

Professor Challenges ‘Free and Faithful’ Baptists to Reclaim Ethics Heritage

ATLANTA—A Baptist professor urged theology schools supported by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to move quickly to build “a 21st century ethic that is shaped by free and faithful Baptists,” saying Baptists are in danger of losing a rich tradition of social consciousness that produced Nobel Peace Prize winners Martin Luther King and Jimmy Carter.

Larry McSwain, professor of ethics and leadership at McAfee School of Theology, told more than 400 guests at Thursday’s Baptist Center for Ethics 15th anniversary luncheon that theology was not Baptists’ greatest contribution to the world during the 20th century.

“We have had good theologians,” McSwain said, “but it is the ethicists among us who stand out.” With “one or two exceptions,” he said, the “Baptists who made a difference” in the last century “were formed in their prophetic consciousness by theological-education institutions.”

The BCE luncheon, an auxiliary event at the June 21-24 Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Atlanta, honored the legacies of two giants in Baptist ethics in the 20th century: Henlee Barnette and T.B. Maston. Both taught at Southern Baptist Convention seminaries.

“It was seminaries that shaped the prophetic consciousness of this generation,” McSwain said. “That consciousness can no longer be found in the six seminaries of a denomination more committed to affirming a culture of consumerism, so-called just war and right-wing politics.”

“Unless we build a new tradition of prophetic consciousness that challenges our

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culture in 13 fledgling CBF-supported institutions that so far have no more than one full-time professor of Christian ethics, we risk losing an emerging generation that knows little more than the names of these giants of social consciousness," McSwain said.

McSwain, a former student of Barnette, said "two primary values" shaped him.

"The first was the prophetic consciousness of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus, the bearer of the Kingdom," he said. "Henlee had indomitable courage and it led him to study beyond his background, challenge the conventional in church and society, and risk rejection for the cause of truth."

The second was a quote by Sir Roger de Coverly he learned in the fifth grade, "There is much to be said on both sides of every question."

Barnette was "a pragmatic prophet," McSwain said, "never living in the ivory tower, but constantly seeking to apply the prophetic message to the realities and complexities of real life, whether in the corridors of Norton Hospital, the hallways of City Hall, the sanctuary of the church or the minds of students in a seminary classroom."

Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, profiled Maston, who spent his entire adult life in Texas.

"His way of doing ethics spoke to the heart and mind of Texas Baptists," Wade said. With their frontier tradition, Texans "were willing to give him attention, even when he made them uncomfortable or angry."

"T.B. Maston was committed to doing the will of God. It was the signature of his entire life and teaching. And he believed that God had not called him to be a pastor, but a missionary or a teacher," Wade said.

Wade described Maston as "a practical and earnest churchman" who "believed the church ought to make a difference in the everyday life of the people."

Wade repeated Maston's illustration about how to bring about change in a church using a rubber band. "You can use a simple rubber band to lift a 2x4 if you will work with it," he said. "Increase the tension slowly and the board can be lifted. Jerk the band and it will snap leaving the board where it was."

"I learned through the years that applying that truth was not easy, but you have to keep the tension on and you have to be more interested in long term change than in short term irritations," Wade said.

Wade said Maston had "a theology of the cross which was expressed in a direct and practical way: there is both a vertical and a horizontal dimension in the Christian life, just as there are vertical and horizontal beams that meet in the cross upon which our Lord died."

"The Christian life is always about our vertical relationship to God and our horizontal relationship to others," he said. "Living life in the shape of the cross is to cherish the will of God and to be obedient to his commands. The Maston tradition of ethics held together an emphasis on both evangelism and ethics, on redemption and on responsible discipleship, on missions and ministry, on word and deed."

McSwain challenged CBF-partner schools to reclaim the traditions of Maston, Barnette and a generation of their former students who upheld a Baptist social witness.

"Our time is short. Our resources are limited," he said. "But with resolve and commitment, we must rebuild a tradition that made a difference, not only in America but the world, as a 'light set on a hill,' that the good news of Jesus Christ is a message that transforms both individuals and the social and political systems of this world with justice, mercy and peace.

"The best honor we can give these men and women of the past is to build on what they taught with a 21st century ethic that is shaped by free and faithful Baptists."

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