having an inappropriate relation with a student. But that did almost happen, in a funny way. One day I met my adult daughter Stephanie, who was very beautiful, for lunch at a cafeteria. One of my students saw us together and came over to investigate. When I introduced Stephanie as my daughter, the student seemed relieved. After he left, I told Stephanie that he had been suspicious about my conduct, and she and I had a good laugh about it.

I loved almost everything about teaching: lecturing, leading discussions, answering students' questions, assigning essays, and counseling students, and my dislike of assessing students' work wasn't intense. I tried to do all of these things efficiently. I tried to begin my classes right on time and, even more important, to end them right on time. I tried to do the grading quickly so the students learned their grades quickly; some students experience considerable anxiety about grades. To me it seemed irresponsible to require that students do their work on time and then for me to be slow in assessing their work. I also tried to turn in the grades to the registrar's office on time and when possible early. Apart from emergencies, there is no good reason not to do these things, and it would have felt sloppy not to have done them.

### January and Summer Classes

Students in the M.Div. degree program took most of their classes in the 32-week academic year. The seminary also offered one- or two-week courses in January and four-week courses in June and in July. Many of these were taught by seminary faculty members and were the same courses they offered during the academic year. But, especially in the January term, some were taught by people from outside our faculty, usually in cooperation with one of our faculty.

I occasionally co-taught in these short terms. On two occasions I co-taught a course about the work of C. S. Lewis, the enormously popular writer whose books have sold more than 200 million copies. In one class my co-teacher was a California writer, Kathryn Lindskoog. Kay (as she preferred to be called) had known Lewis personally, and he had expressed appreciation for her work. She held a minority view about some of Lewis's posthumously published books, arguing that they were not all written by Lewis. When she taught at New Orleans in 1979, she was already experiencing major problems from Multiple Sclerosis. It was nice getting to know her, and the students were fascinated by her.

In the other class on Lewis my co-teacher was my friend Peter Macky. Caroline and I had met Peter and his lovely wife Nancy at Oxford in 1966. Peter was working on his second doctorate there, his first being from Princeton. We stayed in touch, and over the years Peter developed an enormous appreciation for Lewis's work. His teaching was not as controversial as Lindskoog's, but it was rich and inspiring. Peter was a prolific author who put his great learning in the service of ordinary Christian people. At that time many academic theologians were emphasizing narrative theology, but very few of their books contained any actual stories, which I thought was strange. In books such as *Candles in the Dark* and *The Pursuit of the Divine Snowman*, Peter wrote excellent narratives. The students loved Peter's teaching.

In another January term I co-taught a class with a legendary Baptist educator, John Newport. John had begun his teaching career at the seminary in New Orleans. He then taught at the seminary in Fort Worth, moved on to Rice University, and then came back to the Fort Worth school as dean. He was a colorful personality as well as a prolific author. He insisted on taking me out to lunch at Commander's Palace where he entertained me with stories about the seminary from the years when he had taught there and the seminary had been located adjacent to Commander's Palace. The students in this class loved hearing him.



Most of the classes that I taught in summer terms were the same ones I taught during the school year, but there were two exceptions. In

the summer of 1980 and again in the summer of 1982, my colleague Claude Howe and I took students to Oxford for three-week theology courses. In 1980 we stayed at the Baptist College, Regents Park, and in 1982 we stayed at the Queen's College.

We advertised the programs in advance, and several people in addition to our own students went with us. In 1980 we were pleased to be joined by John Claypool who was on sabbatical leave at Oxford. Ten years later John and I were living in Birmingham where we saw each other often and our friendship was deepened.

Claude and I gave one or two lectures, but most of the lectures were given by English theologians. I am proud of the speakers who came to us. Each one gave just one lecture and then participated in discussion. The speakers included John Austin Baker, Frederick Dillistone, Paul Fiddes, Michael Green, Oz Guinness, John Houghton, Rex Mason, Stephen Neill, Jack Ramsbottom, Barrie White, and John Morgan-Wynn, among others.

We didn't spend all our time in class, of course. Everyone wandered around beautiful Oxford, and I think everyone got to Blackwell's, the greatest bookstore I have ever seen. We went to Stratford for a play. Some of us flew to Paris over a weekend. We went punting on the Isis, which is Oxford's name for the Thames when it flows through Oxford.

The program had been my idea, but after I proposed it, I began to have doubts. It was expensive, and our students weren't wealthy. Was it going to be worth it to them? But my doubts evaporated as soon as we got to Oxford in 1980. Something wonderful happened to students in the environment of that great university. They followed the lectures carefully. They asked smart questions and entered into the discussions enthusiastically. They had meaningful discussions outside of class. I think that just being in Oxford inspired them. Having personal contact with lecturers whose books they had read, or at least heard about, was an incentive to their learning. I was especially glad that we had invited British scholars to speak to our group and not done all the lecturing ourselves.

## Doctoral Students

After I received my doctorate in 1972, I became eligible to teach doctoral seminars, and I began to do that a year or so later. The theology degree was called Doctor of Theology (Th.D). Later it was changed to Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in keeping with a nationwide trend. In the 1970s a second doctorate in theology was created, the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.), and I taught in that program, also.



The Th.D. degree was a rigorous academic research degree. It required two years of in-residence seminars plus the writing of a dissertation. Students were required to have studied Hebrew and Greek before they entered the program and to study a third language, usually Latin, German, or French, within a year of enrolling. They usually took two two-hour seminars each week of the 32-week academic year, though that could be spread out if necessary. Most of the seminars met on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. The number of students in my seminars ranged from three to eight.

Professors taught no more than two seminars in a year, and many taught just one a year. Over the years I taught seminars on several subjects. Most of my seminars were on the Christian doctrine of God, the person of Christ, the atoning work of Christ, or modern Christian theology. In my seminars the usual process was for students to read one book each week and write a review of about eight pages on each book. They all read the same book at the same time, and they all came to the seminar meeting with their written reviews. After they arrived, I chose which student would read his or her review to the group. As the student read, other students and I would ask questions and make comments. After the paper was finished, we continued to discuss the book and its subject. The discussions were lively learning experiences for all of us.

I graded all the reviews and returned them to students at the following class session. Students' grades for the seminars were determined by the content of their reviews together with their contribution to the class discussions. There were no exams. Possible grades were A, B, and F; C (average) work was not acceptable in doctoral seminars. Sometimes a

student failed, but that was rare because only students who had already shown academic ability were accepted into the program.

When students completed their eight semesters of seminar work, they underwent a comprehensive oral exam. The faculty examiners coordinated their questions with the particular seminars the students had taken, but they also felt free to ask questions not related to the seminars.

Some students found the oral exams intimidating. I assume that part of the explanation for this is that most of them had never before sat for an oral exam. Not all students passed. Those who failed were allowed to re-take the exam. I remember only one student who failed the oral exam twice which meant that he was excluded from the program. He was an exceptionally bright and articulate person, and the only explanation for his failures I can think of was that, instead of studying and preparing, he had been depending on his giftedness to get him through. From that sad experience I came to see that giftedness and achievement aren't always correlative and that, in fact, some people's awareness of their giftedness actually keeps them achieving what they could have done.

Once the student passed the oral exam, the next step was to submit a written proposal concerning a topic for the dissertation to the supervisor and the committee for approval. The proposal was a formal document, and the faculty provided guidance on what should be included in it. Once the proposal was approved, the student began research and writing the dissertation.

The students I supervised were writing about theological topics. Usually their work was historical in character. A topic might be on something such the mystical theology of an individual theologian, or a comparison of the sacramental doctrine of the church in the work of two theologians.

For most students the writing of a dissertation was the most difficult part of the doctoral degree program. Dissertations typically comprised 40,000–50,000 words (about 160–200 pages, typed double-spaced), and, so far as I'm aware, none of our students had previously written anything that long. They were accustomed to writing brief pieces. Writing a book-length document is a different experience from writing a few hundred words, not just because you must produce more words but

also because it is much more difficult to maintain order and consistency and coherence in a longer document.

One saving grace was that students did not have to make their dissertations interesting. No matter how boring the dissertations were, the faculty examiners were going to read them with care, and they were not going to penalize students because their dissertations were boring.

Faculty advisors guided students' writing in two different ways. Some walked their students through the process step by step. For example, the professor might tell the student something like this: You have six weeks to write a draft of your first chapter and bring it to me. When the draft arrived, the professor would offer feedback on it and give the student a set time to rewrite the chapter. Then the professor would give the student a deadline for writing the next chapter. This was an effective way to help students to get their dissertations done, and I think it was perfectly appropriate.

However, I chose another way. I reminded the students whose work I guided that they were no longer engaged in undergraduate work or even in master's degree work; they were now engaged in doctoral work. The degree they were seeking was "Doctor of Theology." I said that I felt that the degree should be conferred only on students who can work independently and persevere and complete their writing. Therefore, I wasn't going to walk them through the process step by step. I was, of course, available to answer their questions and to discuss what they were doing and to advise them in other ways. If they wished to send me something they had written, I would read it, but I did not want them to send me their entire dissertation piece by piece. They had to write the book themselves.

I knew this made things more difficult for them, but I thought it was a good idea, and I still do. I am happy to report that all my students completed their dissertations. Across the years I supervised the Th.D. work of fourteen students. None dropped out, and none asked for a different supervisor. When they finished, they knew they could write a book because they had written one.

The final step of the program was a two-hour oral exam on the dissertation. This was conducted by the advisor and the guidance

committee. Students weren't especially anxious about it this exam. If they had done their work well, they probably knew more about the subject than their examiners. I don't remember a student failing this exam.

Examiners did routinely require students to make specific changes in the dissertation in order to make them stronger documents. In effect they said, Assuming you make the changes we have indicated, you have completed your work for and will be awarded the Th.D. degree. All of the students did this successfully.



When I began teaching in 1970, the Doctor of Ministry degree did not exist. I don't know its origins, but I know that the accrediting agency for theological schools, then called the American Association for Theological Schools, began to encourage schools to create Doctor of Ministry degree programs. The idea behind the programs was a simple one: allow students to do doctoral level research about the practice of ministry.

Some of the seminary faculty members were resistant to the D.Min. degree program. They felt that it was a watered-down Th.D. I understand their resistance. At first I was uncertain about it. It wasn't until I had seen the results that I became enthusiastic about it. I think that the D.Min. is not a watered-down research degree. For me, the relation of the Th.D. to the D.Min. is like the relation of a Ph.D. in biochemistry to an M.D. in family medicine. The objective of the Th.D. and Ph.D. degrees is to acquire knowledge without respect to its usefulness. The objective for the D.Min. and M.D. degrees is to acquire knowledge that will be useful for the practice of ministry or medicine.

At New Orleans we accepted into the D.Min. program only persons who were experienced ministers and who were currently engaged in substantive ministries. We designed the program so that it would not interfere with the ongoing ministries of the students. For example, students came to campus for seminars only a week or two in a year's time. All the rest of their work was done in their place of ministry.

For some disciplines it was easy to design seminars that contributed to the practice of ministry. This was true of pastoral counseling, church

administration, and preaching, for examples. But how could a seminar in theology contribute to the practice of ministry?

I decided that what I would try to do in my D.Min. seminars was to provide a refresher course in Christian theology. The students in the program had been engaged in ministry for several years; I think that at the beginning we required that they have had 10 years of full-time ministry experience before entering the degree program. Many pastors and other ministers don't read a lot of theology in their ministries. So in my seminars, they read and wrote reviews of books of theology, many of them written after they had completed their M.Div. work.

I began each session of my seminars with a lecture on a topic which was directly related to the life of Christians and of the church. Over the years my topics included things such as the theology of prayer, God and suffering, and the challenge that science poses to our faith in God. I sometimes offered an overview of Christianity in the United States today. I almost always included one lecture on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, in the hope that it would encourage students to incorporate the Trinitarian understanding of God into their preaching and teaching and into their churches' worship services. During and following the lecture, we had discussion. I cannot remember a single seminar session in which there was not a meaningful discussion. These were experienced ministers. Almost all of them were more experienced than I was in ministry in a church. They had a lot of things to talk about and felt confident enough to talk about them.

At each session students turned in written work that had been assigned weeks in advance. I graded everything overnight and returned it the next day with multiple annotations. As in the Th.D. program, the only grades were A, B, or F.

D.Min. students did not write a dissertation as the conclusion of their work. Instead, they wrote what we called a Ministry Project Report. Under the guidance of their faculty advisor, they carried out a new, limited project of ministry in addition to all the things they were already doing in their churches or other places of ministry. Then they studied how successful the program had been. Then they wrote up the results.

Many students did outstanding work. I will give an example from one of my later D.Min. students. An associate pastor in an Episcopal parish designed a program around a statement made in Acts about the early church: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and of prayers” (Acts 2:42). The program was open to interested adults in the parish. It took place on a weekday morning once a week for about twelve weeks. The student first led a Bible study (the apostles’ teaching) followed by a general discussion of what the Bible text meant to the lives of the participants (fellowship). He then led in a Eucharist (breaking of bread), and he concluded with a service of prayer and worship (prayers). It was a brilliant ministry project.

One of the things we required was that students design a meaningful way to assess how effective their ministry projects were. We welcomed quantitative assessments when that was possible, and sometimes it was. But, unlike some other D.Min. programs, we also welcomed qualitative assessments—stories about things the participants said about the program, for example, or ministry that was made permanent after the project ended.

Once the students had written up their ministry project, we conducted an oral exam. Students were not nervous about this; after all, they were the world’s leading experts on the ministry project they had carried out. Students always passed the oral exams, but frequently we required that they made changes in the report they had written.

I came to believe in the D.Min. program because I saw how good its outcomes were. Part of what made the outcomes so good was the opportunity the seminars gave for students to talk among themselves about the work they were doing. Because ministers spend so much time with people, it is easy to overlook that there is something lonely about being a minister. The people around you may love you, but they do not know from experience what it is like to be doing what you are doing. The only people who fully appreciate what your work is like are other ministers.

Unfortunately, your relationship with your fellow ministers frequently has an unavoidable component of competition. Ministers

want their own churches to flourish (they should want that!), and this means they are in a sense in competition with other ministers in their area. This doesn't mean that ministers want other churches to fail, but it does mean that you don't want your own church to be the only one in the area that is failing to attract new members or to retain the members it already has.

Ministers are therefore surrounded by people who either are competing with them or have no experiential understanding of what they are doing. The D.Min. seminars are a solution to that. They bring together ministers who share the experience of ministry but who, because they come from different places around the nation, are not in competition with each other. The result is that they provide support that many ministers have never before experienced, and in some cases they provide healing for ministers who are experiencing pain in their ministries in addition to their loneliness.

Throughout my teaching career I supervised ten students in the D.Min. program. All of them completed the work successfully and received their degrees. If I knew who originated the idea for the D.Min. degree, I would offer that person my thanks. It has been a good thing for the church in America.



I loved teaching theology. We human beings can never become omniscient or inerrant, but we can become conversant and trustworthy. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to help students become conversant with the church's theological heritage and to help them to become trustworthy theologians. I am proud that students whom I have taught have been dedicated ministers of Jesus and of the good news he brought into our world about the love and grace of God.

## Colleagues

The seminary in New Orleans exists primarily as a teaching institution, but there is more to a professor's life than teaching. I was constantly engaged in non-academic relationships and conversations with colleagues. And what good colleagues they were! There were about

forty members of the faculty at New Orleans. Most were men, but there were several women. All were Baptists, all were highly educated, and all were experienced ministers.

When I joined the faculty in 1970, I was thirty-one years old and noticeably younger than the other faculty members. Most of them had been on the faculty when I had been a student, and I had been in some of their classes, so I was somewhat in awe of them. I adopted the men's practice of wearing a suit and tie to class each day, though it wasn't long before I began sometimes to wear a blazer rather than a suit. I am very grateful that all of the members of the faculty welcomed me warmly. In almost two decades as a member of the faculty, I had only one argument with a colleague. It lasted about five minutes, and within a few days the two of us were on perfectly friendly terms again, and we remained friends until his death more than forty years later. I was happy and proud to be a member of such a lovely group of people.

Naturally I worked more closely with some faculty members than with others. One of the faculty members became one of the closest friends I have ever had. He was Malcolm Tolbert, and he taught New Testament. He was a fine scholar, a fact he steadfastly refused to display. He and I taught a class together and later wrote a book together. We were in a dinner club together, and we even formed a publishing company together; I'll say more about that later. All of those things enriched our friendship.

Six years after I arrived at the seminary Malcolm left to serve as pastor of a church in Georgia, but our friendship continued. Over the years we visited in each other's homes, and we met each other in various cities. We camped together with our wives and my children. Malcolm and I roomed together at a conference in North Carolina. I preached for him when he was pastor and gave a series of lectures at the school where he taught in later years. When email became available, we were able to stay in touch more easily.

Malcolm was about 14 years older than I was. In the 1970s he asked me if I would speak at his funeral, and I agreed that I would. But when he died in 2014, my wife Caroline needed to have heart surgery, and I was unable to speak. I did the only thing I could think

of to compensate. Malcolm was a skilled writer; his commentaries on several of the books in the New Testament are the best ones I have, and his books on the church and on Jesus (that one entitled *The Disturbing Galilean*) are grand. For his funeral I typed one of his early articles that had influenced me a great deal. It is entitled “The Thoughts of a Would-Be Change Agent,” and it is a deeply-felt plea for Christians to make a real difference in the world. I made several dozen copies and sent them to Roger Sullivan, who was to speak at the funeral, so that he could distribute them to those who were there.



In addition to working alongside colleagues in New Orleans, we socialized with them. We usually did this informally. For example, when video game machines were created, some of my colleagues and I would walk across the street from the campus in the afternoons to a coffee-and-doughnut shop, drink coffee, and play a few games of Ms. Pac-Man together. It was a wonderful break from our work. Our friendships were strengthened by those times together.

The most meaningful social experience for Caroline and me was a dinner club organized by Malcolm. Initially there were five couples: Bob and Luverne Adams, Carroll and Hellon Freeman, Ray and Joy Rust, Malcolm and Nell Tolbert, and ourselves. Ray was the vice-president of the seminary, and the other men were professors.

We began by meeting in homes for dinner, and later we moved to restaurants. Our first meeting was at the Tolberts’ house, and Nell Tolbert served redfish courtbouillon. My reaction to the courtbouillon was, “Why didn’t somebody tell me about this a long time ago!” At our dinners we sometimes talked about seminary and church matters, but usually our conversation was unrelated to our work. Over the years three of the couples moved away and other couples joined us; they were Mack and Bet Hubbell, Bill and Luwilda Rogers, Joe and Audra Trull, and Leroy and Edwyna Yarbrough.



In many educational institutions there is chronic tension and conflict between administrators and faculty members. Sometimes, of

course, there is reason for disagreement, as when faculty don't do their work responsibly or administrators abuse their power. But often the conflict is just a fact of life with no real justification.

I tried not to engage in that conflict. I think it's a waste of energy at best and a moral failure at worst. Schools must have administrators and they must have faculty members. I think that the ideal is for administrators to do well the things they should do and for faculty to do well the things they should do, and for each to try to appreciate what the other is doing and not interfere in the other's work. I certainly did not want administrators who had little or no teaching experience to interfere with my work as a teacher, so I felt that I, having had almost no administrative experience, ought not to interfere with the work of administrators.

One of the things that helped our administrators and faculty to relate well to each other was a daily gathering throughout the academic year. Our first classes began at eight o'clock. At 7:45 each school-day morning there was voluntary gathering of faculty and administrators in a large conference room in the administration building which was located close to the classroom buildings. The format was simple. A designated person read a Scripture passage. We shared special concerns, and then the leader offered a brief prayer. Announcements were made, and then we left. It lasted about ten minutes, and those who had eight o'clock classes could go directly to them and be on time. Those who didn't have eight o'clock classes sometimes gathered in the campus cafeteria for coffee afterwards.

I am not aware of any other school that has done anything like this. I think it was a smart practice. I suspect that praying together daily may have contributed to the relatively good relations among faculty members and administrators at the seminary. It also had a good by-product. It encouraged faculty to be on campus and at their desks early in the day and not come strolling onto campus just in time to teach their classes.

I smile when I think about one of the weeks when I was the designated leader of the gathering. Each morning I read a few selected verses from the book of Proverbs, using the translation called *The Good News Bible*. Through the week several people nodded at the wisdom

found in Proverbs, and one morning as we were leaving President Leavell asked me for the reference to a verse that had captured his attention. It was Proverbs 17:12: “It is better to meet a mother bear robbed of her cubs than to meet some fool busy with a stupid project.”



One of the ways academic institutions function is by means of committees. Here, as with testing and with relating to administrators, I hold a view that many faculty members do not share. Many faculty members dislike having to serve on committees, and some detest it. Sometimes this is justified. Committee meetings are useless and a waste of time unless the committee is empowered to do things that matter. But when there is power to do useful things, and an agenda, and a chairperson who moves things along, committee meetings are valuable. They are one of the ways faculty members can participate in setting the direction of the school. And a good by-product is that faculty members get to know each other when they work together on a committee.

I always enjoyed my service on committees. I can't remember serving on a committee that was badly managed, though perhaps I did. I can remember serving on multiple committees that were well managed and that got useful things done. I remember in particular a committee charged with making decisions about a new building for the seminary library. Working with architects, we were able to recommend plans for a building that was aesthetically pleasing, highly functional, and very affordable. I was happy to serve on that committee and proud when the building was opened and turned out to be as good as we had hoped it would be.



When I joined the faculty in 1970, I was the only systematic theologian, and the school needed two theologians to cover all the courses. One of Southern Baptists' greatest scholars, the church historian William A. Mueller, was temporarily teaching the other theology courses. When I was a student I had taken church history with Dr. Mueller, and his lectures were some of the most brilliant I had ever heard. This was doubly important because it was a summer school class and met at 6:00

a.m.! The classroom buildings had not yet been air conditioned, so classes began early in the morning in order to avoid the summer heat. The classroom buildings were air conditioned a year or two later.

In 1971 the school called J. Terry Young as a second theologian. Terry was an ideal colleague, and I was pleased to work alongside him. Both of us were interested in maintaining associations with our fellow theologians in the five other Southern Baptist seminaries. Our seminaries might be competitors for students and funding, but Terry and I felt that the theologians on their faculties were not our competitors but our colleagues.

In 1977 I became acquainted with five of them. Broadman Press, the denominational book publishing organization, wanted to begin publishing more theology texts, and they invited one theologian from each of the seminaries to come to Nashville to discuss ideas for future writing. The other participants and their schools were Morris Ashcraft (Midwestern), John Eddins (Southeastern), Bill Hendricks (Southwestern), Ed Humphrey (Golden Gate), and Dale Moody (Southern). I was happy to get to know these fine men personally. The discussions were meaningful and eventually led to the publishing some of good books by Broadman, including the series called *The Layman's Library of Christian Doctrine*. The group continued its work for several years.

At that initial meeting we had an unusual experience. Bill Hendricks, a fascinating man with a lively personality, insisted that we attend a showing of the recently released movie "Oh, God" starring George Burns. All six of us crowded into two cabs and went to the movie together. I'm pretty sure that Burns's portrayal of God didn't correspond to anything we were saying in our classes.

During the years I was on the faculty, the seminaries themselves sponsored only one event where all the professors of theology were brought together for conversation with each other. In the summer of 1978 we met together at Callaway Gardens in Georgia. At one point we were joined by the professors of New Testament for what our amanuensis, Bill Hendricks, described "a spirited discussion of eschatology." Eschatology is an understanding of the future of the world and the life

to come. What Bill meant by “spirited” is that our understandings of the future were wildly diverse and vigorously argued. This is the only event of its kind that I ever attended with all the theologians in the seminaries. It was a splendid meeting, and it would have been good for the seminaries to sponsor regular meetings like this, but I suppose it was just too expensive to do often.

Terry Young and I took some initiatives to try to keep the theologians from the six seminaries in touch with each other. In November of 1978 the American Academy of Religion met in New Orleans. Terry and I attempted to arrange a meal with the theologians from the other five seminaries and who were in town for the AAR, but only two or three were able to join us.

In 1981 Eerdmans Publishing Company published a book of systematic theology by one of Southern Baptists’ most colorful personalities, Dale Moody. Dale had submitted the book, *The Word of Truth*, to the denominational publishing house, Broadman Press, but Broadman had declined to publish it because Dale’s views on the security of believers didn’t conform to Broadman’s theological guidelines. Unlike almost all other Southern Baptists, Dale believed that it is possible for genuine Christians to behave in ways that lead to their being excluded from God’s people in the life to come. His view was called “falling from grace.”

Dale was an intensely biblical theologian. I estimate that there are 2,000 references to Scripture in his 628–page book. He rejected the Southern Baptist consensus for no reason other than that he thought that the New Testament teaches that apostasy is possible. His book created a firestorm of controversy.

Terry Young and I felt that we who were teaching theology in the seminaries ought to honor Dale for his work in general and for this important book in particular. As it happened, the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention was scheduled to meet in New Orleans the following June, 1982. Terry Young and I once more reached out to all of the systematic theologians at the other seminaries, inviting them and their wives to be our guests at a dinner during the time the Convention was meeting. At that time there were sixteen professors of

theology in the six seminaries, and ten of them were able to attend our gathering. Together with wives and special guests, there were thirty of us at the dinner at the Chart House in the Vieux Carre when we gathered. Following the meal several people spoke with appreciation of Dale and his work, and I brought greetings from some of the invitees who could not attend but who had sent messages for Dale. Afterwards one of the theologians wrote to say that it “was one of the most beautiful evenings I have ever experienced.” I felt that way, too.

### Writer

Institutions of higher education encourage their faculty to write. Some require it if the faculty member is to receive promotion, tenure, and salary increases. The popular slogan for this is “Publish or perish.” In Southern Baptists schools in the 1980s, the joke was “Publish and perish.” Putting your ideas into print could get you into trouble.

Many of the faculty members at the seminary wrote articles, and quite a few wrote books. This was a good way for them to extend their ministries beyond their classrooms. It also was a way of transmitting the theological heritage of the church in general and of Baptists in particular. A seminary is not only a place for teaching and research. It also is a major bearer of the church’s long and precious traditions. Professors at the seminary wrote not only because it was expected for promotion and tenure but in order to communicate the collective wisdom of the church to people who would never be able to attend seminary classes.

When I joined the faculty in 1970, the only things I had written for publication were letters. For example, that summer *The Saturday Review of Literature* published a brief letter in which I criticized a recently-published review of some of the work of the novelist John Updike. The reviewer was John W. Aldridge, a major critic with a stellar reputation. He had written that “a writer is committed by the requirements of his medium to a secular view of existence” and suggested that Updike was a clever man but had nothing important to say. I felt the reviewer could only have said this because he himself lacked a religious sensibility.

The first article I wrote for publication was a survey of ways Christian apologists were currently defending the Christian faith. The

article was published in a British journal, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, whose editor, F. F. Bruce, was someone whose work I admired. Bruce accepted the article soon after I joined the faculty in 1970, but after a year or two he wrote to say that its publication had been delayed because he had so many other things ahead of it still to be published. It wasn't published until 1975, by which time I was not as interested in apologetics as I had been when I wrote the article.



My first book was co-authored with my friend Malcolm Tolbert. He and I had taught a course together in the January 1973 term on Pentecostalism and speaking in tongues. It had generated a lot of interest, so we decided to write a book, which we entitled *Speaking in Tongues*. Our denominational publisher, Broadman Press (now Broadman & Holman), had just published a book on the subject and was not willing to publish a second one so soon.

Neither of us knew of another publisher to approach, so we decided to print the book privately. Malcolm knew about a printing company located in a rural area near Baton Rouge, and we drove up to talk to them. On our first trip to their facility, I was surprised to be driving past fields with cows and crops and suddenly to come upon a vast building inside which were enormous printing presses. The company was accustomed to large jobs such as printing thousands of Bibles at a time, so ours was a small job for them, but they were happy to do it.

In those years there were, of course, no personal computers and no computerized printing presses, and the printing process was incredibly labor-intensive. We took our typed manuscript to the printer. The printer set the book in type and created a proof. We checked and accepted the proof. The printer then made photographic negatives of the proof. Where little asperities occurred in the negatives, the printer corrected them by putting opaque ink on the negative with a little brush like the ones used to put on fingernail polish. The negatives were then used to create metal plates. The plates were attached to drums in the printing press. After the books were printed they were put into another machine where they were bound together with glue. The covers were printed separately. The covers

were then glued onto the books. The books were then trimmed. It was slow, time-consuming work. As a result, the cost-per-copy of the books was very high unless you printed many copies; the printer recommended 3,000, so that is what we bought. At the time we were not aware that the average sales for a religious book was a few hundred copies.

Our book was published later in 1973. To our surprise, we sold all 3,000 books in a few weeks. The students who had taken our course bought copies for themselves and took boxes of the books to their churches where they taught the books to their congregations. We ordered a second printing, and the book continued to sell well for several years. We had written the book at just the moment when many Southern Baptist churches were wrestling with the questions raised by the Pentecostal movement. Malcolm and I were glad we could be of help to the churches.

Our position concerning speaking in tongues can be summarized in a few simple statements. We think it is a legitimate religious practice. We don't practice it ourselves. We think the New Testament does not require Christians to practice it. In fact, the New Testament doesn't even encourage the practice. We think the New Testament does permit Christians to practice it. We appreciate the good things such as spiritual renewal and encouragement that come into the lives of people who practice it. We deplore the bad things such as spiritual arrogance and church divisions that come into the lives of some of the people who practice it. We believe strongly that Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal Christians should do everything possible to live together peaceably. We think that, unfortunately, sometimes the only way to live peaceably is by participating in different churches. We think it is morally wrong for Pentecostal ministers to accept a call to become pastors of non-Pentecostal churches without clearly informing all members of the church in advance of their commitment to Pentecostalism.

I still believe these things today. I am glad that Malcolm and I could offer our way of looking at things to ministers and churches, because the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movement has continued to grow dramatically over the years. It was born in a revival meeting on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906; before that, there were no Pentecostal

Christians. The best estimate of how many Pentecostals there are today comes from Todd Johnson, co-author of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. In 2021 there were about 615,000,000 Pentecostal and charismatic Christians, and the movement was still growing rapidly. No other movement, religious or otherwise, has ever grown this large in such a relatively brief period of time. It is therefore very helpful for churches to have a clear understanding of it. I hope our book has given that kind of understanding to those who have read it.



Malcolm and I sold so many books so fast that we decided to create a publishing company. We called it Insight Press, and it has been operating now for almost half a century. Initially Malcolm and I were the only owners. When Malcolm left New Orleans in 1976, three other faculty members joined me as owners. They are Waylon Bailey, Paul Robertson, and Macklyn Hubbell. Mack no longer participates, but Waylon, Paul, and I continue to be co-owners.

Insight Press has been a good hobby but a poor business. Across the years we have published about sixty titles. I am proud of the work we've done. When I'm asked whether it's a non-profit organization, my response is, "Well, we didn't mean for it to be—it just turned out that way."

Our original business plan was simple. We published books by professors who planned to assign the books as required reading in their classes. That way, we might not sell many copies of a book, but we were sure to sell at least a few copies each year, and we were content with that.

Eventually we altered the business plan. We picked up books that had originally been published by other companies and re-published them as Insight Press books. We found that publishers who have dropped a book are almost always willing to give another company permission to pick it up. This too proved to be a good plan, and it has been especially helpful to me. Across the years my books have been published by seven different publishers, and Insight has picked up some of the titles that other publishers have allowed to go out of print. I am happy that some of my books remain in print several decades after they were first published.

That isn't usually the case except for books with very large sales. Sales of my books have been modest.

Eventually we branched out and published original books by writers who weren't professors. Sometimes this worked, and sometimes not. We published books that sold as few as a half-dozen copies a year, and of course we lost money on those. On a few occasions we have had to throw books in the trash because over the years they had deteriorated physically to the point that they were no longer salable.

The problem, of course, was marketing. We learned how to edit and design books in a professional way and to get them printed and bound in a high-quality way, but we didn't have any leverage for marketing. We always told prospective authors plainly and repeatedly that we had almost no marketing clout. We now list our books on Amazon, and that helps with sales, but not much.

Finally, we had to accept that, unless our authors were professors who would assign their books to be read by their students, it was the authors rather than ourselves who must take the risk of their books not selling. We did this by charging authors a subvention which they would recover if their books sold but wouldn't recover if their books didn't sell. By the time we had decided this, digital printing was available, so it was no longer necessary to print thousands of copies in order to keep the per-copy cost low, and this meant that the risk taken by the authors was fairly low. Almost all of our authors have recovered most of their investments, and some have made a small profit.

Did this turn Insight Press into a vanity press, a publisher who would publish anything for vain people who could afford to pay just to see their names in print? I don't think so. We don't publish just anything; we vet everything carefully, and I believe that our books are good and important and helpful. I am proud to be the publisher of books such as *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* by John Claypool, of *The New Testament for the 21st Century* by R. Kelvin Moore, of *It Hurts but I'm OK* by Martha Bailey, of three books by Russell Levenson, and of *Smoke over Mississippi* by C. Oren Renick, to take just a few fairly recent examples.



The year after Malcolm Tolbert and I wrote our book about speaking in tongues, I wrote *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. I did not create the title for this book myself. During the time when I was writing it, I had a conversation in the seminary cafeteria with my friend and former college roommate, Gary Fagan. Gary asked me what title I planned to give the book, and I said, “An Introduction to Christian Theology.” For a moment he was quiet and then he asked, “What’s your definition of theology?” I said, “Thinking about God.” He was quiet again for a moment and then said, “Why don’t you use that for a title?” It was a fine idea, and I am glad Gary suggested it. Two very prominent theologians, John Macquarrie and Dorothee Sölle, have written books with the same title. Titles cannot be copyrighted, so there would be no problem if I had copied theirs, but in fact my book was published before theirs were.

As the title suggests, I use the word “theology” to refer to thinking about God. When you are thinking about God, you are doing theology. What you think about God is your theology.

Understood this way, theology is not a specialized discipline reserved for scholars. We are all theologians. We all think about God, and we all have some understanding of God. This is true not only of Christians but also of people in other religions. It’s even true of atheists. When atheists say there is no God, they have some understanding of God in their minds, just as we who say there are no unicorns have some understanding in our minds of what a unicorn is.

I began writing the book in an unusual way. In the summer of 1974 the pastor of a church in Meridian, Mississippi, invited Malcolm Tolbert and me to come to his church for a week. Each morning I led an hour-long theological study, and each evening Malcolm led an hour-long Bible study. Malcolm and I decided to stay in our campers while we were there. Nell came with Malcolm, and Caroline and our children came with me. We stayed at a campground just outside the city, and we parked our campers about thirty yards apart. Each morning I woke up early and began writing at a picnic table next to our camper, before my family was moving around. When everyone was awake, we would visit

with the Tolberts and then go to the church for me to speak. We'd all have lunch, and in the afternoons, I would write while the other adults rested and the children played. We would then visit some more, and in the evening we would go to church to hear Malcolm teach the Bible. Because I was writing about things that I had been lecturing about for four years, I was able to get a lot done that week. It was a lovely way to spend a week. By the end of the summer I had completed a draft of the book.

I organized the book in the same way I organized my introductory lectures in theology, under twelve themes. I began by describing what theology is. I then wrote about the role of the Bible in Christian theology. Next I talked about God B.C., that is, God as God was known to the Jews prior to the coming of Jesus. I then talked about the Christian understanding of human beings as glorious creatures who bear the image of God and also as fallen creatures in need of salvation. The next two chapters were about the person of Christ and the atoning work of Christ. Then I wrote about the Holy Spirit. Next came three chapters about our experience as Christians: the experience of conversion, the experience of living as Christians, and the experience of life in the church. I wrote then about the Christian hope for the future, and finally I wrote about the Holy Trinity.

One reviewer criticized my putting the Trinity at the end of the book. To him it felt tacked on rather than fully integrated. I understand, but I feel strongly that the placement was correct. In my judgment, Christians do not need a doctrine of the Trinity until they first have a doctrine of the Father (found in chapter 3 in my book), a doctrine of the Son (chapters 5 and 6), and a doctrine of the Spirit (chapter 7). I think that when the doctrine of the Trinity is placed ahead of these three, it is superfluous and it feels superfluous, and I think that can undermine the importance of the doctrine.



My next book was *The Almighty* and was published by David C. Cook Publishing in 1976. Cook invited me to write the book because I was recommended by some people I had met three years earlier who published a satirical magazine called *The Wittenberg Door*. The publisher

required that the book comprise nine chapters of approximately equal length so that it could be included in a large series of curricula for adult education. The title and content of the chapters were, of course, up to me. My book was paired with a four-chapter book on the will of God by a well-known Christian writer, Elizabeth Elliot, to make a 13-week series that could be taught over three months.

I loved writing this book for adult laypersons. I wasn't troubled by the fact that the publisher called for precisely nine chapters and told me the approximate number of words for each chapter. Over the years I have discovered that some authors object to being given requirements like this, but that has never bothered me. I understand that publishers should not put requirements like this on authors who are geniuses; who would dare to impose a template on a Shakespeare or a Tolstoy? But most authors aren't geniuses, and I'm inclined to think that when any of the rest of us object to publishers giving us requirements, we're behaving like prima donnas. I think of something said by an immensely influential and helpful writer of New Testament studies whose work I admire, the late William Barclay: "I have always been able to make words do what I want them to do."



During a sabbatical leave in 1976–77, I wrote *The Death of Christ*; it was published by Broadman Press in 1978. In this book I made a proposal about how we understand the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. It was an original proposal built on an idea that had been promoted by a few writers in the past. However, I felt that those writers had either associated it or conflated it with other ideas. I wanted to build on those ideas and also to carefully distinguish what they were proposing from other ideas about the meaning of Jesus' atoning work. I hoped thereby to bring new clarity to the idea.

The idea isn't really complicated. When we human beings are hurt deeply and unfairly, we naturally feel anger and want to take revenge. We then have a decision to make. Either we forgive or we don't forgive. If we don't forgive, we continue to carry feelings of anger and resentment towards our enemy or else push those feelings down into

our subconscious minds. If we choose to forgive, we will experience a special kind of suffering. We have already suffered mistreatment; now we must also suffer the frustration of not taking the revenge that we naturally want to take. The only way we can forgive is to accept this suffering and to live through it until it disappears. This is not easy. Forgiveness is costly.

Ordinarily God cannot be hurt by our human behavior, but God became incarnate as Jesus and became vulnerable to the same suffering all humans experience, including the suffering caused by being hurt deeply and unfairly by others.

My somewhat original proposal was that we think of the cross as the place where God in Christ voluntarily accepted horrific suffering as God's way of forgiving the sins of all the world. It is costly for us to forgive, and it was costly for God to forgive, and what we see on the cross is God experiencing the costliness of forgiveness.

The Bible offers several ways of understanding what Jesus accomplished on the cross, perhaps as many as two dozen. For example, on the cross Jesus revealed God's love, he set us an example of sacrificial loving, and he won a victory over evil. In my book I proposed that alongside these and other understandings of what Jesus did, we place the idea that God in Christ suffered the worst consequences of human sinning as God's way of forgiving human sins. God did not forgive us simply by announcing from the security of heaven, "All is forgiven." God forgave us on a cross. God's forgiveness is cruciform.

I still think this is a true and important and helpful idea. I wish that it had gained a hearing and created a discussion among academic theologians, but that didn't happen. I was invited to speak to a few groups of theologians about it, and some of them seemed to be interested, but there hasn't been an extended discussion of the idea by academic theologians.

The book was wildly successful in one way, though. It got me into a lot of trouble. It was published just as a controversy was emerging in the Southern Baptist Convention, and it was among the books that those who were creating the controversy singled out as evidence of liberalism in the seminaries. They isolated a few statements in it and presented

them as evidence that I did not really believe that Jesus died and rose again to save sinners. Paige Patterson, a chief architect of the changes in the Convention, actually came to New Orleans to have an extended conversation with the president of the seminary about my theological failings. The president, Landrum Leavell, knew Paige was wrong and told him so.

Something amusing happened as this book was being readied for publication. In the book I had written about an influential 19th century Scottish theologian named John McLeod Campbell. Campbell proposed a highly original understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death (it was later accepted by C. S. Lewis, among others, and elaborated in an important book by R. C. Moberley). Campbell said that all that is necessary for God to forgive sinners is for them to repent, but, because they are sinners, they are incapable of real repentance, so Jesus repented for them. I described this as a Catch-22 situation. One day I received a telephone call from one of the editors at Broadman saying that the editors had talked among themselves and had consulted several dictionaries, and no one could find any information about the phrase "Catch-22." I told them to omit the phrase and re-word the sentence. I have enjoyed telling that story more than I would have enjoyed having the phrase in the book.



In 1976 Malcolm Tolbert became pastor of the First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Georgia. In the summer of 1977 my family and I were traveling through Georgia, and Malcolm asked me to speak at a prayer meeting at the church. I spoke about prayer. Malcolm urged me to put what I said about prayer into a book. I did that over the next two years, and *The Heart of Prayer* was published by Broadman Press in 1980. In it I attempted to distinguish prayer from meditation and contemplation. I defined prayer as "talking to God who listens to us and responds to us because [God] loves us." I still think of prayer in that way today. It's not a profound way to think about prayer; it's the way children think about it. But, after all, we are children of God, and Jesus did teach us to pray "Our Father."



At about the same time, Broadman Press was in the process of putting together a set of twelve beautifully printed, leather-bound books called “Christian Classics.” They invited me to put together a volume on evangelical writings of the 19th century and to provide an introduction. *Nineteenth Century Evangelical Theology* was published in 1981.

I enjoyed the work very much. I chose readings from a very wide range of writers, many of whom would not be called “conservative evangelicals” today. But all of them believed that Jesus brought good news to the world, and the word “evangelical” means “good news.” I included only readings that were written in clear prose and that dealt with issues that were of current and not just historical interest. I have never taught historical theology, and it was good for me to work on a project that brought together Christian writings from the past. Broadman later published this book in a paperback edition.



Next I wrote a book together with Philip Wise. Philip had been my student at the seminary and had then gone on to study at Oxford. His plan there was to write a survey of English biographies of Jesus and assess the theology in them, in much the way Albert Schweitzer had done with Continental biographies of Jesus in his famous book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Unfortunately Philip’s supervisor required him to invert the plan and assess the influence of historical studies of the life of Jesus on the work of some English theologians. As a result Philip jettisoned the work and returned to New Orleans where he earned his Ph.D. His dissertation was on the work of an English theologian, E. L. Mascall. Philip then moved to a pastorate in Alabama and spent the remainder of his career as a pastor, serving a total of four churches in two states. He was as knowledgeable about theology as any pastor I have ever known. He and I shared the conviction that theology is immensely important to the life of the church and that when it is written in clear prose it can be understood by laypersons as well as by clergy.

Neither of us was happy with the theological dictionaries that were in print at the time, and we decided to write one. We wrote brief essays

on 100 theological words or phrases that were in current use. The book was actually more like a small encyclopedia than a dictionary, since we didn't discuss the words themselves but rather the things to which the words point. For example, we didn't describe how the word "hope" has been used in the Bible and in the church; we wrote about hope itself, the hope which we have as followers of Jesus.

Each of us wrote an initial draft of 50 of the words, and then we exchanged what we had written and made suggested changes in what the other had written. Broadman Press published the book in 1983 under the title *A Dictionary of Doctrinal Terms*. We felt gratified that the book has been not only used by pastors in preparing sermons but also taught to laypersons in churches.

We had an interesting experience as we were writing the book. On one occasion Philip and I were working together in my office in New Orleans. We decided to take a coffee break, and as we were leaving my secretary, who had been furiously typing a draft of the book, said, "Would it be okay if I asked you a question?" We agreed, and she said, "Do you know all this stuff, or do you look it up as you go along?" I had no idea what she meant, but Philip understood. He told her that we know most of it but look up things when we need to.



Soon afterwards, Broadman Press was in the process of putting together a series of 16 books entitled "Layman's Library of Christian Theology." Some outstanding professors and pastors were writing for the series, and I was honored to be invited to join the project. My book was entitled *The Nature of God*, and it was published in 1985. It is the only one of my books to have been translated into Spanish.



The last book I wrote before leaving New Orleans was a textbook for the Seminary External Education Department. This department was sponsored jointly by the six Southern Baptist seminaries. Its assignment was to provide non-degree theological education to students, mostly pastors, who either lacked the undergraduate degree

required for admission to the seminaries or were unable to attend one of the seminaries. My book was entitled *Southern Baptist Theological Heritage*, and it was published in 1988 by the department.

This book was a venture into new territory for me. It was not systematic theology, as my other books had been, but a historical survey of what Southern Baptists today have inherited from those who went before them. Parts of it became the nucleus for a book I wrote six years later entitled *The Way We Were* and published by McCracken Press.

### Editor

The seminary in New Orleans had been founded in 1917 and opened its doors in 1918. As part of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary, in the 1967–68 academic year the faculty had launched a new journal called *The Theological Educator*. Its content was directed especially toward the graduates of the seminary. Initially there was one issue a year, but beginning in 1973 two issues were published annually.

The journal did not have an editor. An editorial committee consisting of several members of the faculty made decisions about the content of the journal and then edited the manuscripts that were submitted for publication.

In 1975 the dean of the School of Theology, J. Hardee Kennedy, invited me to become the first editor of the journal. I was delighted to accept. There was a stipend, I was given a full-time secretary (in the past my secretaries had worked just 12 hours a week), and I had the freedom to do with the journal what I thought best. An advisory board offered helpful counsel which I always took seriously, but I was responsible for making editorial decisions. I edited the journal for fourteen years, and never once did the administration make a single suggestion about editorial matters.

The first decision I made was to employ the services of a professional designer. His name was Will Hopkins, and he had re-designed prestigious publications such as *Look* magazine and *L'Express*, a popular French magazine. Will's brother, Turner Hopkins, was a friend whom I had met on my first day as a student in New Orleans back in

1961. I asked Turner if he would ask Will to help us. Turner called Will and urged him to do this. Will came to New Orleans and re-designed the journal at no cost to the seminary other than his travel and housing expenses. It was a generous gift, and I was proud of the striking new look he gave to the journal.

Each year the Southern Baptist Convention published materials to support a January Bible Study in the churches. Churches are free to use them or not, of course; that's the Baptist way. Thousands of churches did use them. A feature of each fall issue of our journal had been to provide multiple articles about the upcoming January Bible Study book. The articles would provide aid to pastors as they prepared to teach the upcoming January Bible Study. Naturally I continued this popular feature.

I added a new section to the journal called "Appraisals." It comprised shorter pieces by various authors, always on issues of current interest. I wrote many of those myself.

Another early decision was to launch a new feature called "Southern Baptist Theology Today." It consisted of interviews that I conducted with influential leaders in Southern Baptist life. Many of the interviewees were theological educators, but others were denominational leaders, pastors, and laypersons.

Working on this feature was one of my favorite activities. I preferred to conduct the interviews in person, but sometimes it was necessary to send interviewees a list of written questions and receive their written responses. This lacked the spontaneity of an oral interview, but sometimes it was unavoidable.

I recorded the in-person interviews on a tape recorder. My secretary typed up what was said. We then sent the typescript to the interviewee so that he or she could make any desired changes. I did things this way because I wasn't trying to play "gotcha." I wanted the published interviews to say exactly what the interviewees wanted them to say. I preferred the in-person process because the answers felt more spontaneous. It also gave me an opportunity to meet briefly with some of the leaders of the denomination.

As with many other journals, there were book reviews at the back of each issue.

Naturally most of the journal consisted of conventional articles. Before I became the editor, almost all those who wrote articles were Baptists, and many of them were members of the faculty of the seminary. I decided to include non-Baptist writers together with the many fine Baptist writers. The non-Baptist contributors, like the Baptist contributors, were a distinguished group. They included a Methodist theologian, William J. Abraham, and a Methodist New Testament scholar, I. Howard Marshall; a Quaker philosopher and writer on spirituality, Elton Trueblood; a Roman Catholic ethicist James Gaffney and a Roman Catholic theologian Gerald Fagin, S.J.; a Presbyterian biblical theologian, Peter Macky; an Anglican ecumenist, Bishop Stephen Neill, and Anglican theologians John Austin Baker and F. W. Dillistone. For an issue on the book of Exodus there was an article by Rabbi Bruce Warshal.



I am proud of all the contributors and of all the issues of the journal that I edited in my fourteen-year tenure. I want to describe three issues that I think were especially important at the time.

Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists are the two largest religious bodies in America. From 1978–1988 scholars from the two groups met together for dialogue. Later on I will say more about my participation in the dialogue.

Members of the dialogue wrote three books together. In 1989 I published the third of these as an issue of the journal. I co-edited it with a nun, Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM. We entitled the issue *To Understand Each Other*. It differed from the two books the dialogue had written earlier in that it was addressed not to other ecumenists but to ordinary Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic clergy and laypersons. It contained, for example, a study guide and a glossary of Baptist and Catholic terms. The leader of the Catholic group, Bishop James Niedergeses, wrote "A Catholic Testimony about Southern Baptists," and a Baptist, Alan Neely, wrote "I Am a Debtor" about his personal indebtedness to the Roman

Catholic Church, both generally and also as he had known it while serving as a missionary in Columbia. There were six fine articles co-authored by Baptists and Catholics on subjects ranging from salvation and the mission of the church to a summary of “How We Agree/How We Differ.”

We printed extra copies of this issue so that it would be available to church groups to read and discuss together. When the copies were all gone, I put the book up on my website so that it would continue to be available ([www.fisherhumphreys.com](http://www.fisherhumphreys.com)).

I was not the only one who felt that this was an important book. Soon after the issue was published, the religion editor at the Associated Press, George Cornell, called me. He first praised the book and then brusquely asked why the heck we hadn’t circulated it more widely! On August 26, 1989, his article about the book was published with the title “10–Year Study by Baptists, Catholics Finds Many Basic Beliefs Shared.” Cornell was right: the book deserved a wider circulation than we were able to give it. It’s a good resource for helping Catholics and Baptists understand each other better. I wish it were still in print.



The two other issues of which I’m especially proud concerned an intra–Baptist controversy. In the 1980s the Southern Baptist Convention engaged in a controversy that resulted in a change of direction for the Convention and a change of leadership in all the Southern Baptist institutions: the six seminaries, the home and foreign mission boards, the publishing house, and some smaller institutions. At stake were theological issues as well as issues of power and control of the denomination. In the end the outcome was determined by political means, not by winning theological arguments. Nevertheless, theological issues were important to people on both sides, and I felt that one service our theological journal could provide was to offer a platform for airing the theological issues.

The problem was how to proceed. People on both sides had deep feelings about the contested issues. Publishing articles about them ran the risk of generating anger against our faculty and our school. It turned out that the solution was simple: Publish articles on both sides of the

controversy. I chose writers who were publicly committed to particular views and asked them to write about why they thought their position was right and why the opposing side's position was wrong. I did this in two different issues of the journal.

The first was published in the spring of 1985. In order to call attention to its special character, we set aside the usual book-size format of the journal (5" x 8.5" and 100 or more pages) and used a magazine format (8.5" x 11" and 42 pages).

There were three pairs of articles. The first pair were by Paige Patterson, one of the two principal leaders of the conservative resurgence aiming to change the SBC, and Walter Shurden who was probably the most influential interpreter of Baptist life in the United States. Their articles were splendid, and in the following months the journal received extensive praise for both of them.

Next came interviews with Judge Paul Presser, the second principal leader of the conservative resurgence, and with Porter Routh whose title, "Executive Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention," fails to communicate that he was the CEO of the Convention.

Then came two excellent articles offering personal interpretations of the controversy by Jimmy Draper, the pastor of a megachurch in Texas, and Russell Dilday, the president of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

Finally, there was a non-partisan review of the history of the controversy from 1979–1984 together with a description of the issues that would be at stake when the Convention convened a few weeks later, in the summer of 1985. It was written by a very knowledgeable and judicious church historian in our seminary, Claude Howe.

I am not a neutral observer, of course, but I think that this issue of our journal was one of the most valuable of the hundreds of things published about the controversy over the course of more than a decade. My only regret is that, even though we distributed copies when the SBC met that summer, it did not receive the wide readership it deserved.

I do not remember receiving any negative feedback from the issue. People on both sides seem to have been pleased that their views had

been well represented. But many years later I did receive one piece of criticism about the process.

I conducted the interview with Judge Paul Pressler in his hometown of Houston. I invited him to join me at a public meeting room in my hotel, but he preferred that we meet in his home, and I was happy to do that. He and I had met more than a decade earlier, and at that time we had visited for several hours. I was happy to meet him in an informal setting, though we were on opposite sides of the controversy.

As always, I tape-recorded the interview. Paul said that he wanted to tape-record it also, which of course was fine with me. Later, as my secretary was working to transcribe the interview, she found that the tape was partially defective. I contacted Paul and asked if he would send me a copy of the tape he had made, so that my secretary could complete the transcription. He did that, and my secretary used his copy of the tape to finish transcribing the interview.

I then followed the process which I had described to him before the interview and which I followed in all of the in-person interviews. I sent the typed transcript to Paul so that he could make whatever changes he wanted in his responses to the questions. He did that and returned the edited version, and that is what we published.

Fifteen years later, Paul wrote a book about the controversy in the SBC and his role in it. It was entitled *A Hill on Which to Die*, and it was published by Broadman & Holman, the denominational publisher which, along with all other institutions of the Convention, was now securely in the hands of the new leaders. I welcomed his book as an insider's interpretation of the controversy and an account of how the new leaders had worked to gain control of the Convention.

In his book Paul wrote briefly about our interview in 1985. He said, correctly, that I had asked for a copy of his tape recording. However, he implied that I was being dishonest and trying to avoid publishing the interview or at least avoid publishing his responses exactly as he had given them.

But that was impossible. Before the interview I had carefully explained to Paul that once my secretary had typed up the interview, we would send him a copy and he would be free to edit it in any way he

liked. I would never have dreamed of altering anything Judge Pressler said in the interview. Quite the opposite. I wanted our readers to know exactly what Paul said, and what Paige Patterson said, and what others who were criticizing the Convention were saying. Perhaps Paul, when writing his book fifteen years later, simply forgot that he had complete control over what would be published as his interview. It is possible that he was just so suspicious of those of us who disagreed with him that he couldn't help but think that there was something dishonest about my request for a copy of his tape.

The other issue of the journal that dealt with the controversy was published in the spring of 1988 in the usual format of the journal. It included six pairs of articles by people on the two sides of the controversy. The authors and titles were:

David Dockery and Philip Wise, "Biblical Inerrancy: Pro or Con?"

Paige Patterson and Rob James, "The Historical-Critical Study of the Bible: Dangerous or Helpful?"

Richard Land and Ralph Langley, "Pastoral Leadership: Authoritarian or Persuasive?"

Charlene Kaemmerling and Carolyn Blevins, "Ordination of Women: Right or Wrong?"

Dorothy Patterson and Oliver Thomas, "Prayer in Public Schools: Yes or No"

Jerry Vines and Herschel Hobbs, "Eschatology: Premillennial or Amillennial?"

All twelve of the writers did excellent work. They defended their own views well and explained why they thought the opposite views were mistaken. I couldn't have asked for anything better.

This issue began with an interview with Adrian Rogers. His election in 1979 as president of the Convention had marked the public beginning of the struggle for control of the Convention. Rogers was a master communicator with a deep, resonant voice and a gift for aphoristic expression that made him a major leader in the movement for the re-direction of the Convention. The old leaders were horrified when, for example, Rogers described the central funding mechanism of

the Convention, known as the Cooperative Program, as a sacred cow. The Convention has no authority to compel churches to support its vast ministries, and it was unthinkable that someone who was serving as the president of the Convention would speak dismissively of the Convention's only funding mechanism. On another occasion Rogers famously insisted that everything taught by professors in the seminaries should conform to the beliefs of the majority of Southern Baptist people. He said that if Southern Baptists believe that pickles have souls, professors should teach that pickles have souls.

The opening interview with Rogers was balanced with a concluding article of my own entitled "Modest Proposals for Aspiring Theologians of the New Southern Baptist Convention." By this time I was pretty sure that the conservative resurgence would succeed and that theologians like me would be replaced with those who agreed with the agenda of the new leaders of the Convention. In the article I made a series of proposals to those who hoped to teach theology in the changed situation. Take classical Christian ideas more seriously than Fundamentalist ideas. Present the Bible both as God's Word and also as the writings of human beings. Be faithful to the Baptist heritage, especially to the Baptist commitment to the rigorous separation of church and state as the best means of providing maximal religious liberty in a religiously diverse society. Be discriminating in the way you criticize other theologians, and avoid invective. Be clear about theological education: seminaries should engage in theological exploration and not just in theological indoctrination. Be a good resource for the life of the denomination as it undergoes change.

The title of the article is my favorite title among things I have written. I am glad to have written the article as a way of trying to be of help to a denomination that I would soon be leaving. I have no idea whether it was ever read by any of the men who would soon be arriving to teach theology in the seminaries.

### Sabbatical Leaves

The seminary had a generous policy concerning sabbatical leaves for faculty members. After six years of teaching, faculty members could

have an entire year free for sabbatical leave with full salary and benefits. I took my first sabbatical leave at Oxford in 1976–77.

My project for the year was to write a book about the atoning work of Christ. A friend at my college, Donald Sykes, told me that F. W. Dillistone was living in retirement in Oxford. Dillistone was a widely respected Anglican theologian who had written four books about the atoning work of Christ, including the large and influential book *The Christian Understanding of Atonement*. I had required students in my doctoral seminar on the work of Christ to read this great book.

I contacted Dillistone and asked if we could meet, and he invited me to his home for a visit. It was an enjoyable and helpful visit, and we continued to meet more or less monthly through the school year. Each time we met we talked about the atonement, but gradually we began to include other topics, including personal ones. Dilly (as he liked to be called) was a gentle, lovely man as well as a creative theologian. Caroline and I were delighted to have dinner with him and his wife Enid on multiple occasions. He didn't own a car, and on one occasion he and I went in my car to see the movie "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest." Dilly had been told that the Mac McMurphy character was a Christ figure, and he wanted to explore that possibility. In the years following my sabbatical leave, Dilly and I exchanged hundreds of letters, and I was able to arrange for him to give lectures at the seminary and later on at the university where I taught after I left New Orleans.

I repeated the schedule I had followed back in 1965–67 of working in the Bodleian Library from 8:00 a.m. when it opened until supper time on weekdays, but this time I didn't work on Saturday mornings. That gave me evenings and weekends with my family. I was writing the book by hand, since typing still wasn't permitted in the Bodleian. I was fortunate to find a typist, Dot Mohrlang, who could read my barely legible handwriting. She and her husband Roger were Americans. Roger was doing doctoral studies in the university, and when he graduated they moved to Spokane where he had a long and distinguished career as a professor at Whitworth College. By the time we returned home I had a typed copy of the initial draft of *The Death of Christ*. After we returned

home I continued to revise and rewrite it, and it was typed several more times by my secretaries in New Orleans.

I usually rewrote my articles and books several times. When personal computers became available, it was much easier to revise and rewrite, and I did so even more often. By the time I retired it was my practice to revise and re-write about ten times. I suppose there are some people whose first draft is a finished product. I have been told that this was the case with the Anglican theologian and philosopher, Austin Farrer. However, I think most of us need to revise and rewrite in order to do our best work, and I have tried to communicate to my students the value of doing this.



My second sabbatical leave was for the school year 1983–84. By that time our children were deeply engaged in their schools and with friends, so it was not a good time for our family to leave town. I decided to stay home and work on a Master of Arts degree in religious studies at Loyola University in New Orleans.

This led to some interesting experiences. For example, Loyola permitted undergraduates who were majoring in religion to sit in on graduate classes and seminars. In one class I was seated next to a young man who was an undergraduate. The professor was running a little late, and the young man said to me, “You’re a Baptist priest, aren’t you?” I said that I was indeed a Baptist minister. “And you’re married, aren’t you?” I told him I was. He said thoughtfully, “You have the best of both worlds, don’t you?” I agreed that I did. I assume that he was a Roman Catholic and wrestling with whether or not to become a priest. I am glad that that we Baptists do not have to choose between marriage and ministry. A year or so later I was invited to speak to the Serra Society in New Orleans. This organization’s mission is to encourage young men to enter the priesthood, so I told them this story. I suggested that for a lot of Catholic young men the only barrier to the priesthood is the requirement of celibacy and that the shortage of American priests would probably end if the requirement of celibacy were ended.

All of the professors at Loyola were excellent. Two systematic theologians, Stephen Duffy and Terry Tekippe, and an ethicist, James Gaffney, taught seminars that were especially important to me because their subjects were closely related to my own. A few years later I served as faculty advisor for Jim's lovely wife Kathleen who earned a doctorate at the Baptist seminary. She was herself a professor at Xavier University in New Orleans.

At Loyola I took a valuable seminar in the work of the Canadian Jesuit theologian and philosopher, Bernard Lonergan. I welcomed this opportunity because I had been impressed by a lecture that I heard Lonergan give in 1974. It was at a meeting of the Southwest Region of the American Academy of Religion that was held in Denton, Texas, and I was there along with my student and friend, John Watson. After Lonergan finished his lecture, another professor read a prepared response. The professor had organized his response around a large number of points. At about the 12th point he made reference to the movie "The Exorcist" and asked whether the reason many so theologians do not take demons seriously is that their intellectual horizon (one of Lonergan's favorite themes) doesn't allow for it. As the professor went through his points, Lonergan, who was 69 years old at the time, sat at the table quietly with his hands folded. He seemed to be dozing.

When the respondent finished, the moderator asked Lonergan if he would care to comment on the response. To everyone's astonishment Lonergan began to make a comment about each of the many points, one at a time, in order, with no notes to remind him! When he came to the twelfth point he said, I will return to this. When he finished responding to the other points, he returned to the twelfth and said something like this: Concerning the demons, I will tell you a story. I spent part of my career teaching at the Gregorian in Rome. One of my friends there had the responsibility of authorizing exorcisms in the Catholic Church. One day I stopped him in the hall and asked him, "Father, do you really think that there are demons?" He replied to me, "Father, I don't know, but I will tell you this: when you see a large oak table come prancing down the corridor, you know something is afoot!"

In the seminar we worked through Lonergan's book *Method in Theology*. He defined method as "a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results." During my years of teaching, many academic theologians, especially in America, seem to have been preoccupied with theological method. One, who happened to be an acquaintance of mine, actually said that if you would tell him a theologian's method, he could tell you that theologian's theology. In my opinion, this is an exaggerated understanding of the importance of method. Method matters, but not *that* much. I felt then and still feel that some academic theologians spend too much time winding up and not enough time pitching. I think it was the Presbyterian Hugh Kerr who said that the only thing that his professors in Scotland had to say about theological method was, "The way that you do it is, you do it."

A nice by-product of my year at Loyola was that I was later invited to teach a course on ecumenism there. It was my first time to teach undergraduates. By this time I was conversant with the quest for Christian unity among Baptists and Roman Catholics, but for the course I had to learn about ecumenical efforts by other churches and denominations. Also, I had never before taught undergraduates and needed to learn how to teach them effectively. I was accustomed to teaching graduate students who were committed to ministry and who therefore knew that my subject, theology, would be important in their work. Some of the undergraduates weren't interested in theology or ecumenism and were taking my course only because they needed a credit in religion, so part of my responsibility was to try to generate interest in the subject. I enjoyed the work very much. It was one of only two undergraduate courses I have ever taught.

### An Ecumenical Dialogue

In 1977 I received a letter inviting me to participate in a dialogue between Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist scholars. The dialogue began the following year, and there were about a dozen persons on each team. We met twice a year for ten years with a one-year break along the way. Each meeting was for a three-day weekend. Across the decade the membership of each team shifted somewhat, but there was continuity because many of us were on board for the entire dialogue.

I was happy to be part of this good project. I had been intuitively ecumenical since I was a teenager. As a seminary student, I began to understand that it is scandalous that Christians are officially and institutionally divided. I believe that the disunity of the churches is sinful and that it undermines the mission of the church in the world. At Oxford I experienced the joy of sharing with Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and all sorts of Protestants, the perennial tradition of the church over its 2,000-year history. Participating in the Baptist–Catholic dialogue gave me an opportunity to play a small role in the quest for visible Christian unity.

Our meetings began with papers that were written in advance and read aloud to us, and then we discussed them. There were no constraints on the topics; everything was on the table. Do Catholics really believe that in the Mass the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus? Yes. Do Baptists really believe that church and state should be kept carefully separated so that people of every religion or none are free to believe and practice as their consciences direct them? Yes.

I think we made progress in our work. We wrote three books together. As I mentioned earlier, the third book was published as an issue of my seminary's journal, *The Theological Educator*. In it, we attempted to show how much Catholics and Baptists have in common: their belief in the one, true, living God; their confidence that Jesus is the Savior of the world; their conviction that the church is the people of God and is being directed by the Holy Spirit on a mission to the world; their commitment to love as the highest Christian calling; their hope for the coming of God's kingdom on earth; their acceptance of the Bible as the written authority for their faith; and much more. The disagreements between our two communions are real and important, but so are the agreements, and the agreements are more than enough to justify our talking and listening to each other.

One of the things I learned early in the process was that the Catholics in the dialogue who were most helpful to me were the ones who were unapologetically Catholic. One or two members of their group seemed to be willing to water down the differences between them and us in order to reach agreements, but I learned much more from the

ones who stood up for their Catholic faith whether that made them seem closer to us or not.

At one meeting I made a serious mistake. I was given the assignment of writing a paper on the Baptist understanding of salvation. An internationally respected Jesuit New Testament scholar, John Donahue, S.J., was to write a paper on the same subject. I gave my paper first.

In our Baptist circles, at least in the ones in which I had moved, the phrase “doctrine of salvation” suggests the experience of being forgiven and of being born again, of being brought into the family of God and morally changed, and of being with God in the life to come. We usually speak of Jesus’ suffering and death and resurrection as “the doctrine of the atonement” or as “the work of Christ” rather than as “the doctrine of salvation.”

Operating with that understanding, I wrote my paper about the experience of salvation and didn’t refer except in passing to the saving work of Jesus. When John got up to read his paper, he began by saying quite seriously that he was astonished that I had said so little about Jesus’ atoning work. He said something like, “I thought Baptists believed that salvation is something that Jesus accomplished by his cross and resurrection.” I was embarrassed and had to explain that I had misunderstood the assignment because of its title and that we Baptists most certainly did agree with the Catholics that Jesus lived and taught and suffered and died and rose again to save the world.

The ten-year dialogue came to an end in 1988, just as the Southern Baptist Convention was nearing the end of the great controversy that would result in changes in the leadership of all the Southern Baptist agencies. The leader of the Roman Catholic group in our dialogue, Bishop James Niedergeses, telephoned me in 1990 to ask if I would be willing to participate in another three-year round of dialogue. I declined and tried to explain to him that I thought the Catholics now had a good feel for those of us who were representative of the SBC as it had been in the past half-century or more, and that what was needed if the dialogue was continued was for the Catholics to get to know those who are representative of the new SBC which was then coming into existence. The dialogue did in fact continue for a short time, and I am

glad that some Catholic scholars got to know some of the scholars in the new SBC.

During the period when I had been a member of the dialogue, the participants were some of the finest theologians in the Catholic and Baptist churches in America. I was honored to be a part of that project, I enjoyed it, and I learned a great deal from it. I felt we did work that was valuable, and I treasure the personal friendships that emerged from our times together. It was in part because of my participation in the dialogue that I decided to study at Loyola University on my sabbatical leave in 1983–84 where, as I wrote earlier, I met still other Roman Catholic scholars who became friends.

### The Controversy

The Southern Baptist Convention was and still is the largest Protestant denomination in America. In 1980 it reported about 13,700,000 church members. But all was not well, for the denomination was engaged in an internal conflict to determine the character of the denomination. The conflict involved hundreds of people. It has had direct religious effects on the millions of members of SBC churches, and it has had indirect political effects on all Americans.

The two groups in the conflict disagreed about what to call it. The people who were in power when it began called it “the Fundamentalist takeover.” The new leaders called it “the conservative resurgence.” Both groups called it “the controversy.”

The two groups also disagreed about what to call themselves. Leaders in both groups wanted to be called conservatives, and neither wanted the other to be called conservatives. The original leaders said the new leaders were Fundamentalists, not conservatives. The new leaders said the original leaders were liberals, not conservatives. The issue of terminology was never resolved.

The two groups also disagreed about the nature of the controversy. Some of the original leaders said that all the talk about theology was a smokescreen and that the real issue was about power and about who was going to control the vast resources of the Convention. The new leaders said that it really was about theology. They said that the Convention

was becoming theologically liberal and they wanted to stop that. On this issue, I think both groups were right and both were wrong. The controversy was about theology, and it was also about power—both/and, not either/or.



The process by which the new leaders gained control was political rather than theological. They did not convince the original leaders to change their theology. They outvoted them at the annual meetings of the Convention.

The vote that mattered most was the vote for presidency of the SBC. The president is usually though not always a pastor. He (all SBC presidents have been males) serves without pay, usually for two years but occasionally for just one. Recently, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a president has served for three years.

The process for effecting change was labyrinthine, and it was a lawyer, Judge Paul Pressler, who figured out how to do it. It included eight steps. At each annual year from 1979 forward, the messengers (the SBC does not call them “delegates”) elected by popular ballot a president who supported the transformation of the Convention. The president then appointed like-minded persons to a national Committee on Committees. That committee then nominated like-minded persons to serve on a Committee on Nominations. At the next annual meeting the messengers elected those nominees to serve on the Committee on Nominations. This committee then nominated like-minded persons to serve as trustees of the various boards and agencies of the Convention. The messengers at the following annual meeting elected those nominees to be trustees of the boards and agencies. Once the new trustees held majorities on their various boards, they replaced the heads of their organizations. The new heads then transformed their various organizations by establishing new policies and by replacing their personnel. This was the most painful part of the conflict. At the seminaries administrators and faculty members were fired or forced to resign. One seminary president was actually locked out of his office. At the publication board, editors and administrators were fired or forced out. At the missionary boards

missionaries and administrators were fired or forced out. It took about twelve years for the new leaders to gain complete control of the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.



Before the controversy began, I already knew the two principal architects of the transformation of the Convention, Paige Patterson and Judge Paul Pressler. Patterson and I had been students together in two doctoral seminars at the seminary in New Orleans in 1968–69. The three of us had been groomsmen in Richard and Rebecca Land’s wedding in Chattanooga in 1971. Afterwards the three of us flew together to Little Rock on a private plane owned by Paige’s father-in-law. During the trip, Judge Pressler talked to me about his hope to bring about theological change in the SBC.

When I returned to New Orleans, I told some friends on the faculty that I thought that Pressler posed a serious threat to the future of the seminary as we knew it. I don’t think that I convinced any of them. They were aware of Pressler and of others who were talking about changing the Convention, but they weren’t concerned. I was young and inexperienced, they were older and very experienced, and they thought that the Convention would muddle through this just as it had muddled through other controversies. Some of them said that the Convention is like a pendulum: from time to time it swings a little to the right or a little to the left, but in the end it always settles down in the middle. About fifteen years later one of them whom I greatly admired, Joe Cothen, reminded me of the pendulum metaphor and said, “The pendulum is not coming back this time, Fisher.” He was right.

In the years following my airplane conversation with Paul Pressler, the new leaders worked hard and worked smart to bring about change in the Convention. They held meetings, published newspapers, and networked with people around the country. They understood that the key to everything was the president of the Convention, and they encouraged their supporters to attend the annual meetings when the president is elected. On some occasions they arranged for buses to take messengers to the annual meetings to vote. Annual meetings that in the past attracted

three or four thousand messengers now attracted forty or fifty thousand or more. When Adrian Rogers, a pastor from Memphis, was elected as president in 1979, the process of changing the Convention was under way for anyone to see.

Some of the original leaders also worked to prevent the change. Like the new leaders, they created publications, held meetings, and did a lot of networking. In my opinion they weren't as politically savvy as the new leaders. In any case, by 1990 the new leaders had defeated the original leaders and the transformation of the Convention was under way.



I was teaching at the seminary in New Orleans throughout the controversy. The controversy affected our work. It became somewhat more difficult to discuss contested issues calmly. Some students became suspicious of the faculty. A few students secretly taped classroom lectures and sent copies to some of the new leaders. I don't want to exaggerate. For the most part, teaching in the 1980s was like teaching in the 1970s, but there was a subtle change of tone.

As a professor of theology in an SBC seminary, I felt a moral responsibility to do what I could, however small, to help the Convention stay on track. There wasn't a lot I could do. I attended and voted at the annual meetings of the Convention. I explained to the students in my classes what was happening and why I thought the new leaders were wrong, and I did the same thing in churches where I spoke. I wrote the initial draft of a charter for a Louisiana chapter of a new organization that is now called the Alliance of Baptists, and I attended some of the annual meetings of the Alliance. I also attended the annual meetings of another new group that was formed near the end of the controversy, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I spoke at the annual meeting of a group called the Forum that had been created by the old leaders. At his request I put together a brief list of resources for use by one of the greatest of the original leaders, Grady Cothen, when he was writing a book about the controversy. I served very briefly as a

theological resource person to another of the original leaders, Albert McClellan, who was involved in political and theological negotiations at the national level. He was serving on an ad hoc group created by the Convention called the Peace Committee.

I described earlier the two special issues of *The Theological Educator* that I put together in an effort to help people understand the theological differences. I wrote articles about the controversy for the journal, and I also interviewed people in the feature called Southern Baptist Theology Today. In 1985–86 I wrote a series of 34 articles called “Theology for Laypersons” for *The Baptist Message*, the state paper for Louisiana. Four of the articles were about the Bible, and one of them was about biblical inerrancy. The inerrancy of the Bible was the presenting issue of the new leaders of the Convention.

Those of us who opposed the changes in the Convention weren’t always playing defense. One of the Fundamentalist publications ran an article in which I was described as an “infidel.” I felt that crossed a line and thought it might be actionable. It was self–evidently false, and it certainly put my job in jeopardy. Southern Baptists don’t want infidels teaching in their seminaries! I asked a friend who was an attorney if I could sue the writer and the publication for libel. He agreed that it was libelous and said he would take the case. When I told President Leavell that I was making arrangements to sue, he said, “Go get ’em!” It turned out, however, that the writer and the publication had no assets. Since lawyers accept libel suits on contingency, a lawsuit wasn’t financially feasible, and we had to drop it. Several years later my friend and colleague, Carlton Winbery, did bring a lawsuit against some of the new leaders in Louisiana. It was finally settled out of court with the new leaders being required to pay Carlton’s legal fees and issue a public apology.



My first public action to try to support the original leaders came early. During the 1970s, when the new leaders began to lob vague charges of liberalism against professors and missionaries and others, they went largely unchallenged. Early in 1980 the editor of *The Baptist Standard*, a Texas newspaper with a large circulation, challenged the new leaders

to either name the liberals or stop the criticism. In April of that year Paige Patterson responded to this challenge by sending the editor a long article entitled “A Reply of Concern.” In it he provided seven examples of theological liberalism in the Convention. My book *The Death of Christ* was one of the examples, and Paige gave quotations from it. One of the editors of the paper called to tell me that they intended to publish Paige’s article, and he said that if I wanted to respond to it, I should call him immediately and give it to him. I wrote a response in just a few minutes and called it in, and he recorded it. He published selections from it together with Paige’s article and with responses by some of the other alleged liberals. I am going to quote from my response because it gives a feel for what things were like during the controversy. I wrote:

Dr. Paige Patterson is deceiving Southern Baptists. He has not told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about my book, The Death of Christ.

It is true that his quotations from my book were accurate, but they were lifted out of context and presented so that they falsify my intended meanings. He gave the letter of my words but not the spirit of my book. He implied that my book is an attack on the atonement. In fact, my book is a defense and exposition of Christ’s atoning work.

You may ask how he can deceive if he quoted correctly. The answer is, his selection and presentation distort my view. This can be done to any writer.

I then tried to show how easy it is to misrepresent someone’s ideas by quoting another writer out of context:

He [Patterson] really should turn his attack against a teacher in one of our Baptist schools who wrote in a recent book that Jesus taught that “marriages was not a celestial contract.” The writer also said, “Jesus is quoting Exodus 3:6, a passage written down by some human author” (his italics). He also wrote, “There are degrees of worth in the Bible. .

. . Obviously John is more crucial than Ecclesiastes.” The same writer said of Baptist preachers, “They must cease with the pious but nauseous platitudes about bowing to the authority of Jesus.”

Dr. Patterson will find it difficult to attack the writer of these words, for he is the writer. These words are accurate quotations from his recent tract, The Issue Is Truth. By selecting isolated sentences and presenting them as suspicious, I have completely distorted Dr. Patterson’s intended meaning.

That is what he has done to my book.

I then affirmed my belief that by his death and resurrection Jesus has provided forgiveness of sins. I concluded:

I would welcome a fair-minded discussion of what I have written, but I deplore Dr. Patterson’s innuendos. What I have written is true to the Bible and consistent with the Baptist Faith and Message, as I told Dr. Patterson over a year ago. I have tried as best I can to speak the truth in love about Christ’s sacrifice. Dr. Patterson is trying to deceive Southern Baptists about my book, and he ought to be ashamed of himself.

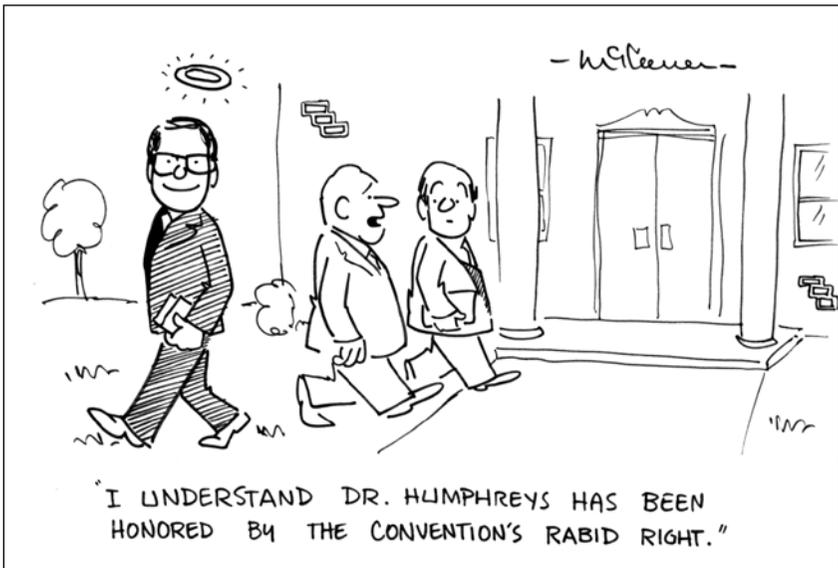
Some of the quotations in Patterson’s article were repurposed and combined with other material to create a document for use in the controversy. The copy of that document that I have is entitled EVIDENCES and is eleven pages long. For the next ten years Patterson and Pressler distributed thousands copies of the document as they traveled back and forth across the southern United States and beyond, speaking at ad hoc meetings to pastors and others about what they saw as liberalism’s threat to the Convention. I expect it was these meetings as much as anything that motivated people to begin attending the annual meeting of the SBC in large numbers and voting for presidents who would work to change the Convention.



After Paige's letter was published, I began to receive letters and telephone calls condemning my views. I tried to reply accurately and in a friendly way to them all. The exception was letters that were truly hateful. I simply tossed those in the wastebasket. Otherwise, I replied.

Of course, not all the mail was negative. Some of it expressed appreciation for my book and wished me well. Some people considered an honor to have been targeted by the critics of the Convention. One Southern Baptist theologian told a colleague that he was miffed because he had not been criticized by the new leaders! If being criticized was an honor, I would have preferred not to be honored.

I received a long, sincere letter from a missionary in Brazil who had heard Paige Patterson speak there. I was surprised that Paige had exported the controversy to missionaries living abroad. The missionary said that he was distressed to learn from Patterson that I did not believe that by his sacrifice Jesus had provided salvation for the world. I wrote him back and assured him that I did believe exactly that and that I had emphasized that in my book and also in my classes. Along with my letter



The controversy in the SBC didn't generate much laughter, but this cartoon by Joe McKeever made me smile.

I sent him a copy of my book. He read it carefully, and the outcome of our correspondence was that the missionary was so relieved to know that I believed the Christian gospel that he invited me to come to Brazil and preach the gospel and he would translate for me. I wish I had been able to accept his invitation.



In August 1985 I received a letter from Earl Davis, the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Memphis, telling me about a sermon that Adrian Rogers had preached at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis. The sermon was entitled “The Serpent in the Garden,” and in it Rogers had quoted my book as an example of the evil that was creeping into the Southern Baptist Convention. The pastor sent me a copy of a letter in which he had replied forcefully to Rogers, telling him that he was wrong and that he ought to be ashamed of himself. I thanked Dr. Davis and thought little about it afterwards.

One afternoon I received a telephone call from Adrian Rogers. He talked for a few minutes about some other matters, and then we talked about the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the conclusion of that conversation he said that he wanted to apologize for what he had said in that sermon. He said that he always tried to get his facts straight but that this time he had been wrong. I told him that I appreciated his apology.

During the controversy I made it a policy not to quote people’s private conversations without their permission. That just seemed like an appropriate thing to do. Two years after my telephone conversation with Rogers, I decided to talk about the telephone conversation in a public debate that I will describe below. I notified Rogers that I intended to do that, and he replied that that he had no difficulty with my reporting our conversation provided I included a particular piece of information, which I did.



In June 1985, I flew to Houston to participate in a live program on the CBS affiliate television station KHOU. A local pastor and I

debated Patterson and Pressler for two hours in front of a large audience consisting mostly of their supporters. I arrived in Houston several hours before the program began, and the moderator of the program invited me to lunch. He said that he intended to direct the debate toward subjects such as women in ministry. I was pretty sure that wouldn't happen, so I said to him, "Good luck with that, but I don't think Patterson and Pressler are going to talk about anything except biblical inerrancy. You can bring up other things, but they're going to go back to the fact that the SBC leaders and especially professors in the six seminaries should be required to believe and teach that the original manuscripts of the Bible contained no errors of any kind—no religious or moral errors, but no errors of history or science, either." I'm not a very good prophet, but this time I was right. Patterson and Pressler were sincerely concerned about the truthfulness of the Bible, and no matter what the moderator asked, they brought the topic back to biblical inerrancy.

During the program I pointed out what was for me the Achilles' heel of the teaching about biblical inerrancy. Inerrantists like Patterson and Pressler do not claim that the Bibles we have today are inerrant. They say that it is only the original manuscripts of the Bible that are error-free. The original manuscripts were written in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), they were never together in one place, and they no longer exist. Patterson and Pressler allowed that errors may have crept into the copies and into the translations such as the King James Version of the Bible. They certainly didn't emphasize these qualifications, but they did believe them and would affirm them if they were asked about them.

During the program I explained this and said that this view of the Bible was not high enough for me. I insisted that it was a mistake to say that only the original manuscripts were the Word of God. I borrowed the Bible which my debate partner had brought with him, and I held it up and said, I believe this Bible, not just the lost original manuscripts, is the Word of God. Patterson and Pressler do not believe that this English translation of the Bible is the Word of God except in a highly qualified sense.

Patterson immediately responded that he did in fact believe that the Bible I was holding was the Word of God. I immediately asked him,

Is this Bible in my hand inerrant? He said, Well, to the extent that it accurately translates the original manuscripts, it is inerrant.

I said that was not enough for me. I said that I had a higher understanding than he did of the Bible which we possess. For me, modern translations of the Bible, just as much as the original manuscripts of the Bible, are God's Word—full stop, no “to the extent that,” no qualifications.



In 1987, the presidents of the six Southern Baptist seminaries sponsored a Conference on the Inerrancy of the Bible at Ridgecrest Assembly in North Carolina. This was part of their effort to find a way to unite the Convention. More than a thousand people attended, including most of the faculty members at the six seminaries. The speakers represented both sides of the controversy.

I was asked to lead one of the breakout sessions. My assignment was to offer an assessment of what was said about the Bible in two documents. One was the Baptist Faith and Message, a confessional document adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963. The other was The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. This document was an explanation and defense of biblical inerrancy that had been issued in 1978 by an unofficial group of biblical inerrantists. Some of them were Southern Baptists, but most were not.

I was glad to speak at that session. It was another opportunity to do what I could to try to prevent the new leaders from gaining control of the Convention. In my presentation I repeated the claims I had made in Houston. I argued that the differences in the two documents are not great but that the Baptist Faith and Message is the wiser document. I said, The authors of The Chicago Statement have forfeited something valuable about Scripture. They have eroded our confidence that the Bible which we now have is itself the very Word of God. They have done this by focusing on the original manuscripts of the Bible to the detriment of the texts and translations we have today. Then I added, I favor doing what Jesus and the apostles and the whole church (until very recently) have done, which is to believe in the Bible which we

hold in our hands as the very Word of God. Finally, I suggested that one way to do this was to restrict ourselves to using the Bible's own language about itself and not use the language of inerrancy which was dominating the controversy.



The controversy affected me personally because I owed so much to Southern Baptists. They had welcomed me as a teenager, given me an extremely affordable college and seminary education, supported me financially so that I was able to study at Oxford, called me to serve as pastor of churches in Alabama and Illinois and Mississippi, and employed me as a professor of theology in the seminary in New Orleans.

The controversy affected me professionally because I was teaching at an SBC seminary. The conflict put my job at risk, and, as Samuel Johnson once commented, it concentrates the mind wonderfully to know that one is soon to be hanged.

### A Debate

As the controversy in the Convention progressed, I became increasingly concerned about whether there was anything else I could do to help bring peace to the Convention. I told my friend Joe Cothen that I didn't want to wake up one day twenty years from now and feel ashamed that I hadn't done this or that. I was aware that I was a very minor player in the controversy and that there was very little I could do, but I felt I ought to do what I could.

I knew that in their campaign to change the SBC, Patterson and Pressler were continuing to use my book *The Death of Christ* as evidence of liberalism. Obviously there was no way I could follow them around the country and correct the misleading use they were making of my book. I responded to the letters I got about my book, but of course most of the people who heard Patterson and Pressler never wrote to me. It occurred to me that if I could have a public debate with them about the atoning work of Christ, that might undo some of the damage that their use of my book was causing and contribute a little to restoring peace to the Convention.

I had felt good about the debate with Patterson and Pressler on television in Houston in 1985, but that debate had been restricted to the inerrancy of the Bible. I thought that what was needed was a debate about my book on the atoning work of Christ. I also thought that, since Patterson had a doctorate in theology and Pressler was an attorney and judge rather than an academically trained theologian, the debate should be with Patterson.

So I asked President Landrum Leavell and Dean Joe Cothen if they would allow a public debate between Patterson and me to take place on the seminary campus. They weren't comfortable with the idea of a public debate, but they agreed to arrange a public discussion.

So in the seminary chapel on a Monday afternoon in the fall of 1987, Paige and I had a three-hour public debate about atonement. About 300 people attended. My colleague and friend Paul Robertson moderated the debate. My former student and friend Lacy Thompson wrote an account of the debate for *The Baptist Message*, the Baptist newspaper in Louisiana.

Paige was a seasoned debater and an effective one. He stayed on the topic of atonement, which I appreciated. He was courteous throughout the debate. Occasionally he was humorous, which was nice.

I unintentionally made one humorous remark myself. At one point Paige asked a friendly, personal question. He said something like this: "Come on now, Dr. Humphreys, if you could do it all over again, wouldn't you really want to write your book in a different way?" I responded, "If I had it to do all over again, I'd try to keep anyone from selling you a copy!" To his credit, Paige laughed along with everyone else.



During the debate I learned something new and important. It concerned the understanding of atonement that Paige and many other Baptists held.

In the New Testament there are many images of the atonement, perhaps as many as two dozen. Here are nine of the more familiar ones:

- On the cross Jesus displayed the self-sacrificial love of God for everyone to see.

- On the cross Jesus set an example of unselfish love which we should imitate.
- On the cross Jesus defeated the forces of evil and death.
- On the cross Jesus perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father.
- On the cross Jesus died in the way that a Good Shepherd will die to defend his sheep.
- On the cross Jesus suffered like the Suffering Servant of whom Isaiah wrote, “He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.”
- On the cross Jesus accepted the curse of being hanged on a tree in order to free humanity from the curse of having broken God’s law.
- On the cross Jesus offered himself as a Passover sacrifice and thereby freed human beings from slavery to evil.
- On the cross Jesus offered himself as a Yom Kippur sacrifice to cleanse human beings of their sins.

These images of the meaning of Jesus’ atoning work contain multiple discrete themes. What I learned in the debate with Patterson was that he and many other Baptists believe that one of those themes has priority over all the others. It is the theme of penal substitution.

Penal substitution is a compound with two parts. It says that Jesus’ death was substitutionary in that Jesus took the place of sinners, and it says that Jesus’ death was penal in that Jesus experienced God’s punishment for sins, that is, suffering and death. In seven of the images listed above, this theme does not appear, but it is present in two of them. It is present in the image of Jesus accepting a curse in our place (Galatians 3:13), and it is present in the image of the Suffering Servant which the early church employed to speak about Jesus’ death (Acts 8:26–40, 1 Peter 2:21–25). So far as I have been able to discover, these are the only places in the New Testament where the penal idea and the substitutionary idea appear together. It is true that in the Old Testament the two ideas appear together in the teaching about the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, but so far as I can tell, no writer in the New Testament explicitly used the scapegoat to speak of Jesus’ death. I have read a number of books about

the death of Christ, and I cannot remember any of them commenting about this important fact. This seems like a strange oversight to me.

Apparently the theme of penal substitution did not receive much emphasis in the church of the patristic era. In the medieval era, a similar but not identical idea appeared in an important book by St. Anselm entitled *Why God Became Man*. In the sixteenth century penal substitution was brilliantly developed by the Protestant reformer John Calvin. In the second half of the 20th century, penal substitution had knowledgeable and able defenders such as Leon Morris, James I. Packer, and John Stott.

One thing that makes penal substitution so appealing is that it is easy to understand. It can be summarized in five propositions: (1) Human beings commit sins. (2) God is just and requires that sins be punished by death. (3) God loves human beings and desires to deliver them from the punishment they deserve. (4) On the cross Jesus voluntarily accepted the divine punishment that human beings deserve. (5) Human beings are thereby saved from divine punishment.

This understanding of the atoning work of Christ says several true and important things. It takes sin seriously. It affirms that there is salvation for the human race. It teaches that it is God who provides salvation, not ourselves. It says that God's provision of salvation occurred in an act in history. It displays the generosity and grace and love of God. It is good news for the world.

Unfortunately, penal substitution is sometimes presented in unbiblical ways. Sometimes the divine punishment is presented as angry, ill-tempered violence rather than a truly appropriate, truly moral response to evil. Sometimes it is said that God the Father punished God the Son. This pits the two divine Persons against each other and is inconsistent with the apostle Paul's statement that "God was in Christ, reconciling." The great writers on the subject—Calvin, Stott, and Packer, for examples—have carefully avoided these and other errors, and Paige carefully avoided them in our debate.

The new thing that I learned in the debate was the place that the penal substitutionary understanding of the meaning of Jesus' atoning work occupies in the thinking of many Baptists—and, I might add, in the

thinking of many other Christians as well. For many Christians, this is *the* proper understanding. All other understandings are incomplete. Any understanding that is presented without emphasizing or at least including penal substitution is to some extent defective.

During our debate Paige was explicit about this. He said that penal substitution is the “ultimate model in the Bible” and “the major motif for understanding the atonement” and the “one indispensable model, that is the foundational model off of which the whole soteriological plan of the Bible operates.” Speaking of the various kinds of animal sacrifice described in the Old Testament, he said, “I do believe that the idea of penal sacrifice—penal substitution—was involved in every sacrifice slain.”

The problem with this is simple and can be stated with a question: Who authorized this indispensability? It is certainly not authorized by the Bible which, as I said above, presents about two dozen images of the meaning of Christ’s atoning work alongside one another and nowhere makes the claim that penal substitution is central and indispensable. In fact, many of the images appear in passages where there is no allusion to penal substitution such as Jesus’ statement that he is the good shepherd who will die for his sheep. This centrality is not authorized by the great creeds of the early church, the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, neither of which makes any reference to penal substitution. It is not authorized by John Calvin. In what he wrote about Jesus’ saving work, Calvin used penal substitution alongside other ideas without suggesting that penal substitution had a priority over the others. It is not authorized by the Baptist Faith and Message of 1963. That confession says simply, “In His death on the cross He made provision for the redemption of men from sin.” That’s it—nothing at all about penal substitution.

Neither the New Testament nor the Apostles’ Creed nor the Nicene Creed nor John Calvin nor the Baptist Faith and Message authorized the idea that penal substitution is indispensable in the way Paige did. I wish I had been able to make that fact clear during our debate, but I couldn’t because until our debate I had not realized how insistent he and others are on the centrality and indispensability of penal substitution.



I felt that the debate went well, with one exception. From the time it had occurred to me to propose a debate with Paige, I was thinking in terms of peacemaking. I hoped that by clarifying what I had actually been saying in my book, we could make a small contribution to healing the division in the SBC. With that in mind, I had prepared in advance a one–page document in which I listed ideas about Jesus’ atoning work that Paige and I shared. I felt that emphasizing our agreements would provide relief to people who had become distressed about our disagreements.

I proposed five agreements. (1) We believe in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as historical events. (2) We believe in the gospel which is that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). (3) We believe in the truthfulness and authority of all the biblical teachings about the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection. (4) We believe that the church should always remember, celebrate, and proclaim Jesus’ death and resurrection. (5) We believe in the mystery of the cross.

Near the end of the debate, my secretary distributed copies of the document, and I invited Paige to join me in signing this document. I should not have done this. It was unfair for me to ask Paige to do this without having alerted him in advance and thereby given him a chance to prepare a response. I later apologized to him for my mistake, and he accepted my apology.

Even so, I really did want our discussion to contribute to peace in the Convention, and I wish there had been some way to communicate to a larger audience how much we shared in common. For several years Paige had been telling people how much we differ without telling them how much we shared in common. That had misled and alarmed people and contributed to the conflict in the Convention. I felt that if we could tell people how much we shared in common, that would provide a corrective and help people to feel confidence and to live together more peaceably. The mechanism by which I tried to do that was unwise, but what I was trying to do was right.

Or so it seems to me now, thirty–five years later.



My overall assessment of the controversy was and is that it was a bad thing. It needlessly hurt hundreds and perhaps thousands of innocent people. It replaced wise leaders with unwise ones. It distracted Southern Baptists from focusing on what they had been doing really well, namely, missionary work and evangelism.

In this assessment, I am talking only about institutions of the Convention and their leaders. Now as in the past, there are millions of wonderful Southern Baptist people and tens of thousands of wonderful Southern Baptist clergy. It is some of the institutions and their administrators, not all the people or all their pastors, who have taken directions that I think are unwise.

As it has turned out, the controversy was bad numerically, too. During the controversy the new leaders said that one of their concerns was that the liberalism in the Convention would lead to numerical decline and that they were trying to save the Convention from that. At first it looked like they might be right. For the first 15 years that the new leaders controlled the SBC, it continued to gain members. But in 2006 membership peaked at about 16,600,000. Fourteen years later, in 2020, the Convention reported a membership of 14,089,947. That is a loss of 2,510,053 members in 14 years. This is equivalent to losing a congregation of 491 members *every day for 14 years!*

There is no *Schadenfreude* here. I am not happy that SBC churches are losing so many members. I am sad. I report this only to show that the new leaders' claim to be saving the Convention from numerical decline has proven false. It is they and not the old leaders who have presided over the first-ever numerical decline in membership in the 175 year history of the Convention. This is as ironic as it is tragic.

What is theologically acceptable in the Convention has changed radically because of the controversy. Although my own theology has not changed much, I am now far out of sync with the theology of the Convention. I am more at home with two organizations that were formed during the controversy, the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Caroline and I are members of a church that has cut its ties with the Southern Baptist Convention, and we are happy to be there.



People who have not attended a theological seminary may imagine that life there is uneventful, gentle, and serene. Perhaps that is true in some schools. As my accounts of the controversy in the SBC and of this debate show, things can become quite lively in theological schools. As a Christian theologian, I am glad that many Baptists care enough about Christian beliefs to argue about them and to debate them. Of course, I wish that the controversy had not hurt so many good people. I wish that it had been civil rather than hostile. I wish the outcome had been different. But it wasn't boring.

Shortly after the dust had settled in the SBC controversy, I had a conversation with a theologian from a non-Baptist denomination. Speaking critically of his own denomination he said that its only theological belief is that God is nice, and its only ethical belief is that you should be nice. I told him that I was a Southern Baptist and that those two beliefs would have represented progress for us.

## Family

I loved teaching students at the seminary. I loved trying to understand about God and God's relations with the world, and I loved trying to share that understanding with my students. If I had been independently wealthy, I would have been happy to teach there without pay.

I have had two very strong desires in my life, understanding and love. I desire to understand and to share my understanding with others. I desire to love and to be loved.

For me, love is the more important of these two desires. I have had many friends whom I love and who have loved me. But it is my family whom I have loved most and by whom I have been most loved. My family of origin was the center of the universe for me until I reached adolescence. Following my marriage, Caroline and later Stephanie and Kenneth became that center.



From the time Caroline and I married in 1963 we were on the move, never staying very long in one house. In our first seven years

together we lived in eight places: a seminary apartment in New Orleans, a pastorium (pastor's home) in Frankville, Alabama, an apartment in Jackson, a house in Begbroke and then a flat in Oxford, England, a house in Argenta, Illinois, another seminary apartment in New Orleans, and another pastorium in Lula, Mississippi.

In 1970 we finally settled into a house where we would live for the next 19 years. It was on the campus of the seminary in New Orleans. It was a wooden, two-story, three-bedroom, two-bath house with a pleasant yard. In the back yard were grapefruit trees that produced abundant, delicious, pink grapefruits and a banana tree that produced abundant but inedible bananas. The house was white when we moved in, and while we lived there we had it painted yellow and later pale blue. It was the childhood home for our children; Stephanie was four when we moved in, and Kenneth was 7 months old. In that house, the four of us talked and listened and argued and laughed and cried and played games and ate Caroline's marvelous cooking together countless times. In it we had parties and innumerable visits with members of our extended families and with friends and with students and with other guests.

Although I am not especially fond of yard work, I enjoyed keeping the yard neat and healthy. It wasn't hard. New Orleans has a sub-tropical climate, and things grow fast there. Caroline did a beautiful job of making the bushes and flowers flourish, and I took care of the grass. A couple of years after we moved in, we planted an oak in the front yard. It was about three feet high when we planted it, and during our years there it grew to be enormous and shaded much of the front yard. The house, the oak tree, and the fruit trees are all gone now, victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The house was just two blocks from my office. This was convenient for me. I sometimes walked to the office, though I took a car to the office parking lot if I were meeting someone for lunch or had to run an errand during the day. Salaries at the seminary were modest, but that was partially compensated for by the fact that I didn't have a long commute to work. Also, the rent I paid for the house was absurdly low, and the seminary paid for big ticket things like painting the house and replacing the central heating and air.



Fisher and Caroline with their children Stephanie and Kenneth  
in their home in New Orleans in the mid-1980s.

Living on campus was like living in a lovely park. I never felt that our colleagues or students were intrusive. I always felt that we were safe there. I had easy access not only to my office but to the seminary library and to colleagues and students. The campus was located close to things we cared about. Caroline and I could drive to the French Quarter, have a quick lunch at a quiche shop we liked, and be back on campus in less than 90 minutes.

I think our children liked being there, too. They had access to a gym and swimming pool a half-block from our house. They developed friendships with other children on campus. They could walk to their elementary school. They got a feel for the work I was doing, and they got to know some of the people with whom I worked.

There were occasional problems. One zealous campus policeman attempted to give our son Kenneth a speeding ticket even though he had neither followed Kenneth's car nor checked Kenneth's speed with a radar gun. I asked him how he knew that Kenneth was speeding, and he said that he could just tell. I don't remember whether I talked him out of the ticket or paid it, but I do remember that Kenneth and I both felt he had behaved irresponsibly.

But that was exceptional. For the most part life on campus was good for our family.

Of course, people who live close together on a campus have all the problems and issues that other people do. Ever since our daughter Stephanie was a little girl, she has had a gift for spotting the humorous things in life, and in her adult years she has from time to time said that she wanted to write a book exposing all the funny and eccentric things she had seen on campus across the years. I would love to read that book.



Our family liked living in the city of New Orleans. Not everyone at the seminary did. Some faculty members bought homes in towns north of the city and commuted. Some students remained on campus as much as possible, venturing out only when necessary to buy groceries or go to church. But we loved the city.

Like many other people who spend time in New Orleans, we enjoyed eating out. In Birmingham where we live now, restaurants seem to be busy on weekends and not very busy during the week. In New Orleans, restaurants are busy all week long. And this is true not only of the world-famous ones such as Antoine's and Galatoire's (which is our favorite), but of the hundreds of neighborhood restaurants. What keeps people coming to these restaurants is not hanging plants or stained glass or hip music; it's the food.

Caroline was already excellent at Southern cooking when we married, and she soon became excellent at Creole and Cajun cooking. I have enjoyed gumbo in many restaurants both elegant and down-home, but I have never had a gumbo anywhere else that is as good as Caroline's chicken and sausage gumbo. We're vegetarians now, so she doesn't cook that dish anymore, but if she cooked a pot of it, I would be tempted to take a temporary leave from vegetarianism.

We also liked the relaxed ambiance of much of the city's life. This was especially good for me. I have loved working since I was a teenager, and it was good for my mental health to be reminded over and over that we all need play as well as work in our lives.

Our family liked Mardi Gras in New Orleans, not just Fat Tuesday itself, but the entire season of Carnival which lasts about a month.

During that period there are about 80 parades in the city and adjacent neighborhoods. On Mardi Gras day there are four back-to-back, enormous, lavish parades in uptown New Orleans. Officials estimate that, when the weather is good, there are a million people on the streets on Mardi Gras day.

I have a vivid memory of the first time I was in the French Quarter at midnight on Mardi Gras day. Everything shut down. Some non-Catholics who had come to town for the celebrations became angry that the party stopped at midnight. It was a vivid reminder that the holiday has a religious background. It's one final, huge party before Ash Wednesday and the forty solemn days of Lent.



A major decision for our family was where our children would go to school. Caroline and I were committed to their being in public schools as much as possible. Other parents made different decisions for their children, and we respected that, but we felt this was best for us. Both of our children attended a public elementary school that was close enough to our house that they could walk to school. With the exception of one troubled teacher, this was a good experience for them.

When Stephanie was set to enter junior high, the public school to which she was assigned was, in our judgment, unsafe, so we enrolled both our children in a Presbyterian school across town. They were there for two years.

Stephanie had an especially nice experience there. She won first prize at the annual science fair. Like me, Stephanie was not very scientifically minded, but she had a good idea for her project. Through a friend who was a nurse, Stephanie purchased some petri dishes. She collected samples of water from wash basins, toilets, drinking fountains, hydrants, and pools of standing water around her school building. She put the samples in the petri dishes and allowed the microorganisms that were present in each place to grow. For the science fair she created an attractive poster and displayed the dishes with labels telling their source. What made the project interesting was that the water in water fountains and wash basins was more contaminated than the water in the toilets and

hydrants! There was an awkward moment during the science fair when a student who was accustomed to winning first prize at the school's science fairs complained. He really was scientifically minded, but he came in second that year. Sometimes someone who doesn't have a special gift in a particular subject but has one really good idea can accomplish more than a gifted person whose best idea isn't quite as good.

After two years our children returned to public schools. Their high school, Abramson, was racially diverse. One estimate is that about a third of the students were black, a third white, and a third Vietnamese. The students were platooned. Half of the student body attended classes in the mornings, and half in the afternoons. There were no study halls and no cafeteria or snack bar. We felt this was good preparation for college life. In 2005 the Abramson building was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, and the school no longer exists.



Another major decision for us concerned Caroline's work. She decided not to work outside our home while our children were young. She wanted to be at the house when they got home from school. We hoped that this would contribute a sense of stability and security to our children's lives. We realize that not all mothers are in a position to do this and that not all feel it's important, and we respect that, but we glad that we were able to arrange things this way for our children.

As the children grew older, there was no reason for Caroline to stay at home, and she began to look around for work. She worked as a secretary for a faculty member on campus. This was convenient, and it put her in contact with some of my colleagues. Later she worked for the pastor of our church. Her favorite position was as office manager for a psychiatrist named Joseph Palotta. He was a lovely Christian man with a large practice. Caroline ran an orderly office for him, and he appreciated her very much. She loved that work and continued to do it until we left the city.



When the children were still young, we bought a small used camper from one of my students. It was light enough that it could be moved

around by hand and pulled safely behind our Volkswagen beetle. When it was opened up, it had a tent top over two double beds and a little room for us to move around inside. It didn't have an air conditioner, so we took a large box fan with us when we traveled in the summer. We attached a propane gas tank to the front of it, so Caroline was able to cook on a small gas stove. For reasons I have never understood, food seems to taste especially good when you are camping out.

Camping is an affordable way to take vacations. We paid as little as four dollars a night to stay in campgrounds that provided us with electric hookups, bathrooms, and showers. This made it possible for our family to see much more of our country than would otherwise have been possible. Camping is especially nice for persons who teach, since we were often able to arrange to camp for several consecutive weeks during summers.

We camped out frequently in campgrounds near New Orleans. We also made trips to California, New Mexico, the Ozarks, Appalachia, Florida, and to an island off the coast of Georgia.

On one trip, we pulled into a camp ground in Tennessee during a light rain. Caroline and I left the children in a large game room near the entrance and went to our assigned site to set up the camper. A few minutes later we heard Stephanie screaming, and we ran to the game room. When she finally quieted down, we asked her what had happened. She said that one of the game machines had shocked her. The manager of the campground was standing nearby with her hands on her hips, and she demanded, "Which machine shocked you?" Stephanie pointed to the machine and the manager said angrily, "That's impossible! That machine cannot have shocked you! It's not plugged in!" When we looked closely at the machine, it was of course plugged in. It was not supposed to be plugged in, because it had an electrical short and would shock you when it was plugged in.

When Malcolm Tolbert and I wrote our book on speaking in tongues, we pointed out that it is foolish to tell people who have had experiences that they really haven't had them. That's as true of people playing in game rooms as it is of Pentecostal Christians.

It was rare for us to have unpleasant experiences like that while we were camping. In fact, at that same campground we had an especially

good time fishing. The campground was next to a clear mountain stream. The management had placed a screen across the stream upstream that prevented any fish from getting into the stream, and they had done the same thing downstream so fish couldn't escape. They had then stocked their section of the stream with rainbow trout and fed them with corn. They provided campers such as ourselves with fishing gear and soft grains of corn for bait. When we had caught enough trout for lunch, we took them to the office where they were weighed and we paid for them by the pound. Less than an hour after we had caught them, Caroline was cooking them.

Occasionally we camped with friends. We frequently camped at places where I was speaking and my compensation covered the cost of the trip. We camped mostly in moderate or warm weather, though a few times we went in colder weather. Some of our friends, when they are camping or vacationing in some other manner, are careful to attend worship services on Sunday mornings. With a few exceptions, we have not done that. But vacation was almost the only time that I have not attended Sunday morning worship services in my adult life, until the pandemic began in 2020.



Earlier I described my service as pastor of churches in Alabama, Illinois, and Mississippi. When I joined the faculty of the seminary in New Orleans, Caroline and I became members of the St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. Eventually both of our children were baptized there and became members there. It was a wonderful church home for our family. Our Sunday School class of youngish adults engaged in an ongoing study of marriage, family life, and parenting that was ideal for us. The programs for children and youth were very good. The choir music was beautiful and inspiring. Our pastor, G. Avery Lee, was an excellent preacher and pastor. He followed a practice that may have been uniquely his. In the summer months he preached re-runs. In the late spring he asked members which sermons that year had been most helpful, and he preached them again during the summer months. One sermon, entitled "The Impossible Dream," was so popular that for a few years Avery

preached it at the beginning of every school year. It was an inspiring call to embrace the hope that Christ brought into the world.

I sometimes missed out on parts of the worship services. Kenneth was not yet a year old when we began attending the church. He was sometimes understandably restless, and I developed the habit of taking him outside and walking up and down the streets of that lovely uptown neighborhood with him.



After a year or so on the faculty, I began to receive invitations to preach and teach in churches. Churches invite guest preachers and teachers for various reasons. Their pastors may be on vacation or ill or attending a conference. A church may be in between pastors, or they may want to have a special Bible study or other study. Many Baptist churches invite seminary faculty members to speak on such occasions. Initially most of my invitations were to Baptist churches in towns and rural areas in Louisiana and Mississippi. Later on I was invited to speak in non-Baptist churches also.

A case can be made that it is not appropriate for professors to preach in churches. After all, it does take away time from their preparation for teaching. I have always felt that the opposite is true. I believe that I was a better classroom teacher because I spent time preparing and preaching sermons. I thought I could do a better job of preparing students to serve in churches if I myself were serving in churches, than if I spent all my working hours in my office.



The most memorable preaching experience I had was at the Jackson Avenue Evangelical Church near the Mississippi River in New Orleans. In the winter of 1979 I was asked by the pastor to preach on a particular Sunday during Carnival. He was having surgery and planned to be in attendance on the Sunday following the surgery, but he felt he might not be strong enough to preach. Our son Kenneth asked me if he and his friend Jerry Winbery could go with me, and I agreed.

On Sunday morning we were running a little late. I was driving up Magazine Street and needed to turn left onto Jackson Avenue. I saw

a police car coming toward me, so I was very careful as I made the turn. The policeman pulled me over; I had not noticed a No Left Turn sign. Since we were just three blocks from the church, I told Kenneth and Jerry to run down to the church and find the elders who would be preparing for the worship service and tell them that I would be there in a few minutes. When the policeman finally finished writing out the ticket, I drove very carefully into the church parking lot. I put on a clerical robe and joined the elders as they prepared to enter the sanctuary.

A minute or two later the policeman came into the room and pointed a finger at me and demanded, "You come with me!" He had belatedly noticed something I wasn't aware of. My driver license had expired a few days earlier. That was a second offense in addition to the illegal left turn, and he called the paddy wagon.

The rather large congregation quickly became aware that their guest preacher was being arrested, and they came out onto the front steps to get a good look. When the paddy wagon arrived, the two officers in it tried to talk the policeman out of arresting me, but he insisted, so they said they had to take me to central lockup. Since I didn't want Kenneth and Jerry to be any more frightened than necessary, I asked if they could go with us. The officers said that they could but that if they did, they would be locked up in juvenile detention. We left them at the church.

The officers took me to the jail at the corner of Tulane Avenue and Broad Street where I was fingerprinted and photographed, left side, facing the camera, right side. The church had called a judge and he had called the station, so I was released almost as soon as the booking was finished. A young couple from the church was waiting to pick me up, and we all returned to the church. The worship service was over, and the congregation was having coffee in the fellowship hall. When I told them what had happened, we all had a good laugh.

As we were driving home, I asked Kenneth if he knew what had happened. He said, "Yes, you have been in jail." I explained about the two offenses. Then I told him that I had asked the officers if he and Jerry could go with me so they wouldn't feel frightened and that the officers said that they could but that they would be locked up in juvenile detention. "Hmmm," Kenneth replied, "accomplice to a left-

hand turn.” It is the best spontaneous line I have ever heard. Kenneth was nine years old.

Another memorable but quite different experience happened when I spoke to a synagogue about Fundamentalism. At the end of my talk the rabbi thanked me for being a rabbi to the congregation that evening. I was moved by that.



In addition to preaching, I taught Bible studies in numerous churches. Altogether, I have spoken at more than 280 different churches since I began teaching at the seminary in 1970. In some of these I preached a single sermon or taught a single study, but some churches have invited me back many times. I also served as interim preacher or interim pastor at ten churches that ranged in size from a congregation in New Orleans of about 25 people to one in nearby Kenner with several hundred people in attendance. The interim pastorates lasted anywhere from three months to two years.

I began to get invitations to give lectures at other seminaries or at universities or colleges. During the 1970s there was a program called the Staley Lecture Series which provided funding for colleges and universities to bring outside speakers to campus. I spoke to college students on campuses, in state conventions, and in retreat settings. I have given lectures and preached at more than forty college campuses. I have spoken to students and to the leaders of student ministries at the two national Southern Baptist campgrounds, Ridgecrest in North Carolina and Glorieta in New Mexico, and at state Baptist campgrounds in California, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Virginia. I became a regular on the BSU (Baptist Student Union) circuit. After I spoke to a group of students in Virginia, I returned home to find that Caroline and the children had prepared a banner to greet me.

My itinerant preaching and teaching activities were a mixed blessing for my family. They gave me an opportunity to engage in an extended ministry, and they provided our family with helpful income. On the other hand, when I was away speaking, Caroline and the children had to go to church without me. In 1981 something happened that made my preaching an unmixed blessing for our family.



Shortly before Easter in 1981 I was invited to become the interim pastor of a non-Baptist church in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans. It was then called Metairie Evangelical Church; today it is called Old Metairie Protestant Church. I remained at this church for more than eight years. This is the longest period I have ever served in a church. I was never formally named the pastor because I couldn't become a church member. Since I was teaching at the Baptist seminary, I needed to remain a Baptist.

But I was their pastor in all the ways that matter. I got to know all the members. I visited in hospitals and homes with members who were sick. I took Holy Communion to those who were confined to their own homes or who were living in nursing homes, often accompanied by some of the church's elders. I was present at all of the business meetings of the church. I taught a Sunday School class for adults. I led the church to adopt new ministries such as supporting missionaries and having an intra-church bookstore on Sundays. I taught confirmation classes for the youth. I acquired detailed knowledge about the quickest way to get to retirement homes, hospitals, funeral homes, and cemeteries in New Orleans.

I did not conduct the baptisms. That would have been inappropriate for me as a Baptist because Baptists do not baptize infants. There was a Presbyterian church a block away, and their pastor agreed to perform baptisms for our church.

I conducted numerous funerals. On one occasion I was called to the home of an elderly lady who had just died. I got there so quickly that when I was walking into the house I passed two policemen who were walking out. They had come to the house to make sure that the lady's death wasn't caused by violence. Though the lady herself was a member of our church, her children were Roman Catholics. They took me back to the bedroom where her body was, and they asked me to give her the last rites. I agreed to do that. She was lying in the middle of a wide bed, so I had to put one knee on the mattress and lean over in order to reach her. I put my thumb on her forehead and made the sign of the cross. Then I quoted some Scripture and offered a prayer that included the Lord's

Prayer which the family members said along with me. I've never had another experience quite like that one. I hope it provided her children with some comfort. I loved being there for that family.

I also conducted numerous weddings. The sanctuary of the church is beautifully proportioned and has a vaulted ceiling, lovely stained-glass windows, and wonderful wood carvings. Weddings there were often conducted with light from numerous candles set in globes and placed on poles attached to the pews down the center aisle. Our daughter Stephanie's wedding to Arlen Hoffman in 1987 was conducted there. It was the most beautiful wedding service I have ever experienced.

Sometimes I helped to conduct weddings in other churches. On one occasion I was asked to co-officiate in the wedding of a young Roman Catholic woman and a young man who was a member of our church. A few weeks before the wedding I met with the priest with whom I would be co-officiating at his office at the church where he served as pastor. In our conversation I learned that, despite the enormous size of his congregation, he was the only full-time priest, though he was assisted by some part-time and retired priests. He told me that in addition to his work as pastor, he went every week to hear the confessions of a group of nuns who lived nearby. When I asked what it's like to hear the confessions of nuns, he said, "It's like being stoned to death with popcorn."

At Metairie Evangelical Church we celebrated Holy Communion every Sunday. I loved this practice. Communion was received by the congregation with great reverence and gratitude. But there were two occasions when it was accompanied by humor. On our very first Sunday in the church my family and I all took Communion, and we realized that we were drinking wine rather than the grape juice, which is what we always had in Baptist churches. At the close of the worship service our then 15-year-old daughter Stephanie went back to the vestry where one of the elders, John Stall, was washing and putting away the wine glasses. She asked him what he was going to do with the wine that was left over. He said that he would use a funnel to pour it back into the bottles. She asked if she could have it, and he said she could, so she drank the wine in the three or four tiny cups that were left unused at the close of the service. John didn't keep that a secret, and church members

got considerable pleasure from the story of the Baptist pastor's daughter drinking up their Communion wine.

The story of Jesus instructing his disciples to take Holy Communion is told in three books of the New Testament, Matthew, Luke, and First Corinthians. Before we took Communion in the church I always read the story either from Matthew or First Corinthians. One Sunday I decided to read the story from Luke. As it happens, Luke's account differs from the others. The others say Jesus gave the disciples the bread first and then the wine, but Luke says that he gave the wine first and then the bread. So when the elders came to the altar to receive the elements that morning, I gave them the wine glasses first. One of them, Adolf Fischer, Sr., said to me, "The bread comes first." I replied, "Not today." We had both whispered, but it didn't do any good because I had a live microphone pinned to my robe, and the congregation heard our little exchange. From then on I always read from Matthew or First Corinthians.

Metairie Evangelical Church was founded as a member of a denomination with a German background, the Evangelical and Reformed Church. This was the denomination to which the influential American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr belonged. In 1957 this denomination had merged with an English-background church, the Congregational Christian Churches, to form a new denomination, the United Church of Christ. Initially the Metairie congregation remained in the new denomination, but eventually they withdrew and become an independent congregation with no denominational affiliation. Because it was independent, it could have pastors from other denominations. Over the years several of the pastors had been men from the Baptist seminary simply because the seminary was in the same city as the church.

The church retained the ethos and practices of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. We sang from its hymnbook. Choir members wore robes, and ministers wore robes and stoles. We prayed the Lord's Prayer together every Sunday. We confessed our Christian faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed. Interestingly, the church had adjusted the Creed by replacing the phrase "one, holy, catholic, apostolic church" with "one, holy, universal Christian church" because in New Orleans the word "catholic" connotes "Roman Catholic." We followed the liturgical

calendar, giving attention not only to Christmas and Easter but also to Advent, Lent, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday.

The worship services were characterized by reverence, thoughtfulness, and beauty rather than by energy and excitement. There were about 120 members, and Sunday attendance averaged about 40, but on Christmas and Easter the church was overflowing. The music was heavenly. The organist was a lovely young Roman Catholic lady, Gloria Cuadrado. She and I came to the church at nearly the same time, and in 2022 she is still there, so she has now been playing at the church for more than forty years. The small choir included a young, very gifted opera singer, Phyllis Treigle, who, when she left New Orleans to study in Houston, planned her summer vacations so she could assist at the church's annual Vacation Bible Schools for children.

Phyllis's mother, Loraine Treigle, was the church secretary and managed the church's business very efficiently. This made it unnecessary for me to do much administrative work, which I appreciated very much. The elders of the church also provided me with support, accompanying me when I took Holy Communion to members who were unable to attend worship services. The couple to whom Caroline and I were closest were Adolph Fisher, Jr., and his wife Betty. They invited us to their home for meals many times, and they often invited friends of ours to come with us to their house. Betty was a marvelous cook, and Adolph usually boiled either shrimp or crawfish in an enormous vat in the back yard. We always ate at a long table covered with newspaper onto which the seafood was placed in a huge pile six or eight inches deep.

Stephanie was fifteen years old and Kenneth eleven years old when I began my ministry with this wonderful congregation. For the next eight years, our family was there together in church. I am thankful that my children were able to hear me as I attempted to preach the Christian gospel during those years. In our home Caroline and I spoke frequently about our understanding of the Christian faith, but we never attempted to give our children formal instruction in the faith, so it would have been possible for our children not to have understood very well our understanding of what it means to try to live as Christians. That problem was solved by their hearing me preach for more than eight years.

Our family benefited in other ways, too, from my service in this church. The church paid me a salary which amounted to about two-thirds of what I was making at the seminary, and that, together with Caroline's work, meant that for the first time our family had a comfortable income.

Another benefit to our family was that by being in a non-Baptist church through most of the 1980s, our family was somewhat insulated from the controversy that was raging in the Southern Baptist Convention. On one occasion I began to tell one of the members about the conflict in Baptist life, and she turned away, saying, "I don't do church politics." I understood.

My family and I loved sharing in the life of this congregation. Some of the finest people I have ever known were members there, and I was honored that they quickly and fully included me and my family in their lives. They were untouched by either Fundamentalism or revivalism. They practiced their more classically Protestant version of the Christian faith with great sincerity.

At Christmas I enjoyed going along with choir members who sang carols at the homes of members who were unable to attend worship services. I enjoyed playing on a church volleyball team whose members included youth and adults, women and men. I enjoyed special celebrations with splendid New Orleans cooking. I hope I contributed something to the life of the church, and I believe that I did. I know the church contributed immensely to my life and the life of my family. After we moved away, two of the pastors who succeeded me, Mack Hubbell and Jack Boudreaux, have from time to time invited me to preach for them, and I have welcomed a chance to stay in touch with many of those wonderful people that way.



As I mentioned earlier, I took two year-long sabbatical leaves while I was teaching at the seminary. The first one was at Oxford. Caroline, Stephanie, Kenneth, and I arrived in Oxford late in the spring of 1976. We quickly settled into a charming row house on Beechcroft Road in north Oxford.

That summer we took two trips to the continent, visiting with missionary friends each time. One trip was to Paris where we saw

Charlie and Sandy Long and their children, and the other was to Salzburg where we saw Tom and Joyce Cleary. For the first trip we drove our car, crossing the channel on a Hovercraft. For the second we flew to Munich and rented a car. After we left Salzburg we drove into Italy and then up to Switzerland and back to Munich.

On these trips our children seemed to have unlimited stamina, but at the Uffizi in Florence Caroline and I felt our energy flagging. The children's favorite stop was Venice. We spent several days in Rome, and then in one long day we drove up into Switzerland where we had fondue the night we arrived. These were two of the most memorable vacations of our lifetimes.

Shortly after we arrived in Oxford, we went New Road Baptist Church where we had an unpleasant experience. After the worship service the congregation went back to a fellowship hall for refreshments and conversation. This was nice for us because it gave us a chance to meet the pastor and some of the church members. Kenneth, who was six years old, wandered back into the sanctuary to look around. A member of the church grabbed his arm and scolded him so forcefully for being in the sanctuary that he was frightened as well as embarrassed. We didn't return to that church.

Instead, we moved a larger Baptist church in the village of Kidlington, about a fifteen-minute drive from our house. Not long after we arrived the church had a fête on a Saturday, and we all went to it. There were lots of games and contests, and we were happy to join in. The contests consisted of things such as guessing how many jellybeans were in a large jar. The following morning, after the worship service ended, the winners of the contests in the fête were announced publicly and asked to come forward to receive their awards. Somewhat to our embarrassment, our family had won several of the contests, and we had to go forward several times in full view of a congregation, none of whom had any idea who we were.

The children adapted immediately to life in Oxford. By the end of the summer they had made friends on our street and had even picked up a slight British accent. Both of them liked the schools they attended.

Stephanie was in the sixth grade and Kenneth in the second. We drove Stephanie to her school each morning, but Kenneth rode a public bus, along with numerous other students.

The schools assigned only a little homework. At six o'clock each school-day evening, an announcer on television said that it was now time for children to stop watching television and to prepare to go to bed for the evening.

It was the policy of the schools not to "grade" students. Their report cards consisted of brief essays in which the teachers provided their assessments of how the children were doing in the various subject areas and also socially. I found these written assessments more informative than letter or number grades.

I think it was a good thing for our children to spend a year abroad, and I think they enjoyed it just as Caroline and I did. Even so, by the summer of 1977 we were all eager to return to New Orleans.



New Orleans is hometown to our children. They were born in Mississippi, but they were so young when we moved to New Orleans that their earliest memories were of New Orleans.

They both married New Orleanians. Stephanie's husband, Arlen Hoffman, grew up on the west bank and was a student at the University of New Orleans when he and Stephanie met. They met when he was working at the Sandbar on campus and Stephanie happened to drop by. Kenneth's wife Jill Condon is from St. Bernard Parish. She was a student at Tulane when Kenneth was a student at the University of New Orleans, but it was in Europe rather than in New Orleans that they fell in love. They were traveling for a summer in Europe in separate groups that happened to bump into each other.

## Leaving

When it was time for Caroline and me to leave New Orleans, we lost two sets of friends, those at the seminary where I had taught for 19½ years and those at the church where I had served as pastor for 8½ years.

I loved being at the seminary. If the institutions of the Southern Baptist Convention had not been changing, I probably would never have left New Orleans. But things were changing, and I knew that once the Convention changed I would not want to be at the seminary and probably would no longer be welcome there. When I went in to tell President Leavell that I was leaving, he asked if there was anything he could do to induce me to stay. I said that if he could produce a birth certificate proving that he was my age and then promise me to stay on until I was ready to retire, I would stay. He laughed, and later he and his wife JoAnn took Caroline and me out to a farewell dinner at a Mexican restaurant they liked.

Landrum's theology was probably as conservative as that of the new SBC leaders, but he was absolutely determined that they would not change his school. He was a fierce fighter, so I felt sure that as long as he was there, my job would be secure. But he was twelve years older than I was, and I was concerned that his successor would be unable and perhaps unwilling to shield me in the way he had done. It was not paranoia that led me to think that I could lose my job. His successor did in fact push some professors out, including my friend Paul Robertson who refused to support the SBC's new ban on women pastors.

Not long before I resigned, something happened that put me on notice that some of the seminary trustees wanted me to leave. Once or twice a year the trustees met on the campus of the seminary. One afternoon my secretary told me that a new trustee was in town for a trustee meeting and wanted to meet with me. I invited him into my office and we introduced ourselves. He said that he wanted to talk to me about my theology. I told him I'd be happy to do that in the dean's office, and I reached out to pick up my phone to call the dean, Joe Cothen. The trustee said that he didn't want to go to Joe's office but to talk in my office. I told him I would not do that. He demanded to know why not. "Because," I said, "I have never before seen you or met you and I have no idea who you are. I don't even know whether you're really a trustee. And I'm not going to talk to you about theology anywhere other than in the dean's office." Finally, he relented, and we walked over to Joe's office.

Later I learned why he didn't want to meet with Joe. Joe had picked him up at airport and brought him to the campus and asked if he would like a tour of the campus. He had never been on campus before. He told Joe that he was tired and needed to stay in his guest room to rest. After Joe left, instead of resting, the trustee walked straight over to my office to grill me about my theology. It was embarrassing for him to have told Joe that he needed to rest and then to show up at Joe's office a few minutes later to quiz me about my theology.

The three of us must have been together in Joe's office for about an hour. Initially, the conversation was fairly low-key but it soon became heated, and a few times the trustee and I were shouting at each other. At one point he announced, "I will be attending your classes tomorrow!" "No," I replied, "you will not!" I said that we faculty members don't have a lot of power but that one power we do have and must have, is control of our classrooms, and no one could come into my classes without my permission, and he had not asked for my permission. He said something like, "I am a trustee and I demand to come to your class. What are you going to do about it if I show up?" I said, "I will dismiss the class for the day." He was not coming to my class without my permission, and that was that. As the conversation neared its close, I decided that that he didn't seem especially threatening, and I invited him to come to the class after all. He didn't show up.

Throughout the conversation Joe Cothen didn't say much. Once or twice, as the trustee and I were screaming at each other, I caught a glimpse of Joe trying to hide a smile by putting his hand in front of his face. Joe had never seen me get angry or yell. For that matter, I don't think any of my faculty colleagues had seen me get angry, certainly not as angry as I was that afternoon. Thinking back on it, I suppose it was funny. I usually feel guilty when I lose my temper, but not that afternoon. I felt good.

But I knew I had to leave. Many other professors at New Orleans and in the five other SBC seminaries needed to leave, too, and some did, but some were never invited to teach anywhere else. My heart goes out to them. They were stuck. They hadn't changed; the Convention had

changed. Through no fault of their own, they were now in schools whose trustees wanted them out. It's very sad.

My own situation was the opposite. I went on to another position that was better in almost every way: I was shielded from the threats brought on by the controversy, my classes were smaller so I got to know my students better, and my salary was larger. I hated to leave New Orleans—our adult children, the city, the seminary, and the church. But I had a good place to go, a place that eventually I would come to love as much as I had loved New Orleans.

## CHAPTER 5

### PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY

On January 1, 1990, when Caroline and I moved from New Orleans to Birmingham, we left our children behind. Stephanie had married three years earlier, and she and her husband Arlen Hoffman were living in Hammond, Louisiana, where Arlen was completing his undergraduate degree. Kenneth had been living with us while he was studying naval architecture and marine engineering at the University of New Orleans, and at about the time we were leaving he had moved into an apartment on Canal Street with some friends.

#### Birmingham

In Birmingham we bought our first house. It was an upstairs condominium with a screened deck and a lovely view of woods. We would live there for the next 27 years, longer than at any other place either of us has ever lived.

Birmingham is the largest city in Alabama and the financial center of the state. It was the scene of some important events in the Civil Rights Movement and the place where Martin Luther King wrote the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” I agree with Father Richard John Neuhaus who said that the early, non-violent years of the Civil Rights Movement were the most morally luminous years in American history. Birmingham keeps the memory of those years alive though its wonderful Civil Rights Institute and Museum.

New Orleans is an international city in a way that Birmingham is not, and Birmingham is a southern city in a way that New Orleans is not. Caroline and I had to make some adjustments as we transitioned to the southern ethos of Birmingham. For example, in New Orleans, after we went to a movie or other event in the evening, we had many choices about where to go for coffee afterwards, including the world-famous Café du Monde. In Birmingham, however, the only place we could find

to get coffee late in the evening was Waffle House. It happens that we both like Waffle House, but it's not the Café du Monde.

Second example: soon after we arrived, we were invited, along with a few other couples, to a Saturday morning brunch in the home of a local pastor and his wife, Otis and Olive Brooks. Naturally we dressed casually for the occasion. When we arrived, we saw to our surprise that some of the ladies were wearing heels and some of the men were wearing jackets and ties. On a Saturday morning! But the eggs Benedict were as good as those at Brennan's.

Birmingham has changed a lot since we arrived. It's more cosmopolitan. There are numerous places to get coffee late at night, and there are some very fine restaurants, including Highlands Bar and Grill which in 2018 received the James Beard Award as the most outstanding restaurant in America. In 2021 US News and World Report ranked the University of Alabama–Birmingham in the top ten percent of universities in the world, principally on the strength of its medical school. The UAB Hospital has been rated the #1 young hospital in American two years in a row.



Another contrast between New Orleans and Birmingham concerned churches. When we lived in New Orleans there were many large Roman Catholic churches, but with a few exceptions the Protestant churches were small, and many of them were struggling to keep the lights on. Birmingham, however, had enormous Protestant churches including at least four Baptist churches with more than 7,000 members each. About ten years after we arrived, a new, non-denominational church was founded in Birmingham. In 2021 the Church of the Highlands has more than twenty campuses and an average Sunday attendance of more than 50,000 people, the second largest of any church in America. It was not unusual for newcomers to Birmingham to be asked, "Have you decided yet where to go to church?"

In addition to mega-churches, Birmingham had many mid-sized and small churches that thrive and carry out fine ministries. Caroline and I knew before we arrived that we would look into joining Baptist

Church of the Covenant, a middle-sized church. It is located downtown between the University of Alabama–Birmingham and a public housing community called Southtown. Covenant was established as a Southern Baptist Church, but it ceased to be Southern Baptist after we called Sarah Jackson Shelton to be our pastor in 2002. It is affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists and the Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Covenant was and is one of the most socially progressive churches in the city, which is understandable, given its history. In 1970 an African American woman named Winifred Bryant and her 11-year-old daughter Twila Fortune applied for membership in the First Baptist Church of Birmingham. The then all-white church held a series of emotionally intense business meetings. At a meeting in late September, the church voted not to receive Bryant and Fortune. The pastor, Herbert Gilmore, then offered his resignation. He and more than 250 members walked out of the meeting and took steps to create what is now Baptist Church of the Covenant. Winifred Bryant remained a member until her death in 2020, and Twila Fortune is still a member as I write this (2022). The church has continued to welcome everyone, including LGBTQ+ persons. Years ago the pastor, Sarah Jackson Shelton, began to officiate at blessing ceremonies for gay persons and then, when the Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that gays may marry, to perform weddings for gay members.

Covenant has been our spiritual home now for thirty years. We have many friends there. The education program is outstanding. The worship services are reverent and thoughtful, and the music is traditional and beautiful. The three pastors of the church whom we have known—Roger Lovette, Sarah Jackson Shelton, and Erica Cooper—and the associate pastor Valerie Burton, are all excellent preachers. The same is true of the two interim pastors, Chris Hamlin and Rodney Franklin.

Over and over, I have been helped in my life as a Christian by participating in the worship of God in company with this lovely congregation. I have spoken in about a dozen churches in or near the city and have immense appreciation for them. I feel sure I could be happy in some of these other congregations, but I am glad to be at Covenant and hope to remain there for the rest of my life. I am happy that from time to time I have been given opportunities to serve our church by preaching,

teaching, and serving on committees. In the school year of 2016–17, I brought together two of my great loves by teaching a survey of Christian theology one night a week at Baptist Church of the Covenant.

Before we retired in 2008, Caroline and I had thought very carefully about whether to remain in Birmingham or to return to New Orleans. Baptist Church of the Covenant is one of the reasons we have stayed in Birmingham.

Birmingham is our home now, just as New Orleans was formerly our home. One of the treasures of Birmingham is Samford University, and that too became a home for me just as the Baptist seminary in New Orleans had been in the past.

### Beeson Divinity School

When I was teaching at the seminary, I was invited from time to time to join the faculties of other schools, but I never felt there was a good enough reason to leave New Orleans. That had changed by the spring of 1989 when I was contacted by Dean Timothy George about the possibility of coming to teach theology at a divinity school that had been launched the previous year. The divinity school is one of the eight colleges and schools that constitute Samford University. Samford had been founded in 1841 and was one of three Baptist institutions of higher education in Alabama (one of them has since closed). In 2021 Samford had about 5,750 students.

The divinity school's origins are unusual. The school was created because of a large bequest given by a wealthy insurance executive in Birmingham, Ralph Waldo Beeson. Ralph Beeson was not a Baptist; he grew up as a Methodist and when he married, he and his wife became Presbyterians. Although Beeson was never a Baptist himself, he had close friendships with Baptists including Frank Park Samford for whom the university is named and Gerow Hodges, a longtime trustee of the university. Sometime in the 1980s, Thomas Corts, the president of Samford, presented Beeson with a list of several projects that Beeson might want to fund at the university. Beeson wasn't enthusiastic about any of them, so Corts asked him what he would be interested in supporting. Beeson said that he would like to fund a school that

would “teach preachers how to preach.” Corts saw immediately that this was a good idea. Samford had been originally founded in part to train ministers, which meant that Ralph Beeson’s idea was in line with the university’s original purposes. Also, the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention was raging and the six Southern Baptist seminaries were under attack, and that seemed to provide an opening for a new divinity school. In the fall of 1988, Beeson Divinity School offered its first classes. Eventually Ralph Beeson contributed more than \$50 million to the divinity school.

So far as I’m aware, Beeson Divinity School is unique in that it is an interdenominational divinity school that is part of a Baptist university. Ralph Beeson said that he wanted the school to be interdenominational because, while he appreciated the Baptists, he didn’t think they had all the truth. In his bequest he included endowments for a Methodist chair, a Presbyterian chair, and an Anglican chair.

Dean George had talked to me early enough that I could have gone to Beeson in the fall of 1989, but I wasn’t able to move that quickly. The seminary was engaged in a routine ten-year self-study to maintain its accreditation. I was responsible for writing part of the report for the study, and I felt it would be irresponsible for me to leave New Orleans before I had completed that assignment. So when I began my work at Beeson in January 1990, the school had been in operation for three semesters.

The divinity school proved to be for me a wonderful place to work. All of my colleagues were lovely people, and I respected them all as scholars and as teachers. I loved working alongside professors from other churches and denominations.

## Students

Beeson is a small school. There were fewer than 100 students in the divinity school when I arrived, and, if I understand the Beeson bequest correctly, there will never be more than 160 regular students at one time. The bequest set a ceiling of 160 students so that there would continue to be an endowment for scholarships for future generations of students. The

school has enrolled additional students for its Doctor of Ministry degree program, the program for persons who are already engaged in ministry. However, students in the D.Min. program do not receive scholarships from the Beeson bequest.

The students at the divinity school were different in some ways from the students I had taught at the seminary. More were non-Baptists, of course. Most of the students in New Orleans were interested in serving in traditional Baptist churches, but that wasn't true of the Beeson students. Most of them hoped to have ministries in churches with non-traditional worship services. They did not necessarily disapprove of traditional worship services, but they weren't especially interested in them, either. They wanted music that was contemporary rather than hymns that were traditional, and they wanted to dress informally rather than in suits and ties when they preached or led music in worship services. Very few of the Beeson students had had any previous experience as pastors.

Both the seminary and the divinity school welcomed female students and had done since they were founded. Only a tiny minority of women at the seminary were preparing for pastoral ministry because at the time almost no Southern Baptist churches called women as pastors. Several of the women at Beeson were preparing for pastoral ministry, and some did go on to serve as pastors of churches.



Another difference concerned Calvinism. Calvinism is the vision of the Christian faith that was taught by the sixteenth century reformer, John Calvin. Calvin held a distinctive understanding of salvation. He said that in eternity, without reference to God's knowledge of the future behavior of individuals, God sovereignly chose one set of people to be saved and left the others to be condemned forever. Almost none of the students at the seminary had held this view, and as far as I'm aware, none of the seminary faculty members held it. At Beeson many students, possibly most, held this view. The explanation for this is that Dean Timothy George and several other members of the Beeson faculty were Calvinists. This made Beeson attractive to prospective students who were Calvinists.

Some of the Calvinistic students were content to study with me and with the other faculty members who weren't Calvinists. However, a few students wanted all of their professors to be Calvinists. Sometimes this became awkward. I tried to be respectful of my students and never to speak dismissively of their views. I presented some of Calvinism's positive contributions such as that it is conducive to humility, it encourages meaningful worship, and it has generated admirable theological work. I reviewed Scripture passages that appear to support Calvinism and others that seem to undermine it. I quoted Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* at length to show that this really was Calvin's position. I directed students to read a famous document from the Synod of Dort of 1618–19 which has been summarized using the acronym TULIP (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints). I explained my view and how it differed from Calvinism.

Some of the Southern Baptists on the Beeson faculty were Calvinists. I told the students who were Southern Baptists not to be misled by this fact, because only a very small minority of Southern Baptist people were Calvinists. Sometimes I illustrated with statistics from Alabama. There were about 3,100 churches in the Alabama Baptist State Convention, and only 31 of these were affiliated with the Founders Ministries, a group which promotes Calvinism among Southern Baptists. Curiously, though this was an important issue for so many students, the discussions about it in my classes usually were brief and not especially animated. I don't know how to explain that.

There was no secret about the fact that the Beeson faculty included both Calvinists and non-Calvinists. On one occasion a debate about Calvinism was held for the entire university. It took place in Reid Chapel which seats 600 people, and the room was packed. The Calvinist position was represented by Dean Timothy George and by Professor Ralph Wood who taught in the undergraduate departments of religion and of English. I represented the non-Calvinist position as did Bill Leonard, a former chair of the religion department who had moved on to Wake Forest University. It was Bill who had proposed that the debate take place.

From start to finish it was a perfectly civil debate, but it was a debate. Our differences were just as clear as our agreements, and our civility was just as clear as our differences. I think it displayed for those present that it is possible for Christians who hold diverse views to be respectful and appreciative of each other while being candid about their differences. The most delightful moment in the debate came when Timothy presented his longtime friend Bill with a bouquet of roses and then explained his kinder, gentler form of Calvinism in terms not the acronym TULIP but of the acronym ROSES (radical depravity, overcoming grace, sovereign election, eternal life, and singular redemption). It was apparent that the four of us were friends, and it was equally apparent that the four of us disagreed.

I was delighted to teach in a university that sponsored that kind of candid, courteous debate. Also, I wondered if there was another divinity school dean anywhere in America who would feel comfortable having a public debate with one of his or her own faculty members the way Timothy did with me that day. I aspire to be as irenic as Timothy George.

One outcome of the change of leadership brought about by the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention was that Calvinism has become more widely acceptable in the Convention. A recent president of the SBC is a Calvinist who is pastor of a megachurch. He may be the most Calvinistic president since the 19th century. The resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC surprised me because some of the leaders who brought about the change in the SBC, people such as Paige Patterson and Adrian Rogers and Richard Land, were vocally anti-Calvinistic. Part of the explanation for the resurgence is the Founders Ministries. They are a well-organized group of knowledgeable Southern Baptists who have worked effectively for decades to bring about a Calvinistic reformation in Southern Baptist life.

When I was teaching at New Orleans, I rarely said much about Calvinism. Given the makeup of the student body at Beeson, I felt that I should give it more attention. For me a turning point came with an anonymous telephone call. The caller said that he was a lifelong member of a Baptist church in Alabama. He said that he loved his church. He had been baptized there and married there, and he had intended to be buried

there. But, he said, not with anger but with sadness, that he was going to leave his church. The reason was that the church's new pastor was preaching sermons in which he seemed to be saying that God doesn't love everyone in the world, just some people, the elect whom God has predestined for salvation.

My caller said that he was not the only church member who was alarmed about this and that he and his friends had arranged to have a friendly visit with their new pastor in order to clarify things. Unfortunately, their meeting confirmed what he suspected was the case, that the new pastor was a Calvinist who did not believe that God loves everyone in the world, at least not in the same way. My caller said that he simply could not allow his children to grow up in a church in which they were being told that God doesn't love everyone in the world equally.

This telephone call together with my experience with my students made me feel that I needed to write something about this. I asked my friend Paul Robertson, who has a doctorate in New Testament and who was teaching theology at the seminary in New Orleans, to write it with me. We entitled it *God So Loved the World* because what mattered most to us is the church's message which goes back to Jesus that God loves and cares for all the people in the world and desires the best for them all. Our book was published in 2000. It hasn't had any noticeable effect on the progress of Calvinism in Baptist life, but it has stimulated some online conversations and numerous individuals have told us that they have found it helpful. To make it more accessible, I have put it up on my website where it can be read by anyone at no cost.

Shortly after the book was published Harold Bryson, who was then the chair of the religion department at Mississippi College, invited me to give some lectures there. Harold said that if I would give one of the lectures on Calvinism, he would advertise it in advance in the hope that pastors would attend. Of course, I agreed. Harold did a good job of promoting the event, and there was a large attendance.

Following the lecture, a dozen or so persons came up to introduce themselves and to thank me for the lecture. When two of the men expressed appreciation for the lecture, I thanked them and turned to the next person in line. No, the two men said, you don't understand. They

told me their names, and I immediately recognized that they were two of the longtime leaders of the Founders Ministries. They said, You and Robertson have understood us better and been kinder and fairer to us than any other critics we have had. Thank you for that. I told them that I was gratified to hear that. Paul and I agree that this is one of the highest compliments we have ever received for our writing.

Unlike the Southern Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has not experienced any influx of Calvinism. This is ironic. For more than a century, the overwhelming majority of Baptists in the South have not been Calvinists, so on this issue the CBF is more traditional than the SBC.

I have no idea what the future of Calvinism is among Southern Baptists. Perhaps it will become more and more widely accepted until it becomes the majority view, though I find that hard to imagine. Maybe it will continue to live alongside the majority view, with perhaps a few conflicts about it in local churches. It seems unlikely that it will just fade away.

## Faculty

When I joined the faculty of the divinity school, there were about six of us who were full-time and some others who taught part-time. By the time I retired in 2008 there were more than a dozen full-time faculty members, and in 2022 there were about twenty. As the faculty grew, it became more diverse. It included women as well as men, and it included African American, Asian, and Hispanic persons as well as white persons.

In my early years there, members of the faculty held graduate degrees from a wide range of schools including Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton, Duke, and the Sorbonne, as well as from other universities and from denominational seminaries. A few faculty members were not ordained clergy, though most were. Unlike the faculty at New Orleans, several of the faculty at Beeson had had little or no experience serving in local congregations.

When I arrived, the dean and most but not all of the faculty members were Baptists. Across the years the number of non-Baptists

grew to include Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, and Lutherans. Timothy George's successor as dean is a Lutheran. Persons in several other denominations and churches, including the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches, have preached in chapel, given guest lectures, or taught one-time courses in the short January or summer terms. The school has kept faith with Ralph Beeson's intention that it not become an all-Baptist school.

The faculty members were a compatible group. Our working relationships were invariably professional, pleasant, and without friction.

With one exception. The semester before I arrived the pastor of the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, John Killinger, came onto the faculty to teach preaching and other subjects. He also taught courses to undergraduates. John was not only a very experienced pastor, he held earned doctorates from Princeton and Harvard. He was a leading authority in the field of theology and literature, and he had written dozens of books. When he came to Samford, he was probably the most distinguished scholar on the university's faculty.

Late one summer John went to the dean's office to inquire about when his Beeson course for the coming semester was scheduled. The dean was not in, but the dean's secretary told him, to his astonishment, that his course was not listed in the divinity school schedule for the fall.

I was never told precisely why John was disinvented. I had heard that some students had complained about something John had said in class, but that is hearsay. In any case, whatever the reason for John's being excluded from the divinity school faculty, the matter was not handled well. No faculty member, especially not one as senior and as distinguished as John Killinger, should be dismissed without having been informed about it in a timely manner by the proper authorities and not by a secretary. It was a slipup that was entirely uncharacteristic of the university. The two Samford presidents under whom I served, Thomas Corts and Andrew Westmoreland, were good managers as well as visionary leaders.

I was saddened but not completely surprised some months later when John brought a lawsuit against the university. Neither was I surprised that the lawsuit was eventually dismissed by the courts. If

the lawsuit had succeeded, the only tangible things John would have won were the salary and benefits that he lost because of being excluded from the divinity school—but he had not lost any salary or benefits. The fact that he could no longer teach a class in the divinity school had no effect whatever on his undergraduate teaching or on his salary or on his tenure. He continued as a tenured Distinguished University Professor. His retirement a few years later was entirely voluntary.

One of several things that had encouraged me to come to Beeson was that I knew John was there. Soon after Caroline and I arrived, we became friends with John and his lovely wife Anne, so the matter was personal to us. But the principal losers were not John’s friends or John himself. The principal losers were Beeson students who denied the opportunity to study with this great scholar, author, and preacher.



If I were asked to describe the theology of the Beeson faculty, I think I would say that the outstanding characteristic was that the faculty were theologically orthodox. Orthodoxy is spelled out in the Nicene Creed as it was endorsed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 a.d.: belief in God the Creator whom Jesus called “Father,” belief in Jesus as God’s Son and the Savior of the world, and belief in the Spirit of Jesus and of God who guides and empowers the church on its world mission. Orthodoxy is what the writer C. S. Lewis, following the Puritan Richard Baxter, called “mere Christianity.”

The Beeson faculty never had a discussion about these beliefs. We simply assumed that we shared them. The shared beliefs made it possible for us to work together harmoniously despite our denominational and other differences. We were fully aware that we had differences on issues such as Calvinism, but we all agreed that the beliefs we held in common were more important than those about which we differed.

The divinity school did not create a statement of faith of its own. Faculty members who were Baptists were asked to agree to teach in accordance with and not contrary to the Baptist Faith and Message statement that had been adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963. Those who were not Baptists were asked to do the same but also

to provide the dean with a letter saying how their denominational beliefs differed from those of the statement.

This was a shrewd arrangement, and I was happy to agree to it. I had appreciated the 1963 statement for many years. I had had made use of it at my church in Mississippi before I began teaching in New Orleans. When I was at New Orleans, I proposed a new course to be structured around the statement, but the committee that vetted proposals for new classes turned the idea down as incompatible with the well-known Baptist aversion to creeds. A few years later, during the controversy, the seminary faculty agreed to accept the statement as guidelines for our teaching.

Under its new leaders, the Southern Baptist Convention has twice revised that statement. The changes include excluding women from serving as pastors and requiring that wives be submissive to their husbands. I disagree with these changes and some others. I think the 1963 version of the statement is better than the more recent versions.



In addition to my relationships with the faculty and administrators of the divinity school, I worked became friends with numerous faculty members and administrators in other parts of the university. Colleagues in areas as diverse as modern languages, sociology, pharmacy, and religion invited me to speak in their classes, and I loved doing that. For a few years I participated with faculty members from the law school in a discussion group, and for about 15 years I participated with faculty members from the sciences in another discussion group. As a member of the faculty Senate I worked together with faculty from across the university. I served for many years on the university committee that made recommendations concerning promotion and tenure. And I served on ad hoc committees that dealt with matters such as the place of women in the university and the mission and purpose statements of the university.

### Accreditation

Because Beeson Divinity School is a part of Samford University, receiving accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and

Schools was more or less routine. Accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools was a different matter. Soon after I arrived at Beeson, Dean George asked me to serve as editor of the report we would submit to ATS in order to qualify for full accreditation. I was happy to do this.

Many faculty members in many schools dislike preparing for an accreditation review. It takes a lot of time and energy and is a distraction from their work as teachers and from their research and writing. I understand this, but it seems to me that the big picture is that a review for accreditation provides a school with an occasion to do some serious reflection about its work and about how well it is doing its work. That work is reviewed by knowledgeable professionals from outside the school who pay close attention to the report and to what they observe when they visit the school. In the long run, accreditation review is certainly good for schools. Since Beeson was being reviewed for its first full accreditation by ATS, the work was especially important.

It was also very demanding. The faculty met together many times. We conferred with current students and with graduates. We met with our advisory board. We conferred with members of the university-level administration. We met with colleagues at the Divinity School at Duke University and at Reformed Theological Seminary. We conducted multiple surveys of various stake holders.

Professor and administrators drafted reports on their work. As editor, it was my responsibility to bring all this material together. I immediately had to face a question: Would I restrict myself to copy editing—grammar, punctuation, and the like—or would I edit the content as well? This was a much larger task. I decided to do it. I worked closely with faculty members to shape their materials into a coherent, well-written book. It just seemed to me that a highly educated group of experienced faculty members in a university ought to be able to write a good, coherent book. The individual Beeson faculty members certainly knew how to write good books. Though it is a small faculty, in any given year its members probably write as many books as all of the other faculty members in the university combined. We were a writing faculty.

Part of the reason is that we have two distinct reading publics: other academics plus churches.

The editorial work was intense and time-consuming. Before I began the work my practice had been to go to my gym at 5:00 a.m., be back home at 6:00 a.m. to shower and dress (I rarely eat breakfast), arrive at my office at the school by 7:00 a.m., and teach my first class at 8:00 a.m. During the months I was editing the accreditation report, I arrived at my office at 4:00 a.m. in order to have time to get everything done.

In the end, we had a 184-page report with 450 additional pages of supporting documents. It was comprehensive, and it was nicely written. It was not surprising to me that, when the review team from the Association of Theological Schools came to visit our campus, things went smoothly, and we were given full accreditation. We had, as the saying goes, done our homework. That is exactly what anyone who knew our faculty members would have expected.

## Church and State

The seminary in New Orleans was a free-standing institution, unattached to a college or university. Beeson Divinity School is an integral part of Samford University. Even before we moved to Birmingham, I began to think about the implications of that for my work. What topics might I explore as a member of a university faculty that I had no occasion to explore in the free-standing seminary? As it turned out, there were two, and it so happened that I began to study them at just the moment when public interest in them was accelerating.

The first concerned relationships between church and state. The early Baptists had staked out a radical position on this controversial issue. Baptist church life first came into existence in 1609 among some English Puritans who had emigrated to the Netherlands in order to avoid persecution for their religious faith. One of their two original leaders, Thomas Helwys, wrote a book entitled *The Mystery of Iniquity* which apparently is the first book ever written that calls for a complete separation of church and state. It was published in 1611, the year the King James Version of the Bible was first published. Helwys sent a copy of his book to King James with an inscription that said: "The king is a

mortal man and not God, and therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make [spiritual] laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual lords [bishops] over them.” King James believed just the opposite. He thought that God would hold him accountable for how faithfully he enforced the proper version of the Christian faith upon his people. He had Helwys arrested and placed in Newgate prison in London, and no later than 1616 Helwys was dead, a martyr for the cause of religious liberty.

So from their earliest beginnings Baptists have promoted the separation of church and state as the way of providing maximal religious liberty to all the citizens of a religiously diverse society. That principle was put into effect first in 1636 in the colony of Rhode Island whose founder, Roger Williams, also founded the First Baptist Church in America, at Providence. Unlike other English colonies on the Atlantic seaboard, Rhode Island never had an official religion. People of all religions or of none were welcome there, and the colony neither supported religion nor interfered with religion.

A century and a half after its founding, Rhode Island became the model for the newly formed United States of America. The First Amendment to the Constitution states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Broadly speaking, this means that government must remain neutral toward religion; it must neither support religion nor interfere with religion. The principle is clear, but its proper application is endlessly complicated in a large, diverse, complex society such as ours.

At Samford, I participated for several years in a church–state discussion group comprising professors from the law school, the religion department, and the divinity school. The issue was on people’s minds for at least three reasons. One was that the Supreme Court of the United States continued to hand down rulings on the issue.

The second reason was a federal law that was passed in 1993, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Some of the initial impulse for the law came from the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington and from its attorney, Oliver “Buzz” Thomas, who had been a student in my classes in New Orleans. It was, I think, a very

good law. Today it is still applicable to the federal government, and more than twenty states, Alabama among them, have adopted versions of it for themselves. A major principle in RFRA is that government can interfere with religion only if it can demonstrate two things. First, it must have a compelling public interest in doing so. Second, the manner of interference must be the least intrusive way to achieve that public interest. So, for example, government can require that the drivers of church vans or buses have chauffeur's licenses. This interference in a church's activities is justified because government has a compelling public interest—safety on public roads—and there is no less intrusive way to achieve that public interest than to require that drivers of church buses be properly licensed to drive large vehicles.

A third reason the subject was on the minds of Baptists in the South was that the new leaders of the SBC were changing the denomination's position. For many decades the Convention had carefully and consistently opposed government support for religion as well as government interference in religion. For example, the Baptist seminaries had refused to seek or accept government money. Many of the leaders who came to power following the controversy in the SBC were more open to government support for religion than the old leaders had been. All that they asked was that government not show any favoritism toward one religion over others.

There is irony here. The new leaders of the SBC claimed to be traditionalists who were opposing the innovations of progressive professors like me, but on this issue, it was we who were the traditionalists and they who were the innovators.

After my retirement I didn't continue to follow the intricacies of church-state legislation or court decisions as closely as I did when I was teaching, but I sense that the old Baptist principle—and, given the First Amendment, it could be called the old American principle—of church-state separation is losing ground today.

For example, in March 2020 Congress passed and the president signed into law the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act which provided funds to address problems caused to the American economy by the COVID-19 crisis. Some of the funds were

for non-profit organizations, including churches. Churches could apply for federally-guaranteed loans to be used to pay salaries of pastors and other ministries in churches, and if the money was used for that purpose, the churches did not have to repay the loans. That is government support for religion.

Another example is the June 2020 Supreme Court decision *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*. In this decision the court opened the door for more government support for church schools. I think the CARES act and court decisions such as this are inconsistent with the historic Baptist vision of church-state relations. I also think they are bad for the country. I also think they are bad for the church, since the American people may understandably project onto government-supported churches the contempt that many of them feel for the agencies of government.

### Theology and Science

The other new subject I took up when I moved to the university was the relationship between theology and science. I began to read and think about this issue just as the field was expanding. When I was a student at the seminary in New Orleans in the early 1960s, I had read a fine book entitled *Science and Christian Belief* by a Methodist layman who was Professor of Applied Mathematics at Oxford, C. A. Coulson. When I began teaching theology in 1970, there were a few people, such as Ian G. Barbour, who were writing about theological issues related to science. However, most theologians didn't give much attention to the subject. In part this is attributable to the enormous influence of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Barth devoted 2,200 pages of his *Church Dogmatics* to the doctrine of creation, and apparently he did not mention science a single time.

In Chapter 3 I mentioned that when my family and I went to Oxford in 1965, we lived for a time across the street from John Houghton and his wife Margaret. John was then Reader in Atmospheric Physics in the university, and later he became professor of atmospheric physics. He went on to become Sir John Houghton and to co-chair the science working group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which

was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work on global warming. John himself was awarded the Japan Prize, Asia's version of the Nobel Prize. John was a traditional, knowledgeable, devout Baptist layman with an intense interest in theology and science. I remember thinking at the time I first met him how little I had read or heard about the subject. Later John wrote a fine book about the subject entitled *The Search for God: Can Science Help?* John's answer was yes. After he retired and until his death in 2020, John participated actively in the John Ray Initiative which works on science-and-theology issues.

It was another "Sir John," a Presbyterian, who did more than anyone else in the late twentieth century to stimulate the study of the relationships between theology and science. Sir John Templeton was a pioneer in the development of globally diversified mutual funds, and he became one of the richest men in the world. He donated much of his vast wealth to fund projects in the relationship of theology and science. His Templeton Foundation sponsors conferences and publications, provides scholarships to persons studying in the field, gives grants to fund the salaries and research projects of university faculty members who teach in the field, and awards an annual Templeton Prize of \$1.5 million, slightly more than the Nobel Prize, to a person who has utilized the power of science to explore the deepest questions of the universe and of humankind's place and purpose in it. The Templeton Foundation has stimulated a vast amount of research and writing about the relationship between science and theology.

I became involved in this issue in an indirect way. A few years after I arrived at Samford, I served for a time on the Advisory Board of the Department of Pastoral Care at UAB Hospital. At one of our board meetings I happened to have a brief conversation with a psychiatrist at UAB, Nathan Smith, about relationships between theology and science. He and I agreed to meet for lunch a few days later in order to continue our conversation, and as our lunch ended, I asked him if he had friends with whom he discussed this issue. He said that he didn't but that he wished that he did. So, Nathan and I stumbled into the idea of creating such a group. Its members have included UAB and Samford professors in the various sciences and professors in various areas of religion together with

some pastors and other interested persons. The group met monthly for more than twenty years, often discussing a new book at each meeting. Eventually our group was merged into another group who were doing the same kind of work.

My reading has included books by atheists and agnostics who believe that science and religious faith are mutually exclusive and that science has demonstrated conclusively that religious faith is illusory. It also includes writers who think that science and theology have nothing to say to each other. This idea is known as NOMA, non-overlapping magisteria. I have learned from them all. But I have learned most from writers who are knowledgeable about both theology and science, who respect the work done by both, and who explore the relationships between the two.

Some writers in the field operate with novel understandings either of science or of theology. Their work doesn't hold much appeal for me. The work that interests me is being done by people who hold both a traditional understanding of Christian faith and the standard scientific model of the universe. My friend John Houghton was such a person.

Another person who held those views, and was especially prolific was John Polkinghorne. Like John Houghton and John Templeton, he could have been called "Sir John"—he was a Knight Commander of the British Empire—, but he was ordained, and the tradition is that clergy who are KBE are called "Reverend" rather than "Sir." Service for the Lord takes precedence over service for the Queen.

As a young man Polkinghorne had been engaged in research at Cambridge University that led to the confirmation of the existence of quarks. He became an Anglican priest and wrote more than thirty books about science and theology, all in crystal-clear prose. Shortly before I retired, Caroline and I drove to Pennsylvania to attend a conference at which Polkinghorne gave four lectures. He was an excellent speaker as well as an excellent writer. He died in 2021.

I have led conferences on theology and science in two churches. I have written a few articles about this subject, one of which is posted on my website. When the scientific study of cosmic background radiation

offered support for the idea that the universe came into existence at some point in the distant past, my friend Mike Hardin and I accepted an invitation to contribute an article to *The Birmingham News* about the religious implications of this discovery. When Samford opened a new science building, I was given the opportunity of speaking about science and theology to a group of interested faculty members. I included a 5,500–word appendix on the subject in the 3rd edition of *Thinking about God*. Because I don't have a background in science, I don't feel qualified to do much more than this. My writing about this is in a sense confessional; in my articles I have attempted to describe how I as a non-scientist have come to understand various issues in the study of theology and science.

## Writing

At Beeson I continued writing, but in a new way. In the past I had written with a fountain pen. I love the feel of a hefty fountain pen and the look of wet black ink on plain white paper. In New Orleans I wrote with a fountain pen and my secretaries then typed what I had written. I did my revising and rewriting with a fountain pen.

At Beeson I no longer had a full–time secretary, and this forced me to learn how to compose on a computer. Caroline was my teacher. She had learned how to use computers when we were still in New Orleans. I have come to accept the necessity and advantages of writing on a computer, but I still miss the beautiful, wet, black ink. I still use a fountain pen occasionally by printing what I have written on the computer and revising it with a pen.



If I have counted correctly, I wrote about forty–five articles for publication while I was at the seminary and forty–five more after I came to the divinity school. In addition to articles, I have written about a hundred book reviews. I have written ten sets of studies for use in the curriculum of Sunday Schools or other Christian education, and I have contributed 35 essays to be included as articles in encyclopedias or as chapters in books edited by others.

In academic circles, a distinction is made between articles published in peer-reviewed journals and those published without having undergone peer review. I think this is a useful distinction, and I have written for both kinds of publications. However, my principal objective for writing is to try to make a contribution to the life of the church. This means that the articles are all equally important to me, no matter where they are published.

Naturally, most of what I have written is about theological topics such as God, Jesus, and the church, but I have written about other subjects, too. I have written a lot about Baptists. Oddly, most of my writing about Baptists came after I left the Baptist seminary rather than while I was there. In the previous chapter I mentioned that I have written about the controversy in the SBC. I have written about Calvinism, and I have written about the two subjects I began to explore when I came to Beeson, church-state relations and the interface of science and theology.

But some of my themes haven't been quite as predictable. I have written about controversial social issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and the death penalty. Another unusual article arose from an experience I had when I was on sabbatical leave in Oxford in 1976–77. My family and I lived near a lovely young English family who were devout Nichiren Buddhists. Over several months the husband, Michael, attempted to convert me to Buddhism. I attended one of their religious services and read some books that Michael recommended. He then came to my home one evening to inquire whether there was any reason that I couldn't become a Buddhist. I said that I couldn't do that because I would be lonely. "Oh, no," he said, "I have lots of good friends." "No," I replied, "that isn't what I meant. I mean lonely in a cosmic sense. You believe the heavens are empty; no one is there. I believe God is there, a God who loves me and who loves you." I wrote an article about this experience and entitled it "On Being Evangelized."

Our family had another interesting experience with that lovely Buddhist family. One afternoon our daughter Stephanie, who was 11 at the time, was playing in our front yard at Oxford with her friend, Hannah. A local minister was walking along the street, and he stopped and asked the girls if they were Christians. Stephanie replied, "Yes, I am

a Christian.” Hannah replied, “No, I am not a Christian. I am a Buddhist, and I am an atheist.” The pastor apparently didn’t know what to say to a young atheist, so he began to quiz Stephanie to make sure she was the right kind of Christian. I think she passed his test.



If I were asked which of the ninety or so articles that I have written might be of most value to my fellow academic theologians, I would mention one in particular. About 2005 it occurred to me that I had never seen a collection of essays written by Baptists about the Holy Trinity. This seemed unfortunate to me, so I volunteered to serve as guest editor of a volume about the Trinity to be published as an issue of *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, an academic journal which is published by the Association of Baptist Professors of Religion. Some of the finest Baptist theologians in the world agreed to contribute to the issue, and it was published in the fall of 2006. I regret that the theologian who had agreed to write about women and the Trinity encountered a crisis at her work at the last minute and was unable to write her article, and it was too late for me to find another writer. Other than that omission, I am very proud of the entire issue.

My article in that volume is entitled “The Revelation of the Trinity.” In it I made a proposal about the manner in which the Church came to understand that in some wonderful and mysterious way the one, true, living God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In my lifetime there has been a renaissance of writing about the Trinity, inspired in part by Karl Rahner among Catholics and by Karl Barth and later by Jürgen Moltmann among Protestants. Many valuable things have been accomplished in the avalanche of research and writing, but as far as I can tell not much headway has been made in understanding how the earliest Christians came to have a Trinitarian faith. I hoped that my proposal might help to address that omission.

My proposal was a little complicated. It began with the observation that the New Testament contains approximately 110 discrete references to the Three Persons together. From a historian’s point of view, that is an astonishing fact that cries out for explanation. The writers of the

New Testament were all devout monotheists. How then was it possible for them to have casually mentioned Jesus and the Spirit alongside God without offering any explanation or defense? Even one such reference would be puzzling. What are we to think of more than 100 such references?

I think the answer must be that the writers could make casual references to the Three Persons together because they were all participating in the life of churches where this language had become conventional. They were so accustomed to this language that it required no explanation.

This leads us to a second question: how did it become conventional in the churches to speak of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? I think that the answer is that the earliest churches had responded religiously to the Three Persons. They trusted in them. They began as Jews with trust in God who is the God of Israel and the Creator of the world. They then heard the gospel about Jesus and put their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Then, following the first Christian Pentecost, they trusted the Spirit to guide and empower them on their mission to the world.

This leads to a third and final question: how did these early Christians come to trust in the Three Persons? I think that the answer is history. In the pre-Christian era God had acted in the history of Israel to communicate that there is one and only one true and living God and that this God is the God of Israel and the Creator of the world. Second, Jesus came into the world and into human history, and the early Christians responded to him—not to ideas about him, but to him—by trusting him as their Savior and Lord. Third, at Pentecost the Spirit was poured out on the church, and the Christians set out on a mission to the world with trust that the Spirit would guide and empower them in their mission.

In summary, the three historical events led to trust in the Three Persons. Trust in the Three Persons was so pervasive that in their worship services and elsewhere the churches began to refer routinely to the Three Persons. The church's routine references to the Three Persons influenced the language used by the writers of the New Testament who then referred repeatedly to the Three Persons without any explanation or defense. It could be expressed this way:

Three historical events → trust in Three Persons → the church's conventional Trinitarian language → more than one hundred casual references to the Three Persons throughout the New Testament.

I don't know of any other plausible account for the presence in the New Testament of the 100+ passages that refer to the Three Persons. Moreover, this account is perfectly plausible. That is why I think that this is how God has revealed to us the fact that in some wonderful and mysterious way the one true God is Three Persons: by acting in history and inspiring people to understand the meaning of the historical events.

I would have liked for academic theologians to assess this proposal, but so far as I'm aware, that hasn't been done. I think that articles like this are a little bit like the notes in bottles I threw into Luxapalila Creek when I was a boy. You write your notes and you throw them out there, and you hope that someone will pick up on them and respond to you, but it doesn't always happen.



The controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention generated a lot of public interest, and in the early 1990s publishers were looking for books that might help the public understand what it all meant. I was asked by Bill Griffin, a longtime friend and at that time the editor-in-chief of a start-up publishing company in New York, to write about the theology involved in the controversy. *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What It Means to All of Us* was published by McCracken Press in 1994.

I organized the book in a way that I hoped would be helpful. It had two principal parts, the majority tradition among Baptists and the minority traditions among Baptists. The majority Baptist tradition included beliefs that Baptists share with all Christians, beliefs they share with Protestant Christians, beliefs they share with fellow Baptists, and beliefs they share with revivalist Christians. The minority Baptist traditions were Anabaptist beliefs, Calvinistic beliefs, Landmark Baptist beliefs, Deeper Life beliefs, Fundamentalist beliefs, and progressive beliefs. I then tried to display how beliefs were shifting as the new leaders of the SBC took

charge. When McCracken Press went bankrupt a few years later, the book was published in a revised edition by Smyth & Helwys in 2002.



In 2004 Smyth & Helwys published a book that my good friend Philip Wise and I had written entitled simply *Fundamentalism*. Philip and I had led breakout sessions on Fundamentalism at some of the annual meetings of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The sessions had generated considerable interest, and we decided to write a book about the subject.

Writing with Philip was as much fun this time as it had been when we had written *A Dictionary of Doctrinal Terms* twenty years earlier. Philip was incapable of writing an obscure sentence, and he had an unerring feel for what is religiously important to Christian people. He and I shared the conviction that it is always worthwhile to try to understand the Christian faith better and that you don't understand it really well until you can write it down clearly. Once we had written our ideas down, we invariably found that our understandings of the Christian faith were very close, almost identical.

It was a great loss to me personally and to the wider church when Philip died in 2009. At his memorial service I said that it's a sure test of how strong a friendship is for two friends to write a book together on a subject about which they both have strong convictions. Our 39-year friendship passed that test with flying colors. Twice.

A primary concern as we wrote the book was to be fair, and even generous, to Fundamentalists. We succeeded well enough that one or two friends who, like us, are not Fundamentalists, suggested that we may have been too kind to Fundamentalists. Philip and I took that as a compliment. We both believed that we humans face a particular temptation when we are relating to someone who disagrees with us. When we have thought carefully about an issue and explained our position clearly, we are tempted to think that anyone who continues to disagree with us either does not understand or is acting perversely. In other words, if you don't agree with me, you're either stupid or evil. But this is not true. People who are smart and knowledgeable and

conscientious sometimes disagree with us, and it is a mark of maturity, and perhaps of moral wisdom as well, to resist the temptation to say they are stupid or evil. We tried to resist it as we wrote the book, and I hope we succeeded.

In the book we wrote about fundamentalism in the generic sense, as something found in many religions, and also about Fundamentalism in the original, Protestant sense. We wrote about the beliefs of Fundamentalism and what we regarded as the deficiencies of the beliefs, and we wrote about some of the negative attitudes associated with fundamentalism. We devoted one chapter to Fundamentalism in the new Southern Baptist Convention. Finally, we wrote about strategies for relating to Fundamentalists in one's family or workplace. We did not receive a lot of feedback on the book, but I hope it was helpful to people inside and outside the church.



In 1997 New Hope published my book *I Have Called You Friends*. New Hope was a book publishing ministry of the Woman's Missionary Union, the highly effective missions-support organization which operates as an auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention.

This is the only one of my books that consists of a series of Bible studies. In it I followed a pattern found in Paul Minear's 1960 book *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. I wrote one chapter about each of ten personal images of Christians found in the New Testament. Every Christian is a disciple, a servant, a steward, a soldier, an athlete, a traveler or pilgrim, a priest, a child, a friend, and a guest.

Doing the research for this book was pure pleasure. I had always used the Bible extensively in my theological writing, but for this book I did extended research into what scholars have written about these biblical images, and I found that work very enjoyable. Writing the book was a pleasure, too. And so was working with the editor at New Hope, Rebecca England. My books have been published by seven different publishing houses, and across the years I have had about twice that many editors. All of my many editors across the years have been excellent. Rebecca England is the best of them all.

There was a nice bonus to writing this book. It was adopted by the WMU as its study book for 2005, and therefore I was asked to speak at the annual meeting of the WMU. The meeting was held at the First Baptist Church of Nashville on the two days before the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention there.

The Woman's Missionary Union has an interesting history. For many years after its formation in 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention excluded women from its annual meetings. Women in SBC churches created the WMU as their own organization and scheduled their meetings at the same time the men were attending the SBC meetings. The mission of WMU was to raise money to support SBC missionary work and to provide resources for missions education for SBC churches. WMU has been a powerful force for missions.

When the SBC began to allow women to attend its annual meetings, the WMU became an auxiliary of the SBC. It has an independence from the SBC that the publication board and the seminaries and the two missions boards do not have. The WMU chooses its own leaders; they are not chosen by the SBC. The WMU does not depend on the SBC for funding. The reverse is true. The WMU raises millions of dollars each year to support the two great missionary boards of the SBC. In its beginning the WMU has funded its work by taking up offerings in the churches. More recently it has also raised funds through the sales of its missions literature to the churches and of its books to the wider public.

As the new leaders of the SBC began to gain control of the boards and agencies of the Convention, they faced the frustrating fact that there was no way for them to control the WMU. As a result, some of the new SBC leaders engaged in unconscionable bullying of WMU leaders. For most of the time I was at Beeson, the Executive Secretary of WMU was Dellanna O'Brien. She was a brilliant leader who launched an initiative called the Christian Women's Job Corps that is doing wonderful work. The headquarters of WMU is in Birmingham, and Dellanna's husband, Bill O'Brien, was teaching missions at the divinity school. He and I became good friends, and I spent more time visiting with Bill than with any other faculty member at Beeson.

So when I got up to speak at the annual meeting of the WMU in Nashville in 2005, I knew that I was speaking to a group some of whose leaders were being bullied mercilessly by some of the new leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention. I began my first presentation with a story that was told originally by the great Baptist Congressman Brooks Hays. A woman in rural Arkansas was on trial for killing her husband, and her defense attorney decided to put her on the witness stand. When the prosecutor's turn came to question her, he asked, "Were you present when your husband was shot?" She replied, "Yes." "Did your husband say anything before he was shot?" "Yes." "Did you hear what your husband said before he was shot?" "Yes." "What did your husband say before he was shot?" "My husband said to me, 'Go ahead and shoot. You couldn't hit the side of a barn.'"

### Sabbatical Leaves

Samford University has a generous sabbatical leave policy, though not quite as generous as the seminary's. Samford provides a one-semester leave at full pay or a one-year leave at half pay, after six years of teaching. I chose the former. Because I was only a year short of qualifying for a third sabbatical leave at the time I left New Orleans, Dean Timothy George arranged for me to have my first sabbatical leave in the fall of 1993, just three years after I came onto the divinity school faculty. I took it at Princeton Theological Seminary. This Presbyterian school has a sterling academic reputation and has stayed in close touch with the life of the church. Caroline and I were given an apartment on campus, which we very much appreciated. I attended a few lectures, but my primary work was to do research on the doctrine of the Trinity.

Doctrines have content, of course. But they also have effects on the people who believe them. And they also have uses. In recent years, especially in America, much of the writing about the doctrine of the Trinity has been about the effects and uses of the doctrine.

For example, some theologians think that the doctrine of the Trinity has political effects. They say that one effect of the doctrine is to support democratic government. The reasoning is that people who think about God as a single monarch who reigns with absolute power naturally feel

it is appropriate to be governed by an absolute monarch. On the other hand, people who understand God as a Trinity of co-equal Persons who share a common life naturally feel it is appropriate to govern themselves in a democratic manner.

I think it is possible that the doctrine of the Trinity may have effects like this, but I suspect that it is almost impossible to prove that fact conclusively. After all, the largest organization in the world, the Roman Catholic Church, is committed to the doctrine of the Trinity but is governed hierarchically rather than democratically. Conversely, the largest functioning democracy in the world, India, is not predominantly a Christian nation.

Theologians have shown great creativity in finding uses for the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, some feminist theologians have called upon the doctrine in support of their conviction that the ideal relationships between men and women are not the traditional ones of dominance and submission but rather relationships of equals to equals.

Is it wise to use doctrines in this way? Perhaps, but only if you keep in mind that doctrines are pliable and may be put to different uses. For example, it is not only feminists who use the doctrine of the Trinity in support of a particular understanding of relationships between men and women. Some conservative evangelical scholars use the doctrine to support their belief that the proper relationship between men and women is that men should lead and women should follow. The argument is that the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that the Father has always been the Father and the Son has always been the Son, and that the eternal relationship between them is that the Son submits to the will of the Father. They refer to this as ESS, the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. From this they argue that there is properly an eternal subordination of women to men, or at least of wives to husbands.

I think that the feminists have the stronger argument, and I suspect that ESS may represent a departure from the traditional or orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. But that's not the point. The point is that clever theologians can find ways to use Christian doctrines in support of their various causes. Therefore I think that the uses of doctrines should be understood as illustrations and not as demonstrations.

I tried to spell out these things in a faculty address that I gave when I returned to Samford following my sabbatical leave. The faculty address was not the only thing I wrote while we were at Princeton. I also wrote a hymn, the only hymn I have ever written. It is entitled “Three–Personed One,” and there is a copy of it in an appendix to this book. We sang it at the program when I delivered the faculty address. Dean George invited several guests to a lunch following the program, and at the lunch we had a good conversation about the doctrine of the Trinity.

Caroline and I loved living at Princeton. The town has been called “Disneyland with books” because it is so charming. Our children came to visit us while we were there. Caroline and I dined at some nice restaurants there and in nearby places. We visited with our friends Alan and Virginia Neely and with Gregory and Melanie Faulkner whom we met after we arrived there. I spoke at some conferences, and I spoke several times to a group of Baptist students in Princeton University. Caroline and I regularly drove into New York City, and on one occasion I preached at the Metro Baptist Church there. At about the time the leaves were changing in New England, we drove there to hear lectures by Frederick Buechner. It was a wonderful sabbatical leave in every way.



My second sabbatical leave from Beeson came in the fall of 2000, and Caroline and I went to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. The divinity school at Duke, like Princeton Theological Seminary, has a splendid academic reputation and has remained in close touch with the life of the church.

Caroline and I lived in a small house owned by a Duke university professor who was taking her own sabbatical leave abroad. It was near the east campus of the university. Durham, like Princeton, is charming and has lovely restaurants. While we were there we visited several times with our dear friends Malcolm and Nell Tolbert who were living in Raleigh. At Malcolm’s invitation I spoke to a club whose members had been on the faculty of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary before the new SBC leaders took control of that school. Caroline and I visited several churches while we were there.

During our time in Durham, Caroline's mother, Nan Toler, fell and broke her hip, and Caroline flew to Jackson to be with her. When Nan's condition worsened, I drove to Jackson to be with them and, as it turned out, to attend Nan's funeral.

While we were at Duke I continued to do research on the doctrine of the Trinity. I have mentioned my interest in the revelation of the Holy Trinity. At Princeton I had explored the widespread interest in the effects and uses of the doctrine of the Trinity. At Duke, I studied the development of the formal doctrine of the Trinity especially in the fourth and fifth centuries. That history is complex and contested, and the scholarly writing about it is vast. I knew I could not become an expert in this subject, but I hoped to become more conversant in it.

The reason I devoted two entire sabbatical leaves to the doctrine of the Trinity is that as early as 1976 I had been thinking about writing a book that could introduce the doctrine to first-time, interested readers. Out of the vast literature on the subject, I had not been able to find one that I believed to be a really good introductory text for Protestants. There is a good introductory text for Catholics. It is *The Tripersonal God* by Gerald O'Collins, S.J. O'Collins is a fine theologian who writes clear prose and has a gift for clarifying complex subjects. But in my opinion his book is not as useful for Protestants, especially non-liturgical Protestants, as it is for Catholics. I do not know whether I will ever get the book written. *L'homme propose, Dieu dispose*. But even if I don't, my classroom teaching about the Trinity has been enriched by the study I did, and, after all, the primary purpose of sabbatical leaves is to improve and enrich classroom teaching, not to get books written. In addition, I feel blessed to have been able to devote so much time to the study to the Holy Trinity as understood by the church and as presented in the church's official teaching.

### Outside the Divinity School

While I was teaching at the divinity school, I was invited to do some teaching outside the divinity school. I taught one class of undergraduates in the Religion Department at Samford. I also taught in two others schools, the University of Alabama-Birmingham and Spring Hill College.

My teaching in the religion department at Samford came about almost accidentally. Bill Leonard, the chair of the department, and I were having lunch one day at a Mexican restaurant he liked, and we began to talk about the Bible courses his department offered which almost all undergraduates were required to take. Bible wasn't my field, of course, but I nevertheless had developed some definite convictions about how introductory courses in Bible should be taught. I thought many students do not know what is in the Bible and it was premature to introduce them to the scholarly study of the Bible until they had that knowledge. Students who were church members might be familiar with isolated texts in the Bible but were unlikely to have a clear understanding of the overall scope of the Bible. I thought that students in an introductory course in Old Testament should be required to read carefully selected passages from the Old Testament, and that students in Introduction to the New Testament should be required to read the entire New Testament. I thought that teachers should occasionally tell students about what biblical scholars think about various individual passages.

I developed most of these convictions when I as an undergraduate I had taken a course on Chaucer. We studied *The Canterbury Tales* and part of *Troilus and Criseyde* rather than what scholars said about these books. We memorized the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English. Our professor lectured on the books themselves, and we discussed the books themselves. Gradually the professor began to describe the background of the books and introduced us to the history of the text of the books; like the Bible, these books were written before the invention of printing by movable type, and the manuscripts were not identical.

Bill listened to me talk about all this. He is shrewd and he said, You ought to teach one of Bible Intro courses. I replied innocently, I'd love to teach the New Testament Intro. He said, How about Mondays and Wednesdays at 2:00 p.m.? I was trapped by my own brashness. I ended up teaching the course, and I loved doing it.

It was a large class, as required classes often are; I think there were 55 students. The textbook for the class was the American Bible Society's *Today's English Version: The Good News Bible*. It's the most

readable translation I know, and it's never ambiguous. It is what is called a dynamic equivalency translation, which means that it's not word-for-word but idea-for-idea.

My assumption that students don't know much about the Bible was confirmed in the first week of class. After the first class session, a student came by my office and said that she hoped to get into the class even though she missed the first meeting. I agreed that she could join the class, and she said, I'm so glad, because I don't know much about the Bible even though I'm a church member. I then went over the class syllabus with her. It was detailed and included references to particular Scripture texts such as Matthew 5:1. She said, What are those numbers, page numbers? I said they were chapter and verse numbers. She asked, What are chapters and verses?

I spent the first class period telling the students what we would be doing for the semester and providing them with some general background about the four Gospels, such as, for examples, that the Gospels are about Jesus who lived in the first century and were written by some of his followers after he had died. I gave them the syllabus with its schedule for the semester. Their assignment for the second session was to read the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament.

When they arrived for the second session, they took a test about facts in that Gospel. When they finished the test, I read a passage from Matthew and we talked about it. Usually I called on individual students to answer a particular question about the passage. Then I read another and we discussed it, and so on.

In the discussions I would occasionally mention some scholarly ideas. For example, I pointed out that Matthew, unlike the writers of the other three Gospels, frequently used the phrase "kingdom of heaven." Many of the students understandably assumed that when Jesus referred to "the kingdom of heaven," he was talking about heaven as a place where people go after they die, if they don't go to hell. In fact, almost all scholars reject that idea. They say that "the kingdom of heaven" is a circumlocution used in order to show reverence for God by not using the word "God" more often than necessary. "Kingdom of heaven" is the

same thing as “kingdom of God.” It’s not a place you go when you die. It’s God’s reign over this world.

At the end of the second session I gave the class a series of questions about the Gospel of Matthew and said that they would have to turn in their answers at the following session and that they would be graded on their answers. In order to answer the questions, they pretty much needed to read Matthew a second time. At the following class I collected the answers, and we continued discussing passages from Matthew. The assignment for the following session was to read the Gospel of Mark.

I continued with that process throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, if they did all the work conscientiously, they would have read most of the New Testament twice and answered many dozens of questions about it and participated in dozens of hours of discussion about it. They received grades for the tests, for how successfully they answered the lists of questions, and for class participation.

I felt good about most of the course. Using the modern translation was a good idea. The tests on alternative days were an incentive to do the reading, and the same is true of having to answer questions on the other days. Calling on students during discussions was a good idea, too, though I think that some students found it a little intimidating.

With hindsight I came to see that the process was more effective with the Gospels and Acts, which are mostly narratives, than with the Epistles and Revelation. The students needed a good bit of background information about those books before they read them. Once I realized this, I tried to provide more background than I had done for the Gospels and Acts.

I loved teaching the course, and it was one of the most intensive learning experiences I have ever had. I was teaching outside my field which required a lot of study, I was teaching undergraduates which also required that I do a lot of learning, and I was using was a new format for teaching. I’m glad Bill Leonard challenged me to do it.



As a result of the article that Mike Hardin and I contributed to *The Birmingham News*, I was invited to serve on a panel discussion

about science and theology at the University of Alabama–Birmingham. Afterwards, Ada Long, the director of the Honors Program at UAB, talked to me about teaching in her program in the fall of 1998. As we discussed that possibility, she asked, “If you do this, will you talk about God?”

I was surprised at the question, so I asked her, “Haven’t the theologians who taught for you in the past talked about God?”

“Oh, hell, no, they haven’t!”

“What did they talk about?”

“They talked pop psychology. I told them we didn’t need that stuff because we had real psychologists in the university. But I couldn’t get them to talk about God.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll talk about God. I’ll even talk about Jesus.”

The course was entitled “Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein.” The schedule was such that I could teach there while continuing to teach my classes at Beeson.

The students were all freshmen in the Honors Program. There were more than a hundred students in the class, and we met two days a week for four hours each day. I was one of five professors. Ada taught literature—she is a Milton scholar—, and her life partner Dail Mullins taught origin of life science. The others were a second scientist and an art historian. All of us were present for all presentations in the class, and we worked together to design exams.

I had not taught in a state university before, and I had had only a limited experience teaching undergraduates, so I gave a lot of thought about how best to communicate with them. I decided that the way to do it was to be direct. I wasn’t the only one who favored directness. Dail began his first lecture by saying, “My position is atheistic, scientific, materialism.” Well, I thought, this going to be different!

The students were all honor students, very bright, and they could understand anything I had to say provided it was expressed clearly. I gave six lectures during the semester, on topics such as the Bible and science, God and evolution, and the meaning of life in a scientific era.

I was careful to stay in my area and not to slip over into teaching science. I talked about religion generally and about religious matters as they interface with science in particular. I forcefully affirmed the

scientific *enterprise* and also the scientific *method*, but I remained neutral about the *conclusions* of science, which I was not qualified to assess. I pointed out that the origin and development of modern science under Galileo and Newton was made possible in part by certain Christian theological assumptions, among other things. These assumptions have been discussed by Alfred North Whitehead, Ian G. Barbour, and John Polkinghorne, among others. Here are four of those assumptions. (1) God the Creator is personal, and God was free to choose what kind of world to create. This means that in order to learn about the world God has chosen to create, it is necessary to investigate the world. Ancient Greek thinkers did not affirm a personal Creator. They therefore minimized the importance of investigating what the world is actually like and maximized the importance of reasoning about what the world must be like. (2) God is rational and has created a rational world, and this makes it possible for rational human beings to understand the world. The gods of some other religions are far from rational. (3) God and the world are clearly distinguished from each other, as any creator is distinguished from what he or she creates. Therefore it is not a sacrilege to run experiments on the world. Religions which do not carefully distinguish the world from God may find it difficult to support experimentation on the world. There are religions that see God as the soul of the world and the world as the body of God. (4) God is good, so the world that God has created is good. Therefore learning about the world is a worthwhile task. Religions that see the world as a bad thing and religion as a way of escaping from the evil of the world do not provide an incentive to study and learn about the world.

In this course I learned by experience why lawyers say that in a courtroom you never ask a witness a question unless you know what the answer will be. In one of my lectures I was arguing that the Bible uses several different images of God's work of creation. The most famous is found in Genesis 1 where God speaks and the world comes into existence in much the same way a monarch gives orders and they are carried out. But in Isaiah 45, for example, there are some quite different images of God's work of creation. God is like a father who begets a child or a mother who gives birth to a child, or like a potter who makes a piece

of pottery. God stretches out the heavens the way a nomad stretches out a tent. I then asked somewhat rhetorically and with the expectation that the answer would be No, Can you think of any reason why we should take the image in Genesis literally when we don't take the images in Isaiah literally? A Jewish student raised her hand and said, I can tell you why you should take Genesis literally and not Isaiah. Genesis is Torah, and Isaiah isn't.

Ada invited me to teach again in 2002, and I was delighted to do this. This time the course was on origins—of the universe, of the solar system, of earth, and of life. Once again I attempted to speak very directly to the students.

For me, one of the greatest benefits of teaching at UAB was getting to hear my fellow professors teach. They were all splendid teachers, and I learned a lot from hearing them doing their work.

My experiences in the Honors Program were thoroughly enjoyable. I treasure the friendship that Ada and Dail and I developed. Caroline and I had a memorable visit with the two of them in their home on St. George's Island after they retired there, and we were saddened when Dail died suddenly and unexpectedly in 2016.



The other college at which I taught while I was at Samford was Spring Hill College, a small Jesuit college in Mobile, Alabama. For several years Spring Hill offered master's degrees on a campus in Birmingham. The courses were taught on six Saturdays during alternative weeks, and we were in class for, if I remember correctly, six hours a day with a break for lunch. Altogether I taught seven courses for the college, the first in 1992 and the last in 2012, after I had retired. On one occasion I taught a survey of Christian theology, and on another occasion I taught a course on Christianity in the United States today. On the other five occasions I taught a course entitled "Christology and Trinity." Enrollments in the classes ranged from about 15 to about 40 students.

Many of the students were Roman Catholics, but there also were many Episcopalians and a scattering of persons from other churches. They were all mature adults. For the first time in my teaching

experience, I had numerous students who had been strongly influenced by the charismatic renewal movement, which had powerfully affected Catholic and Protestant churches alike. Back in 1973 when Malcolm Tolbert and I wrote *Speaking in Tongues*, we expressed our appreciation for the renewal of faith and life that had come to so many people through their charismatic experiences. If I hadn't appreciated that back in 1973, I certainly would have done so beginning in 1992, as the good effects of the movement were unmistakable in the lives of many of the Spring Hill students.

It hadn't occurred to me that it might be confusing for Roman Catholics to take a class taught by a Baptist. In one of the early classes on Christology and Trinity, I spent an entire day lecturing and responding to comments and questions about the Holy Trinity. As the class session was coming to a close, I asked if there were any final questions. A nun in the class asked, So you Baptists believe in the Trinity, right? I replied that, yes, we do believe in the Trinity. She seemed relieved.

I was delighted to be able to teach at UAB and at Spring Hill College. In the seminary and at Beeson I was teaching students who were preparing for ministry. UAB and Spring Hill gave me the opportunity to teach people who weren't preparing for ministry and UAB gave me the opportunity to teach some students who were not Christians. The Anglican theologian Leonard Hodgson once commented that a major choice that academic theologians have to make is whether to teach in a secular setting where your responsibility includes representing the Christian church to outsiders or to teach in a Christian setting to Christian people. I have been blessed to be able to do both, though of course my principal work has been teaching people preparing for Christian ministry.

### The Trinity Group

The American Academy of Religion is the world's largest organization of professors of religion. As many as 10,000 people attend its annual meetings. I began attending the meetings in 1970 and continued to attend until my retirement. I benefitted from the hundreds of breakout sessions and subsidiary groups at each meeting as well as from the plenary sessions. However, I felt that as a confessional,

systematic theologian I needed something that wasn't available at the AAR meetings at that time.

Philip Wise and I had discussed this problem occasionally even before I moved to Birmingham. In 1988 he and I had traveled to Milwaukee to attend a conference at Marquette University on the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. That was such a good experience that we began to think about forming a discussion group of our own.

In the fall of 1990 I gave the Staley Lectures at the University of Mobile, and I mentioned to Ted Mashburn, a professor of theology there, that Philip and I had been talking about forming a group to discuss theology. I asked Ted if he would be interested in participating, and he said that he would.

So the three of us met in Montgomery in December 1990. This turned out to be the first meeting of a group that is still meeting more than three decades later. Originally all the members held doctorates in systematic theology, but two who joined the group later had doctorates in New Testament, one had a doctorate in church history, and one had a doctorate in the study of literature and theology. We have adopted the name "the Trinity Group."

In 2022 the members are Paul Basden, LaMon Brown, Brad Creed, Gary Furr, Dwight Moody, Paul Robertson, Roger Sullivan, Rick Wilson, Gerald Wright, and me. Paul Basden and Brad are long-time friends. At different times both have worked at Samford, Brad as Provost and Paul as Minister to the University. Paul moved on to become co-pastor of a megachurch in Frisco north of Dallas, and Brad is president of Campbell University in North Carolina.

LaMon and Gerald are former missionaries who have taught in missionary schools, Gerald in Nigeria and the Middle East and LaMon in India and Thailand. They also have taught in this country. I was their faculty advisor in their doctoral studies at the seminary in New Orleans. They are among the very few of my students from New Orleans who have gone on to teach Christian theology at the graduate school level. Another person who has done that is Sheri Dawson Adams. Sheri has taught in Buenos Aires and at School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb

University in North Carolina. A few months after she entered my classes in New Orleans, Sheri and I were delighted to discover that we are second cousins.

Gary is a retired pastor and a prolific author who continues to minister through his music and writing. Dwight is retired now, but he has been both a pastor and college professor, and he continues to produce a broadcast called *The Meeting House*. Roger has had three careers. He began as a pharmacist, became a pastor, and is now helping pastors and others as a financial advisor.

Paul Robertson is a former theology professor who, after he was forced out of the seminary in New Orleans because of his support for women in ministry, moved on to become the administrator of Clinical Pastoral Education in the ten-hospital Memorial Hermann system in Houston. He and I are co-authors of *God So Loved the World*.

Rick is a teaching theologian who was chair of the Department of Christianity at Mercer University. From 2014–2016 Mercer seconded Rick to serve as president of the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary near Monrovia while remaining a member of the Mercer faculty.

Over the years there have been thirteen members of the Trinity Group, though never that many at one time. In 2022 there are ten. Ted Mashburn resigned because of changes in his work, Ralph Wood resigned because he moved to Baylor University, and Philip Wise died in 2009.



Our practice has been to meet twice a year for two days, usually Thursday and Friday. Our current members live in six states, and we ordinarily meet in Birmingham, though we have met elsewhere on a few occasions. There usually are six to eight of us present. During the pandemic we have been meeting about once a month for two hours via Zoom.

Over the years our friendships have developed and it has become natural to start our meetings with a period of sharing about ourselves, our families, and our ministries. After that, we engaged in theological conversation. We often structured the conversation around one or more books or else around one or more papers that had been distributed in advance.

Theologically we share the most important things in common, but our thinking about subsidiary ideas is diverse. I think our group measures up to a famous slogan attributed to a 16th century Lutheran theologian, Peter Meiderlin: *In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas*. In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.



The Trinity Group was created to discuss theology, not to carry out ministry, but after a few years we decided to do some writing together. Paul Robertson invited us to do our first project. After I left New Orleans, Paul had become the editor of *The Theological Educator*. He invited us to contribute articles for a special issue on the theme of “Theology for the Healthy Church.” Each of us led from his strength, writing about a subject that was of special interest to each. I think the articles are splendid. Alas, this turned out to be the final issue of that journal. The seminary decided to discontinue its publication. This made me uneasy, but I am pretty sure that our articles didn’t cause the demise of the journal.

Our second project was a book entitled *For Faith and Friendship*. The title is modeled on a magisterial two-volume work by the Anglican theologian Leonard Hodgson, *For Faith and Freedom*. Our book was a collection of essays on a variety of topics. Philip Wise contributed an article on how his mind had changed about pastoral ministry. Sadly, Philip died before the volume was published, and we dedicated the book to his memory. We also included in the book a biographical article about him. The book was published by Insight Press in 2010.

Our second book was quite different from our first. Entitled *Encountering God in the Prayers of Others*, it was published by Parson’s Porch in 2014. Paul Basden edited it beautifully, and we dedicated it to another of our members, Paul Robertson. It is a deeply personal book. Each contributor selected about a half-dozen of his favorite prayers and wrote a page or two about each one explaining why it was meaningful to him. It is, I believe, a beautiful book, rich in content and quite readable. The prayers I chose were from Anne Lamott, John Greenleaf Whittier,

John Henry Newman, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the gospel of Luke. The prayer from Luke is for me the most beautiful prayer in the Bible: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel” (Luke 2:29–32). Many of us will probably never know exactly when or how we will die. I hope that, if I am aware when I am dying, I can pray this prayer that was first prayed by another old man when he saw Jesus. I loved contributing to this book.

Recently the group has agreed to write a series of articles to be included in the Fall 2022 issue of the journal *Christian Ethics Today*, which is edited by Pat Anderson.



Both professionally and personally, the Trinity Group has been the most important and meaningful voluntary association to which I have ever belonged. My sense is that it is equally important and meaningful to the other members, too. A few years ago I suggested that perhaps our group had run its course, as groups tend to do, and that we might want to disband, but others would not hear of it, and so it continues now, more than thirty years after it began. I am immensely indebted to the members for their friendship and for enriching my life and understanding immeasurably.

### *Christian Ethics Today*

One of the new publications to come out of the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention is called *Christian Ethics Today*. It was created in the mid–1990s by Foy Valentine, a progressive ethicist who had retired from leadership of the SBC’s Christian Life Commission. When Foy decided to step down as editor, he asked Joe Trull to take his place.

Joe and I had been colleagues at the seminary in New Orleans. Joe had taught Christian ethics, and he was co–author of an influential book on ethical issues in pastoral ministry. He had served as a member of the advisory board of the seminary journal that I edited. In 2000 he

invited me to join the Board of Directors of *Christian Ethics Today*, and I accepted.

As the name suggests, the journal is not just for Baptists but for other Christians as well, and its Board has included members from the Roman Catholic Church and the United Church of Christ. But most Board members and most subscribers and all the editors are Baptists. The journal is published in print and on-line versions. Subscriptions are free and there are no ads.

Over these two decades I have served as chair of the Board at different times. When Joe stepped down as editor, I chaired a search committee to identify his successor. Today Pat Anderson continues to do the same kind of splendid work that Foy and Joe did before him. He reads widely and solicits articles from numerous writers about diverse themes. I treasure the friendship that Pat and I have come to share as a result of our many conversations about the work of the journal.

Foy, Joe, and Pat may have experienced the greatest editorial freedom of any editors in the nation. The Board has been a support group and a sounding board for the editors, but it is the editors themselves who create each successive issue of the journal, and they have done so without any interference from the members of the Board.

The editors have published a wide range of articles, wider than the title of the journal might suggest. Articles about social issues are the most progressive found in any of the many entities that came into being when the Southern Baptist Convention began its journey to the far right. For example, to the best of my knowledge, no other Christian journal in America has published more articles about the issue of reparations for the descendants of slaves.

I have written about a dozen articles and a half-dozen book reviews for the journal, and I am proud to serve on the Board of such a fine journal.

## Family

After Caroline and I moved to Birmingham, she engaged in interesting work. At different times she worked for a cardiology group and for an executive search group. She worked with a non-profit organization, Alzheimer's of Central Alabama, which provides support

and resources for caregivers of patients with AIDS. She worked as the secretary of Contemplative Outreach Birmingham, a group which sponsors Centering Prayer in the state and also provides annual conferences on Centering Prayer. She served on the international board of Centering Prayer for a period of time. Through her association with this work we heard numerous fine speakers and got to know people such as Father Thomas Keating, O.C.S.O. Caroline has also done volunteer work with people who are poor and with AIDS patients.



Our family changed dramatically during the 18½ years I was on the Samford faculty. Our daughter Stephanie completed her undergraduate degree and her husband Arlen completed his graduate degree. They graduated together from the University of North Alabama. At one point, in between houses, they lived with us for about 18 months. We loved having them with us. They ended up in the Birmingham area and built a house in nearby Calera. Stephanie did interesting and important work with a Birmingham company called Ergoscience, and Arlen enjoyed his work at Publix. We loved that they lived nearby and that we were able to visit with them often.



In 1996 our son Kenneth and Jill Condon were married in a beautiful ceremony at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. The officiant was my friend Steve Duffy, a brilliant systematic theologian who taught at Loyola in New Orleans. When Steve met with Kenneth and Jill to discuss their wedding, he told them that in the past, when he had officiated at the wedding of a Catholic and a Protestant, he always gave Holy Communion to both of them. However, he said that the Archbishop had given him forceful instructions that he should give Communion only to the Catholic and not to the Protestant, so he would not be giving Communion to Kenneth. Then with a smile he said to Jill, “I will be giving you Communion. Of course, if you want to share it with Kenneth, that’s up to you.” She did.

At the wedding we were delighted and surprised to see that Frank and Evelyn Stagg had joined us in the pews reserved for our family.

Some years before, Caroline and Frank had discovered that they are second cousins through the Chachere family of Louisiana. When the ceremony ended, everyone walked a block down to the Jax Brewery where there was a large wedding reception. Jason Bourgeois's band, The Boogie Men, was playing, and they were loud! Evelyn and Frank and I were cupping our ears in order to be able to hear each other talk, and even so we had almost to shout.

Caroline and I had taken dancing lessons before the wedding so that we could dance together at the reception. She is a good dancer. I am not, but when Jill's mother Lois pulled me onto the dance floor I did my best, to the amusement of some who was watching. I may have been set up. Caroline and I have loved getting to know Lois and Ray Condon across the years.



Jill and Kenneth and their children live in a house in mid-city New Orleans. Kenneth is co-owner of a firm which does naval architecture and marine engineering. Its name is MiNO Marine, an acronym for Made in New Orleans. Jill is a CPA who works with the Ochsner Health System. They have three daughters. Camille was born in 2000, Kate in 2002, and Jane in 2007.

Caroline and I have loved being grandparents to our three wonderful granddaughters, Camille, Kate, and Jane. Since we lived five hours from them, we had to plan ways to spend time with them. We visited them in New Orleans regularly, and Kenneth and his family visited us in Birmingham regularly.

When the girls were very young, we began having them stay with us for a week or two each summer. Usually they flew, alone, on Southwest Airlines from New Orleans to Birmingham. For me, it was a moving experience to see a five- or six-year-old granddaughter walk off an airplane by herself.

We called our visits "Nana and Granddaddy's Camp," and we tried to plan things that the girls would enjoy. The condo where we lived had a swimming pool which the girls liked. We traveled with them to interesting places such as DeSoto Caverns and Mentone and to visit some

friends' farm which had blackberries and a large field of sunflowers. We went to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery. We went to Ruffner Mountain and to the Treetop Family Adventure in Chelsea. We went to the McWane Science Center for children on almost every visit and sometimes saw a movie in the center's IMAX theater. We visited the zoo and went bowling. We played Monopoly and cards and other games. Caroline and the girls painted pottery at a store that fired their pieces for them, and they cooked together. Stephanie and Arlen often joined us for part of these visits, and sometimes friends joined us, too, including the Furr's, the Reeveses, the Powells, and the Grates. In the evenings we often went out for yogurt and then watched one or more movies when we got home. On the last night together we usually went out to eat in an upscale restaurant. While they were here the girls liked to telephone their parents, but never once did any of them express any homesickness, which I think is remarkable.

One of my ideas was a bust. None of the girls had ever seen a working dairy farm, and I thought they might find that interesting. We drove for more than an hour to a family-owned dairy near Anniston that was open to the public. When we arrived, we were directed to the milking parlor where the milkers were already hooked up. Nothing seemed to be happening, just cows standing around munching on hay with mechanical pumping sounds in the background and the smell of hay and milk in the air. Our middle granddaughter Kate viewed the room for less than a minute and then without the slightest hint of complaint said, "Is that it?" She was right. It was boring. We left and partially justified the long drive by over-eating at a Popeye's.

As the girls got older, our visits with them changed, and we began to take them or meet them in different cities. We took all three of them to the Great Wolf Lodge in Fort Worth, and we met them on the Gulf coast of Mississippi. We met Jane in Atlanta to visit a Lego Factory, among other things. On one occasion Caroline and Stephanie took Camille and Kate to a Taylor Swift concert in Nashville, and on another occasion Caroline and I met Camille and Kate in Miami and drove with them to Key West. These visits with our wonderful granddaughters have been some of the happiest experiences of our lives. They are all beautiful people.

## CHAPTER 6

# RETIREMENT

**D**eciding when to retire wasn't especially difficult for Caroline and me. In our mid-sixties we began to feel a kind of retirement readiness. We knew that we wanted spend more time with our granddaughters and their parents. A review of our finances indicated that we could retire when I reached age 69. I had several helpful conversations with people in the Human Relations Department at Samford. I attended two retirement seminars and read four books about retirement. These all confirmed that it was time to take the plunge.

Deciding where to retire was more difficult. The issue was whether to remain in Birmingham or to return to New Orleans in order to be near our son Kenneth and his wife Jill and their three daughters. One summer we house-sat for five weeks for a couple who live adjacent to Audubon Park in uptown New Orleans, in order to experience what it would be like to be living in that city again. It felt pretty good.

On the other hand, almost all of our friends I had known at the seminary had left the city. The seminary had changed so much that I would not have been invited speak in chapel, let alone to teach an occasional course. The cost of living in New Orleans is high. According to Zillow, the median price for a house in New Orleans is more than twice as high as in Birmingham. We were already settled in Birmingham. Our daughter Stephanie and her husband lived there, and so did most of our friends. We knew how to navigate the health care systems there. And we could easily drive to New Orleans in five hours to see Kenneth and his family.

So we decided to stay in Birmingham. I retired on June 1, 2008. I had been teaching full-time for 38 years, 18½ years at Samford and 19½ years at the seminary in New Orleans.



Dean Timothy George and the Beeson Divinity School did two things to make my retirement special. Timothy worked together with

Eric Mason, a friend and former student who had become an outstanding New Testament scholar, to edit a book entitled *Theology in the Service of the Church: Essays Presented to Fisher H. Humphreys*. It was published by Mercer University Press early in 2008.

I realize I am not a neutral observer, but I'm sure that I am right when I say that it is a fine book. President Thomas Corts wrote a gracious foreword in his inimitable style. Timothy wrote a generous introduction that includes a biographical sketch; earlier he had asked me a series of questions about my life, and he used information from that interview to write the introduction. Eric prepared an annotated bibliography of my publications; when I read through it recently, I wondered if Eric doesn't know more about what I've written than I do.

Three of my fellow faculty members from Beeson contributed essays. Frank Thielman wrote about the complicated relations between biblical scholarship and Christian theology; that the relations are intensely problematic must seem puzzling to those outside the academic world. Norfleete Day wrote an informative and wise overview of spiritual theology and assessed its component parts. Robert Smith wrote about the imperative for doctrinal preaching and the need for balance in doctrinal sermons.

Curtis Freeman of Duke Divinity School wrote an essay suggesting that even though Baptists haven't put as much emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity as the ancient church did, the future of the doctrine among Baptists is promising. Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University showed how the study of church history empowers the church to pass along its traditions and to better understand its identity, its ideas, and its context as well as to appreciate individual Christians in its past. Steve Harmon of Gardner-Webb University wrote about the importance of theology in the life of the church, especially in light of the scandal of church divisions. Ralph Wood of Baylor University argues that three American writers—Emily Dickinson, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor, none of whom was a traditional Christian—display the radical character of Christian faith. Steve Duffy of Loyola University in New Orleans wrote the best short essay I have ever read on a theology of ecumenism.

Sadly, Steve died before the volume was published, and the editors dedicated the book to his memory.

Wanda Lee was the Executive Director of the Woman's Missionary Union and the only contributor whom I didn't know well. She surveyed the biblical teaching that God is a missionary God who calls and sends. Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the SBC, wrote about race relations, something that he had cared deeply about since he was teenager. My good friend and first theology teacher Samuel Mikolaski argued that the loss of faith in God leads to the loss of confidence in the value of human persons and that it is by embracing classical Christian theology that the church maintains its faith in God. Gary Furr, pastor of the Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, drew upon a book entitled *The Mind of the Maker* by Dorothy Sayers to write about creativity and the Trinity; Gary is a creative musician and writer as well as a creative preacher and pastor. And my dear friend of almost forty years, Philip Wise, wrote a wise and deeply personal essay about friendship as a theological virtue.

A few weeks before I retired, Dean George and the school hosted a dinner at The Club. About 130 people attended, including members of Caroline's and my families and many of our friends as well as faculty members, students, and graduates of the divinity school and of the wider university. Following some brief and very generous speeches, Timothy officially presented me with a copy of the book. He had given me a sneak peek earlier, so in my response I was able to attempt to thank the writers in what I hope was a meaningful way. It was a happy evening for me and my family.

## Ministry

Many people find that the work they did when they were employed necessarily comes to an end when they retire, but that is not true of us ministers. In retirement I have been able to engage in some of the parts of my work that I have loved most, teaching, preaching, serving on boards, and writing.



In the years following my retirement I have taught two courses in each of three educational institutions. I taught two courses for Spring Hill College at their Birmingham campus. In 2009 I taught a survey of Christian theology, and in 2012 I taught a course on Christology and Trinity.

At the invitation of my friend Larry Baker, I co-taught two D.Min. seminars for Hardin–Simmons University. In Abilene in 2011, I co-taught with Jim Heflin. Jim and I had served together on the faculty of the seminary in New Orleans in the 1980s, and it was a pleasure to get to see him again and to work together with him. In San Antonio in 2013, I co-taught with Les Hollon who was pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in that city, and I enjoyed getting to know him and learning about the ministries of that great church. The seminars were theology refresher courses similar to those I had taught when I was at Beeson.

Shortly after I retired I taught two non-credit courses for Beeson’s Lay Academy of Theology. In 2009 the subject was the Holy Trinity, and in 2010 it was a theology of Christian living.



Since I retired I have given lectures in some diverse venues. I will mention six of them.

In November 2008 I gave the inaugural Edgar Boss Lectures at Judson University in Elgin, Illinois. I spoke to the faculty about relationships between science and Christian theology, and I spoke to the student body about discerning God’s will for their lives. As early as 1970 I had been speaking to student groups about this subject. During their college years, Christian students have to make a series of decisions with life-long consequences for themselves and others, and they seem to welcome a message with counsel about how to make decisions that are aligned with God’s will or purpose for their lives. There was also a lunch for pastors in the area around Elgin, and I visited and spoke informally in some classes.

Caroline and I drove up for the lectures, and we had lovely visits with Eric Mason and his wife Jackie while we were there. Eric had co-

edited the book that was given to me, and it was he who had suggested that Judson invite me to give these lectures. We also got to visit with our friend Clinton Stockwell who drove out from Chicago.



In 2009, on the 400th anniversary of the emergence of the Baptist movement, I participated in the Pruitt Memorial Symposium at Baylor University. I gave a lecture about what I had come to believe are the two most important contributions that Baptists have made to the church and to society. The first was restricting baptism to believers as a means of achieving a faith community that can support its members in their efforts to follow Jesus. The second was the separation of church and state as a means of achieving maximal religious liberty for citizens in a religiously diverse society. In the lecture I offered an analysis of what Thomas Helwys said about religious liberty in his ground-breaking book *The Mystery of Iniquity*.

I thoroughly enjoyed the discussion that followed my lecture, and I also enjoyed an exchange of vigorous email messages with a doctoral student who had attended the lecture. The lecture was published later in *Baptist History and Heritage*.



In 2010 I gave a lecture at a retreat sponsored by Evangelicals Concerned, Inc. This organization was created in 1971 by Ralph Blair. Ralph and I had been students together at Bob Jones University in 1956–57. He became a psychotherapist in New York City, working primarily with gay men. He is a very conservative evangelical Christian, and he has continued to maintain connections with some of the most conservative evangelical organizations in the country.

Ralph thinks that evangelicals' well-known opposition to homosexuality is misguided. He says that the Bible condemns homosexual practices associated with idolatry (as in Romans 1), homosexual gang rape (as at Sodom), and promiscuous homosexual practices when they are carried out by heterosexual people as an expression of moral rebellion. However, he is convinced that many people are born with same-sex attraction only and that the Bible does not condemn the mutual love of

these persons; in fact, it does not even mention this love. The mission of Evangelicals Concerned is to help conservative evangelical Christians understand and affirm the love that homosexual people experience.

I was honored that Ralph would invite me to speak at the retreat, and I knew immediately that I should talk about forgiveness. As we all know, Jesus calls us to forgive those who mistreat us. Homosexual persons have been some of the most mistreated people in our society and therefore need to practice forgiveness often.

Caroline and I enjoyed our drive to upstate New York and our time together with Ralph and the other retreatants. I think that Ralph's ministry is unique in that he brings together a very conservative evangelical theology with a socially liberal understanding of homosexuality. I hope that someday a good historian will write either a biography of Ralph himself or a history of his organization. I feel that his story needs to be told and remembered.



In 2011 my friend Bruce Gourley, who was then Executive Director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, invited me to give a lecture at the 2012 meeting of the society on the topic of Baptist theology since 1950. I welcomed this invitation because my knowledge of the recent history of Baptist theology was patchy. The theologians who have influenced me most have been Anglicans rather than Baptists. However, I was and still am keenly interested in Baptist theology, and this invitation provided me with an opportunity to fill out my knowledge about our Baptist heritage.

Over the next year I devoted hundreds of hours to research for this lecture. I reviewed writings by more than 200 academic theologians who were Baptists; before I began the research I wouldn't have thought that so many Baptist theologians had been writing during the period 1950–2010. In the lecture I described parts of the work of about fifty of those theologians. I also proposed an analytical framework for thinking about the work done by the theologians.

This research and writing were an important learning experience for me, and I was glad to present some of what I discovered to the scholars of

the Society. I felt that the lecture went well, and the discussion afterwards was one of the best in which I have ever participated, no doubt because the audience were experts in all things Baptist. The lecture was later published in the journal of the Society.



In 2018 I gave the Holley–Hull Lectures at Samford. Two good friends had recommended me for the lectureship. One was Jim Barnette, who taught in the Religion Department of the university and who had been overseeing the choice of speakers for this lectureship since he first arrived at the University. The other was Warren Holley. Warren was a cardiologist who was intensely interested in academic theology and extremely knowledgeable about it. He and his siblings had endowed the lectureship in memory of their parents and in honor of Bill Hull who, in addition to being provost of Samford, had until his death in 2013 served as theologian-in-residence at the Holleys’ home church, Mountain Brook Baptist Church.

I decided to talk about a topic that is immensely important but that in my judgment has been neglected by academic theologians: the purpose of God. Why did God create our universe?

The Holley–Hull Lectures are arranged in an unusual way. The lecturer delivers three lectures, one in each of three venues. Each lecture is given to a specific audience, and I tried to address each lecture to its primary audience. The first was delivered on a Tuesday afternoon and was addressed principally to faculty members. In it I said that I think God’s purpose is to create a family of people to be the people of God. These people freely receive God’s love into their lives, and they learn to love God with all their hearts and to love their neighbors as themselves. In this life and in the life to come, they share together in a fellowship of mutual love, happiness, and the worship of God. I tried to show that when God’s purpose is understood in this way, it corresponds perfectly to the perennial human quest for the meaning of life.

The second lecture was delivered on Wednesday evening to the congregation of the Mountain Brook Baptist Church. In it I argued that communities can be strong without being exclusive and that God’s family is inclusive rather than exclusive. In particular, I argued against

supersessionism, the teaching that the church has displaced Israel as the people of God. I think the truth is rather that, as Paul wrote in the book of Romans, the church has been grafted onto Israel the way a new branch can be grafted onto an established olive tree. Both are the people of God.

The third lecture was delivered on Thursday morning and was addressed to a much larger audience, the undergraduate students at Samford. In it I talked about how individuals discern God's purpose for their lives, the same theme I had addressed at Judson University ten years earlier.

I was honored to be invited to deliver these lectures. I have continued to enjoy conversations about theology with Warren Holley. Sadly, our mutual friend Jim Barnette died in 2021.



In 2019 I led two days of discussions with a small, informal organization called the Baptist Classics Seminar. All of the members are professors of Baptist studies, mostly of Baptist history. The group has been meeting annually since 2002. They emphasize Baptist history, and they have given attention to Baptist theology in several of their meetings.

My assignment was to select readings in theology written by Baptist theologians across the 410 years of Baptist history. I finished the selections early in 2019, and my friend Doug Weaver of Baylor University arranged for copies of them to be distributed to the participants. We didn't gather until September, so everyone had several months to read the materials. We met at the Atlanta campus of Mercer University. It was a good experience to be with so many fine scholars.



Most of my post-retirement teaching and preaching has been in churches. For several years I have received almost no invitations to speak in Southern Baptist churches, but I have been invited often to speak in churches affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or with the Alliance of Baptists. I also preached and taught in non-Baptist churches such as the Cottdale Christian Church in Cottdale, Alabama, and the Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit, Highland Avenue Presbyterian Church, and Canterbury United Methodist Church, all in Birmingham.

For several weeks I taught a study about the Holy Trinity in a Church of God of Prophecy congregation. Their pastor, Phil Pruitt, invited me to teach this study because he wanted to help his congregation to avoid a mistake that some Pentecostal churches have made of giving up the classical Christian belief that the one true, living God is in some wonderful and mysterious way also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I hope that what I said was helpful.

One Sunday shortly before Christmas 2017, I preached at Frankville Baptist Church, where I had served as pastor 52 years before. My sermon was entitled “The Plainest and Simplest Thing in the World.” The phrase is from a comment made by the English writer William Law to John Wesley and his brother Charles: “Misters Wesley, Christianity is the plainest and simplest thing in the world. We love because He first loved us.” In the second sentence Law was quoting 1 John 4:19, and that was one of the Scripture texts for my sermon. The other text was Jesus’ teaching that the two greatest commandments are to love God and love one’s neighbor.

Following the worship service there was a big dinner at the church, and many people stayed for the meal. There are still some splendid cooks in the church, and the meal was delicious. The church now has a nice kitchen and fellowship hall, so we were able to eat inside. During the meal Caroline and I roved around the fellowship hall in order to visit with as many church members as possible. It was a challenge to adjust to the fact that some of the members who had been teenagers when I was their pastor were now retired senior citizens. It was a pleasure to be with them all and to get to know their current pastor and his wife, Grant and Delana Barber.



It wasn’t until after I moved to Birmingham that I preached regularly in churches whose worship services are broadcast on television. I served as interim pastor of two such churches, Woodmont Baptist in Nashville in 1998 and First Baptist in Huntsville in 2015. In Huntsville I shared the interim work with Brad Creed, the provost at Samford.

In 1998 I realized that I needed to write out my sermons in order to avoid ending the sermon too soon and leaving the TV folks scrambling to find something to put on the air, or on the other hand preaching too long and forcing the TV folks to cut us off before the sermon was finished. In the past I had taken extensive notes rather than a full manuscript into the pulpit, but I found to my surprise that it felt natural to write out sermons. Writing enabled me to say more in less time, and it also made the transitions within the sermons smoother. The risks of a written sermon are that you preach without feeling or that you lose eye contact with the congregation. For me, it was worth the risk. Among other things, it is reassuring to know that no matter how distracted or tired I might be, I will be able to say something coherent simply by reading what I have written.



I have preached in numerous churches since I moved to Birmingham. In two of them I served as interim pastor and also preached on so many other occasions and led so many other studies that I came to feel almost as if I were an honorary member. They were the Cottdale Christian Church and Auburn First Baptist Church. At Auburn I shared the interim work with Ronnie Brewer who was then the Coordinator of Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Serving at the Cottdale Christian Church was a wonderful learning experience. The Christian Churches—Disciples of Christ are a lot like Baptists, but there are two important differences, both of which I appreciate. The Disciples have Holy Communion every Sunday. This was especially nice at Cottdale where the Communion service was conducted by the laypeople rather than by me, leaving me free to focus on the meaning of Communion with God and with each other.

Second, the Disciples are intensely ecumenical in a way that few other denominations can match. They have made contributions to the movement for Christian unity that are way out of proportion to their size. In fact, one of the greatest of their ecumenists, Paul Crow, had served as pastor of the church in Cottdale when he was a student at the University of Alabama many years before. Across many years he

had continued to be a loyal fan of Alabama football and to come back to Tuscaloosa for one or more games each year. When I learned this, I invited him to preach for us on Sundays when he was in town, and he kindly did this.

I hadn't been writing out my sermons very long when Cottdale Christian Church invited me to come as their interim pastor. In the business meeting when they took the vote about my coming, one of the matriarchs of the church voted against me. I wasn't there for the vote and didn't learn about her vote until several years later. On a Sunday afternoon Caroline and I were visiting with her not long before she died, and she said she had something important to tell me. She said, I want you to know that I voted against you. I didn't think it was right for a preacher to write out his sermons. Then she added, I want you to know that I have changed my mind. I am still not sure about written sermons, but you have something to say in your sermons and I am glad that you have come to our church. I thanked her and told her that I understood.

Auburn First Baptist Church is adjacent to the campus of Auburn University and is very much a university church. I had preached there once even before I moved to Alabama, and I have continued to preach and teach there occasionally for more than three decades. I have been a friend with three of their pastors—John Jeffers, Jim Evans, and Tripp Martin—and with the longtime minister of music, Dale Peterson, and I am grateful they have included me in the life of the church. One of the nice things about being there has been getting to know Wayne Flynt, an eminent historian in the university and an ordained Baptist minister. Wayne is a prolific author of books and of articles and op-ed pieces. He has been called the conscience of Alabama because of his incisive writing about Alabama politics and public life. Caroline and I are delighted to have become friends with Wayne and his wonderful wife Dartie, and we were saddened when Dartie died in 2020.



During the COVID-19 pandemic I have done almost no preaching. In fact, since the pandemic began, Caroline and I have been able to attend worship services on only a handful of Sundays, in the summer

of 2021. We are glad that we can watch worship services online, but we miss being able to worship the Lord in the company of our fellow church members. Across the years, several friends have told me that the closest they ever feel to God is when they are out of doors enjoying the beautiful natural world. I enjoy the natural world, of course. We feed the birds in our yard, we watch the rabbits and chipmunks, and we actually have deer wander through our yard from time to time. But the natural world is not where I feel closest to God. I feel closest to God when I am in church worshiping God alongside my fellow Christians. I love singing the hymns of the church, and having Scripture read to me in a church setting, and hearing sermons that are truthful and thoughtful and helpful, and perhaps most of all, engaging in Holy Communion with the Lord and with my fellow church members.

Being retired made it possible for me, for the first time since I began teaching in New Orleans in 1970, to have as much time as I needed to prepare sermons and studies for churches. It was nice that I no longer needed to steal time from my family or from my teaching to prepare sermons and Bible studies for churches.

I love preaching, but I think I do a better job of teaching. My sermons tend to be more informational than inspirational. I have never held back when preaching and teaching in churches. I talk to churches about the same things that I talk about when teaching students at the seminary or in the divinity school. I express things a little differently by telling different stories or using different sources in sermons than in lectures, but the content is the same.



The most extended ministry of my retirement years has been in an Episcopal Church in Birmingham. St. Mary's-on-the-Highlands is located in downtown Birmingham and is almost as old as the city, having been founded in 1887. I had taught a study on the Holy Spirit there the year before I retired. The rector, Huey Gardner, invited me to become a part-time theologian-in-residence for the church after I retired, and I happily accepted.

I had two assignments. One involved a format that was new for me. Once a month for nine times each year, the church sponsored a weekday lunch. They named it “Fisher and Loaves,” a pun on Matthew 15:36. Attendance was limited to about 15 people, the number who could sit comfortably around a large table located in a conference room. The church provided the meals. We opened with a prayer, spent a few minutes eating and visiting, and then I made a presentation of five to eight minutes on a theological topic that had been announced in advance. We spent the remainder of the time discussing that topic. Some of the topics that I chose were evolution, suffering, prayer, religious liberty, feminism, non-Christian religions, and miracles. The discussions were lively and interesting. We finished in 60 minutes or less so that those who were working could hurry back to their workplaces.

There was one downside to the format. When the church first offered the program, some church members became unhappy when they telephoned the church to reserve a place only to find that all the places had taken. I understand. It’s unusual for a church to offer programs and then turn away people who would like to participate. Fortunately the members soon understood the necessity of limiting participation, and the unhappiness seemed to subside.

My principal assignment at St. Mary’s was to present theological studies to adults on Sunday mornings. I did this between two worship services. I gave the hour-long presentations in a large room, and I would estimate that the average attendance was between forty and fifty persons.

I offered a set of presentations on each of 12 topics. Each set lasted from four to seven weeks, and I did not repeat any of the sets. The topics were the Holy Trinity, Atonement, Christianity in the United States Today, Our Knowledge of God, Six Momentous Christian Beliefs, Forgiveness, Virtues, The Church, The Spirit of the Lord, Jesus, Biblical Images of Christians, and Salvation. It was a wonderful experience for me to prepare lectures for an audience who were interested and informed and who were part of a church tradition that was substantially different from my own.

I always attended the worship services prior to my Sunday morning presentations, and those were very meaningful to me. The

liturgy, the heavenly music, the weekly Eucharist, the sermons, and the thoughtful, reverent, beautiful character of the services helped me to worship the Lord.

As my work at St. Mary's was coming to a close, I prepared a gift for the church. I had used handouts in all of the presentations. With few exceptions, the handouts were full texts rather than outlines. I collected the handouts and put them into a uniform format. For the cover I used a photograph of a beautiful stained glass window in the church. The photograph had been taken by Irene Gardner, wife of the rector. I then took the lectures and cover to a local bookstore that had an Espresso print-on-demand book machine and made about ten copies. The book is entitled *Thinking about God at St. Mary's*.

At my final presentation to the church, I presented several copies of the book to Huey, to be placed in the church's library. I told those who were there that they could buy copies of the book simply by requesting them at the bookstore. The bookstore kept a permanent digital file of the book, and it took less than ten minutes for the Espresso machine to print and bind a copy. I learned later that several members had done that. Unfortunately, the Espresso machine is no longer in Birmingham, and I miss it. It was nice to be able to be able to buy copies of the book on few minutes' notice.



Another way I continued to engage in ministry during retirement was by serving on boards. I had served on a few boards before I retired, and after I retired, I joined several additional ones. Six years after my retirement I was serving on nine of them: the Coordinating Council for Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Alabama Faith Council, the Justice and Mercy group which works to end the death penalty in Alabama, the Ministering to Ministers Foundation which provides support for ministers who have been fired, the Advisory Board of the Department of Pastoral care at UAB hospital, the Board of the journal *Nurturing Faith*, the Board of the journal *Christian Ethics Today*, and the Board of Greater Birmingham Ministries. I also served on the Board of the Vestaview Condominium Association.

On some boards I didn't make much difference, but on others I think I was able to make a contribution. For example, along with some of the other members of the Justice and Mercy group (JAM), I was invited to speak about the death penalty in churches and also in high schools, colleges, and universities. Most of our speaking was in or near Birmingham, but I have spoken in venues from Athens in the northern part of Alabama to Mobile in the south.

I enjoyed this ministry immensely. I am convinced that we don't need the death penalty in order to protect society from violence. I recognize that on the principle of a life for a life (Exodus 21:23–24), some people deserve to be executed. However, Jesus taught that his followers should not follow that principle but rather practice mercy (Matthew 5:38–42). I believe that his teaching about mercy is morally appropriate for public policy as well as for our personal lives.

The only two nations in Europe and North America that still have the death penalty are the United States and Belarus. In the United States for the past few years, public support for the death penalty has declined, fewer people are being executed, and fewer death penalty sentences are being handed down by the courts. I hope that in the not-too-distant future Americans will look back with embarrassment on the fact that their country continued to execute people for as long as it did.

Caroline and I have participated in JAM-organized public demonstrations against the death penalty. On days when an execution is scheduled in Alabama, we meet at noon for a vigil in downtown Birmingham across from the sheriff's office. We carry signs with messages such as "Thou Shalt Not Kill." The response of the public varies from thumbs-up and horn-blowing from passing drivers to words of appreciation or disagreement from pedestrians. My most memorable challenge happened when I was carrying board with Jesus' words, "Be ye merciful." A man who appeared to be about sixty years old got right up next my face and said forcefully, "The Old Testament says 'An eye for an eye'!"

I pointed to my board and said, "But Jesus said, 'Be ye merciful.'" He replied, "Yeah, well. . . ." and walked away.

I think that I was able to make a contribution also through my work as president of our condominium association. Before I joined that board, the monthly meetings had been acrimonious, and there had been a lack of clarity about the finances of the association. As president I was able to clarify the finances by creating some pie charts and other documents. Thereafter the meetings became so pleasant that some board members told me that they looked forward to them. Once we were better organized and informed, we were able to build a beautiful new swimming pool area as well as manage the ongoing needs of the association efficiently.



In addition to serving on boards, I participated in discussion groups. At the time of my retirement I was participating in three. They included the Trinity Group and the Science and Theology Discussion group, both of which I described earlier. The third was the Ministers Discussion Group, a 75-year-old organization whose 18 members always included some academics, some pastors, and some heads of judicatories.

Year by year I became more and more busy with the boards and discussion groups. For example, my calendar for 2014 shows that in that year I attended 93 hour-long meetings plus a 3-day meeting in Birmingham and two 2-day meetings away from Birmingham. I began to feel that even though I enjoyed working on the boards and participating in the discussion groups, I needed to step back from some of them in order to keep up with things that were happening in my ministry and in my family. I ended up resigning from most of them. In 2022 I am serving on just one board, for *Christian Ethics Today*, and participating in just one discussion group, the Trinity Group.



After I retired I continued to write. The other large project in addition to this book was preparing a third edition of my book *Thinking about God* (2016). It is 55,000 words longer than the 1994 edition and 70,000 words longer than the original 1974 edition. Many friends have given me their advice concerning this book. Gary Fagan suggested the title, and Malcolm Tolbert and Philip Wise made very helpful suggestions about the first edition. I got additional advice concerning

the second edition from Paul Basden, LaMon Brown, Gary Furr, Ted Mashburn, Dwight Moody, Paul Robertson, Philip Wise, Gerald Wright, and Bill Griffin. Charlie Arnett, Jason Baldwin, Sarah Jackson Shelton, and LaMon Brown all offered wise counsel for the third edition.

It is an interesting experience to revise a book that you had first written more than forty years earlier. I kept the same twelve chapter titles in the three editions. Nothing that I wrote in the earlier editions seemed to me in 2016 to be wrong, but some of the things I had written earlier did seem to me to be less timely or less important, and I omitted them. I added other things that now seemed to me to be important. In the third edition I included appendixes for the first time. This made it possible to incorporate things that I felt might be useful to some readers but that were difficult to integrate into the main body of the book. I appreciate that across almost a half-century now the book has been used to teach theology in several colleges, universities, seminaries, and churches. Because it is the fullest statement of my theology, I have put a copy on my website to make it available to as many people as possible.

I was delighted when my friend and former student Thomas Sibley told me that he would like to have the first edition of the book translated into Croatian. It was translated by Goran Medved and published in 2016 with the title *Razmišljanje o Bogu*. Tom is using it as a text in his theology class at the Biblijski Institut in Zagreb.



I have written a few articles since I retired. I especially enjoyed co-authoring two series of articles, one about forgiveness and the other about prayer, with my friend Arthur Freeman. Art is a psychiatrist who is very knowledgeable about Christian theology, and I think that gives him special insight into both prayer and forgiveness.

Since I moved to Birmingham I have written about Baptist life and thought, the death penalty, homosexuality, the environment, women in ministry, relations between theology and science, the person and atoning work of Christ, Christian missions, moral formation in Christian universities, and the vast middle space between secularism and Fundamentalism.

## Family

Caroline and I had loved our work, and we soon came to love our retirement, too.

During our retirement years we have remained close to our children. We have been able to visit frequently with Stephanie and her husband Arlen because they live near us. Since one of our principal motives for retiring was to see Kenneth and Jill and their three daughters more often, as soon as we retired we began making regular trips to New Orleans for 3–day weekend visits with them. As our granddaughters got older and their schedules became fuller, we continued to visit, but not as frequently. Our children and their spouses and our grandchildren are all wonderful people and we treasure the times we can be with them.



Caroline and I celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary in 2013 with our family. In Birmingham we all went to the Highlands Bar and Grill for a celebratory dinner, and the next day we drove to Lake Lanier in north Georgia. For several days we stayed together there in a large house with a game room and swimming pool and a dock on the lake. We also stopped in Atlanta for a lovely meal with Caroline's older sister Myra and her husband Bob Marsh and with her younger sister Ingrid and her husband Joel Richardson. We have been to celebrations of milestone anniversaries for friends that were large public affairs, and those are nice, but for us being together with our family was just perfect.



Caroline and I had taken vacations before we retired. We had camped many times with our children, sometimes in company with friends. After our children married, we met them and their spouses and granddaughters for a week in one of our favorite cities, Santa Fe. We had used vacation time to visit with our extended families. Sometimes we had vacationed in connection with my speaking engagements. Caroline and I had taken two week–long distant vacations by ourselves, one to Bermuda and the other to Paris. We rode around Bermuda on a motor scooter that reminded us of the Lambretta we had had back in our Oxford

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days. In Paris we stayed on the Île Saint–Louis, about a two minute walk from Notre Dame.

Three months after we retired, we took our longest vacation ever. We left on September 19, 2008, and returned home on October 6. It was a driving trip. We both enjoy traveling by car. We saw many beautiful things on the trip, but our objective wasn't to see the sights. Our objective was to see family and friends.

We visited with Evelyn Stagg in Louisville, and then with Wallace and Judith Williams in Georgetown, Kentucky. We spent a night in the log cabin home of Dave Sheffel of *Wittenberg Door* fame and his wife Brenda. In Elgin near Chicago we visited with Eric Mason and his wife Jackie. I remember that in Illinois we were paying more than five dollars a gallon for gas.

We saw two couples in the Twin Cities. I had taken a fine class in ethics with Jim Gaffney at Loyola, and his wife Kathleen Gaffney had



Our family gathered to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary in 2013.  
Front row left to right: Kate Humphreys, Fisher, Caroline, Jane Humphreys.  
Top row: Stephanie Humphreys Hoffman, Arlen Hoffman, Kenneth Humphreys,  
Jill Condon, Camille Humphreys.

been a doctoral student at the seminary in New Orleans. In the Christian Theological Research Fellowship I had worked alongside Alan Padgett and had gotten to know his wife Sally Bruneel.

Near Bozeman we visited with Bruce Gourley and his wife Debra. In Spokane we saw Roger and Dot Mohrlang for the first time since 1977 when the four of us were at Oxford and Dot had typed the first draft of my book *The Death of Christ*.

We went on to the coast where we spent a week, and then we drove down to Portland where we visited with our friend David May. We hadn't seen David in person since he and I worked together at the Vieux Carre Baptist Church the early 1970s in New Orleans, he as the pianist and I as the interim pastor. More recently, he and I had worked together to create a website to make some of my writings available online.

Next we went to Oceanside, California, where we visited in the beautiful home of Samuel and Jessie Mikolaski. Sam told us with a smile that they had an ocean view, and then he took us out onto his patio. If you stood on tiptoe and leaned over the fence, you could see in the far distance a tiny blue dot which Sam assured us was the Pacific Ocean.

We drove next to Phoenix where we had a lovely visit with Larry and Wanda Baker. We also had very brief visits there with Terry Young who had been my colleague in the seminary and with Harold Casaubon who had been a member of Metairie Evangelical Church. Next we went across to Houston to visit with my sister Dale and her husband Garland West and then up to Mexia to visit my other sister, Ruth, and her husband Ronnie Talbot.

In Dallas we saw three couples. We had lunch with Susan and Charlie Arnett. Charlie and I had become friends when we were in Boy Scout Troop 35 together back in 1951, so 2021 marked the anniversary of a 70-year-long friendship. We had supper with John and Jory Watson and Jory's parents Ray and Joy Rust, all of whom we knew from the seminary. John and I had heard the remarkable presentation by Bernard Lonergan in Denton in 1974, and Jory had been a secretary for Malcolm Tolbert at the time our book *Speaking in Tongues* was published. Ray and Joy were in the original dinner group that Malcolm and Nell Tolbert had created.

Next we went up to visit with Carol and Rob Sherer in Little Rock. We had gotten to know Carol well in New Orleans when we were all at the seminary together, and later she invited me to speak for events at Rayne Memorial Methodist Church in New Orleans where she was one of the clergy. I enjoyed being with her church, but it did include an embarrassing moment. During a worship service we took Holy Communion, and we clergy knelt on a bench with our backs to the congregation. As I knelt I remembered that one of my shoes had a hole that went almost all the way through the sole. I was so distracted by this that when the time came for me to dip the bread into the cup of wine, I reached out for the cup to pull it to my lips. Before I caused the wine to spill out, the officiant managed to communicate to me to dip the bread.

Finally we visited with some other friends from seminary days, Mack and Bet Hubbell, in their lovely home in Cleveland, Mississippi. Then we went home, tired but very happy. We had driven a little more than 7,600 miles.

In the middle of that long trip we spent a special week in Washington State with our family. Our friends Mike and Debra Carlson had offered us the use of a beautiful vacation home they owned at Friday Harbor in the San Juan Islands. Shortly after we arrived at Friday Harbor, our children and their spouses and our three grandchildren flew into Seattle, and the nine of us spent a week together in the Carlsons' house at Friday Harbor. It was the longest visit we have ever had with both of our children and their spouses and all three granddaughters together.

Our granddaughter Jane was not yet a year old. It would have been unsafe for her to go along when the family went out on a boat to see the famous Orcas, so I stayed at the house with her. Her mother Jill had told me that the best way to get her to take a nap would be to lie down with her so she could hear my heartbeat, so when it was time for her nap, I lay back in a recliner with her on my chest. She went sound sleep—and so did I. Both of us were still sleeping when the rest of the family returned from their boat trip.



Since that long trip, Caroline and I have continued to take trips and vacations. In the past we had camped with Gary and Bertha Fagan and their children in the Ozarks, and we had traveled with Philip and Cynthia Wise to Vancouver and later to Dresden, Germany. During our retirement, we vacationed on the Gulf Coast with the Wises and at other times with Caroline's sister Ingrid and her husband Joel Richardson, with our dear friends Gary and Vickie Furr, and with our longtime friends Bill and Ruth Ann Blase. More recently, we have taken several vacations with our friends Buddy and Kay Shurden. These have all been wonderful experiences for us. The freedom to have extended visits with friends has been one of the best things about retirement.



I mentioned earlier that when we moved to Birmingham we bought an upstairs condo. We loved the condo, but in our middle seventies we stopped loving the stairs. We needed a house with no stairs or steps. We searched for several months with little success until Vickie Furr told us about a charming development called Charleston Square. We kept our eye on it, and in 2017 we bought a lovely home there. It's about a ten-minute drive from the condo, so we are still close to things we're familiar with such as restaurants and doctors' offices. The house has three bedrooms and two baths. It is on a small lot and I am cutting grass again, but we have outside help for trimming the bushes and weeding the flower beds. I cleaned the gutters the first year, but our friend Marla Corts expressed alarm about my working on a ladder, and I don't do that any longer. Until the pandemic, we frequently entertained family and friends in our new house, and we hope to be able to do that safely again soon. It has proved to be a very good place for Caroline and me to be living during the pandemic.



In our retirement years health issues have become more pressing. My health is basically good, and the few problems I have are easily managed. Caroline, however, has developed some more severe problems.



Caroline and Fisher in retirement.

She has had cancer (which is now cured), she has heart failure, and on six occasions, beginning back in 2002, she has fallen and broken bones. She is still as beautiful and lovely as always, but now she has to be more cautious and to spend more time in doctors' offices. Kenneth and Jill have experienced health problems, too, but these have been managed successfully. Our son-in-law Arlen Hoffman also has challenging but manageable health issues. Our granddaughters are all well.

In our retirement Caroline and I have experienced the greatest sadness of our lives. On March 19, 2020, our daughter Stephanie went into hospital for a routine ablation to address atrial fibrillation. In the recovery room something went horribly wrong and Stephanie became completely non-responsive. On April 11 she died, having never regained consciousness. She was 54 years old.

Stephanie was a beautiful soul, pure in heart. From her childhood she was as gentle and as compassionate as anyone I have ever known. She had a lively and slightly scandalous sense of humor. She was a devout Christian with a special gift for relating to people who are outside the church. I am very sorry that she did not get to live a long life the way Caroline and I have, and I am very sad that she is no longer here with us. There is an empty place in our lives that Stephanie used to fill.

In the weeks following Stephanie's death, many family members and friends said beautiful things and helpful things to us. I welcomed all of the condolences. It did not trouble me that some of them were poorly expressed, because I knew that they came from hearts of concern.

As I think back on that tragic time, I can see that what was most helpful to me was a simple phrase. It had been used repeatedly by our friend John Claypool both in sermons and in conversations: Life is gift. Life is not an entitlement. It is a gift. God gave Stephanie the precious gift of life, and God gave Stephanie as a precious gift to Caroline and me. Later God gave Stephanie as a gift to her wider family, to her husband Arlen, and to her many friends and colleagues. I think about her every day, always with sadness but also with gratitude for her life and that she was in our lives for 54 years.



We human beings naturally feel many emotions. Gratitude is one of them. We usually express gratitude directly, by giving thanks. Over and over, I give thanks to God for giving us the precious gift of our dear daughter.

We can also express our gratitude indirectly, by living grateful lives. One of our great hymns begins with the words, "Come, ye thankful people, come." Over the years gratitude can become such a prominent emotion in people's lives that it is fair to say that they have become thankful people. I aspire to be a thankful person.

A Scottish theologian, John Baillie, has written about what he calls the wider witness of gratitude. Sometimes people who do not believe in God find themselves feeling gratitude but don't know what to do with it. Baillie quotes the short story writer Katherine Mansfield

who, while on a trip to the Alps, wrote this in her diary: “If only one could make some small, grasshoppery sound of praise to some one, of thanks to some one—but to who?” We Christians believe that Jesus has shown us the One to whom we may give thanks for the all the good we experience in our lives.

I share the ancient Christian hope that God’s final word to Stephanie is not death but life, life abundant and eternal in the presence of the Triune God of love. I am attempting to follow the instruction found in the book of Hebrews: “Let us hold on firmly to the hope we profess, because we can trust God to keep his promise” (Hebrews 10:35). I have that same hope for all people. I hope that the Good Shepherd will continue to search until he finds the last lost sheep.

In the year I was born Lou Gehrig, the iron man of baseball, gave a brief farewell speech in Yankee Stadium. He had recently learned that he had the debilitating disease ALS which has come to be called “Lou Gehrig’s Disease.” Despite that cruel, fatal disease, in that famous speech Gehrig said, “I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”

I know exactly how he felt. I feel that I am one of the most blessed people in the world. All of my long life I have been enfolded in love by family, by friends, and by our wonderful God. I love life, I love the wondrous world God has created, and I love God. I love my family and my friends. I have had joy in my work. I have found a measure of understanding that is satisfying to me, and I find it fulfilling to continue to seek for more and better understanding. I look with hope to the coming of the Kingdom of God. I am grateful and hopeful.

For the wonder of each hour,  
Of the day and of the night,  
Hill and vale and tree and flower,  
Sun and moon and stars of light.  
Lord of all, to Thee we raise,  
This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of human love,  
Brother, sister, parent, child,  
Friends on earth and friends above,  
For all gentle thoughts and mild.  
Lord of all, to Thee we raise,  
This our hymn of grateful praise.

For Thyself, best Gift Divine!  
To our race so freely given;  
For that great, great love of Thine,  
Peace on earth, and joy in heaven.  
Lord of all, to Thee we raise,  
This our hymn of grateful praise.

## APPENDIXES

### Appendix 1

#### TIMELINE FOR FISHER HUMPHREYS AND HIS FAMILY

February 5, 1939	Born in Columbus, Mississippi
July 31, 1941	Caroline is born in Jackson, Mississippi
May 1956	Graduates from Lee High School in Columbus
1956–1957	Attends Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina
1957–1958	Works for a construction company in Columbus
1958–1961	Attends Mississippi College at Clinton, Mississippi
May 1958–May 1960	Works at WLBT TV station
Summer, 1960	Works as a youth minister in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico
Fall, 1960–August 1961	Works for Camp Lake Forest
May 1961	Graduates from Mississippi College
1961–64	Attends New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and works at motels and then the telephone company
June 7, 1963	Fisher and Caroline are married. They move into an apartment on the seminary campus
August 1963–May 1964	Caroline teaches school and Fisher has several small jobs
May 1964	Fisher and Caroline move to Frankville, Alabama and Fisher is pastor of the church there
August 1964	Graduates from seminary
August 1964–May 1965	Teaches math at Leroy High School near Frankville
June–September 1965	Fisher and Caroline live in Jackson and Fisher works at TV station again
September 1965	Fisher moves to Oxford and Caroline remains in Jackson with her parents for the birth of their baby
November 24, 1965	Stephanie Caroline Humphreys is born in Jackson
December 28, 1965	Caroline and Stephanie join Fisher in Oxford

March 15, 1966	Fisher's mother Hilda Humphreys dies and he flies Tallahassee for her funeral
Late March, 1966	Returns to Oxford together with his 15-year-old sister Ruth
October 14, 1966	Caroline's father Kenneth Toler dies. Caroline and Stephanie go to Jackson
June 22, 1967	Graduates from Oxford University
June 29, 1967	The family flies home. Ruth goes to Texas. Fisher, Caroline, and Stephanie go to Jackson
August 1967	Fisher, Caroline, and Stephanie move to Argenta, Illinois
1967–68	Teaches English in Argenta–Oreana High School and is pastor of the Weldon Baptist Church
May 1968	The family moves to New Orleans
1968	Begins doctoral studies
Spring 1969	Teaches adjunctively for the seminary
May 1969	The family moves to Lula, Mississippi, where Fisher is pastor of the Baptist church
November 1, 1969	Kenneth Fisher Humphreys is born in Clarksdale, Mississippi
May 1970	The family moves to New Orleans
June 1970–December 1989	Teaches at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
May 11, 1972	Graduates with a doctoral degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
February 25, 1973	Fisher's father Hugo Humphreys dies
1976–77	The family lives in Oxford during Fisher's sabbatical leave
January 31, 1987	Stephanie and Arlen Hoffman are married in the Old Metairie Protestant Church
1983–84	Sabbatical leave at Loyola University in New Orleans
May 21, 1984	Graduates from Loyola University
January 1, 1990	Fisher and Caroline move to a condo in Birmingham

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January 1990–May 2008	Teaches at the Beeson Divinity School of Samford University
Fall 1993	Fisher and Caroline are at Princeton Theological Seminary for his sabbatical leave
May 11, 1996	Kenneth and Jill Condon are married in St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans
August 3, 2000	Camille Grace Humphreys is born in New Orleans
Fall 2000	Fisher and Caroline are at Durham, North Carolina, for his sabbatical leave at Duke University
October 17, 2000	Caroline’s mother Nan Olson Toler dies
October 15, 2002	Kate Elizabeth Humphreys is born in New Orleans
July 23, 2006	Fisher August Humphreys is born in New Orleans. He dies a few hours later.
October 30, 2007	Jane Margaret Humphreys is born in New Orleans
June 1, 2008	Retires
April 11, 2020	Stephanie Caroline Humphreys Hoffman (1965–2020) dies

## Appendix 2

## BOOKS BY FISHER HUMPHREYS

- 1973 *Speaking in Tongues* with Malcolm Tolbert (Insight Press)
- 1974 *Thinking about God* (Second edition, 1994. Third edition, 2016) (Insight Press)
- 1976 *The Almighty* (David C. Cook Publishing)
- 1978 *The Death of Christ* (Broadman Press)
- 1980 *The Heart of Prayer* (Broadman Press)
- 1983 *A Dictionary of Doctrinal Terms* with Philip Wise (Broadman Press)
- 1981 *Nineteenth Century Evangelical Theology* (Broadman Press)
- 1985 *The Nature of God* (Broadman Press)
- 1989 *Southern Baptist Heritage* (Seminary External Education Department)
- 1994 *The Way We Were* (Revised edition, 2002) (McCracken Press. Revised edition, Smyth & Helwys, 2002)
- 2000 *God So Loved the World* with Paul Robertson (Insight Press)
- 2004 *Fundamentalism* with Philip Wise (Smyth & Helwys)
- 2005 *I Have Called You Friends* (New Hope Publishers)
- 2016 *Thinking about God at St. Mary's* (Espresso)
- 2022 *A Personal History* (Insight Press)

Appendix 3

**THREE-PERSONED ONE**

En - fold - ed in your life and love, Three-Personed  
Fa - ther of Christ and of us all, Source, Guide, and  
Lord Je - sus, you are the Son of God, To save us  
Spi - rit of Christ, we are thank - ful to you, In all our  
Fa - ther a - bove — our ris - en Christ—Spi - rit who

One, we sing our prayer; We give you thanks, e -  
Goal of all your world; We love be - cause you  
all, be - come a man; Thank you, that in your  
lives you pour God's love; Trans-form us, teach us to  
lives in those you call, We wor - ship you, Three-

ter - nal God, For your great kind-ness, love, and care.  
first loved us; Thank you for send-ing Christ your Word.  
love for us, You lived, and died, and live a - gain.  
know the Truth: The cru - ci - fied and ris - en Lord.  
Per - soned One, Who share your life and love with all. A-men.

Tune DUKE STREET, John Hatton, 1793.

Appendix 4



A PERSONAL HISTORY

Somewhere in my forties it occurred to me that if one of my parents or grandparents had written down stories about his or her life or about the lives of his or her ancestors, I would treasure that book. It was a short move from there to the idea that my children and grandchildren, and perhaps in the future their children, might someday come to treasure a book like that. That is when I decided to write this book. I have written it with my immediate family in mind. Other potential readers include my extended family, my friends, my former students, people who are interested in Christian theology and how it is taught, people who are studying the controversy that convulsed the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s, and people who have an interest in Baptist life or in church life generally in America from the 1950s until the present.



Insight Press, Covington, Louisiana

