

BCE Founder Robert Parham Remembered as Entrepreneurial Ethicist

Robert Parham, founder and executive director of Baptist Center for Ethics, died Sunday evening, March 5 at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville after a prolonged illness. He was 63 and surrounded by his family.

“More than anyone I have known, Robert was well-suited for and passionate about his specific job in life,” said Kevin Heifner, chair of BCE’s board of directors. “His purpose was the same as the organization he founded and deeply cherished: to help people of faith advance the common good. This was not a sound bite for him but the way he lived out his understanding of the essence of the Gospel. He was a true gentleman and will be missed by his many friends. We extend our prayers for peace to his wife and children in the days ahead.”

Parham, the eldest of five children, grew up in Nigeria. His parents, Bob and Jo Ann Parham, were missionaries with the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Parham earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Foreign Service from Georgetown University, the Master of Divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Doctorate in Christian Ethics from Baylor University.

Parham began his career with the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention in Nashville, where his work focused on issues including hunger, race and the environment.

Parham left the CLC and started BCE in 1991. The mission: provide positive, practical and pro-active ethics resources for congregations and congregational leaders.

Parham also wrote his first book at that time: *Loving Neighbors Across Time: A Christian Guide to Protecting the Earth*.

“Robert Parham was a close personal friend who was one of the most entrepreneurial Christian ethicists to emerge from our generation,” said Ray Higgins, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas. “The Bible and the life of Jesus were the foundation for his brand of Christian ethics.”

Parham’s early work for BCE focused on programming ethics-centered conferences. BCE also created *Ethics Report*, a print publication that would last the decade and focus on social and ethical matters.

Parham also oversaw the publication of BCE study guides and Bible study curriculum. He wrote and spoke consistently with secular media outlets like the *Washington Post*, the *Tennessean*, CNN, Fox News and NPR’s Morning Edition in an effort to frame Christian involvement in the public square in positive terms.

A new millennium brought technological changes for BCE. In 2000, Parham initiated BCE’s first online curriculum, as well as a weekly e-newsletter, bcE*byte. It was through that newsletter that Parham [wrote on Sept. 11, 2001](#):

“When some rush towards revenge, those of faith must be slow to speak about retribution. When some quickly denounce Muslims and demonize them, we must avoid the false witness that universalizes harmful attributes to those of different religions. When some seek purely military solutions, we must recognize the sad duty to use force to establish justice in a sinful world. When some ignore the social soil that nourishes hate, we must seek the welfare of the poor and oppressed. Let us begin now to till the soil and to plant the seeds for peace and justice for all.”

In 2002, BCE launched EthicsDaily.com, a website offering daily news and opinion that also served as the platform for Parham’s continued and consistent editorials on creation care, immigration, taxation, missions, prison ministry, human trafficking and so much more.

“The ethics that he talked about, spoke about online, through his ministry, was also the way he lived,” said Ed Hogan, secretary of BCE’s board of directors. “He was the most consistent and good person that I’ve ever known. And I’ve known him for 25 years.”

Returning Stateside after visiting tsunami-stricken areas in early 2005, Parham became ill. A diagnosis of leukemia soon followed - but this failed to sideline Parham’s ethics work and work ethic.

Parham took BCE into the realm of documentary and video production that year, releasing “Always ... Therefore: The Church’s Challenge of Global Poverty.”

Despite being later diagnosed with amyloidosis, Parham continued to work on and travel for documentaries on a host of topics, including racism, Baptist-Muslim relationships and, most recently, the untold story of missionary courage during a tribal genocide in Nigeria in 1966. Parham witnessed part of that conflict as a seventh-grader in Jos, Nigeria, and he wrote a book to accompany the film.

Parham, along with his wife, Betsy, was a member of First Baptist Church Nashville, where he taught Sunday school. He died believing in the power of the local church to effect positive social change. He also traveled the globe with the Baptist World Alliance, supporting the work of Baptists the world over and often quoting a favorite African proverb: “Drop by drop the bucket fills.”

Parham was preceded in death by father Robert M. Parham II, and sister Cynthia Parham. He is survived by wife Betsy; daughter Elisa and son-in-law Erich Wilhelm; son Chris Parham and girlfriend Sophie Solomon; mother JoAnn Parham; brother Sam Parham and wife Kathy; brother Terry Parham; brother Danny Parham and wife Elaine; along with a host of nieces and nephews: Sam and Megan Parham, Kyle Parham, Bobby, Katelyn and Luke Parham, Cameron and Raechyl Parham, James and Meg Parham, Ryan Parham, Rebecca Parham, Spencer Nunn, Ann Wade, Hannah Parham, David Burchfiel, Emily Wade, and Jamie Burchfiel.

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The family is grateful for the entire medical team and staff at Vanderbilt University Medical Center for their compassionate care, as well as the support and care of Parham's long-time running group. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that [memorial gifts](#) be made to Baptist Center for Ethics.

The funeral service will be held on Monday, March 13, at noon at First Baptist Church, Nashville. A visitation will be held beforehand from 10 am to noon.

An album with a sampling of photos from Parham's work at BCE / EthicsDaily.com can be viewed [here](#).