

The Main Thing

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The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

Dr. Henry J. Lyons: A Surprising Choice

The Sunday School Lesson on the first Sunday in June coincides with a thought-provoking question that was asked of me about a month ago. The lesson is based on the call of Moses in Exodus 3:1-12. The question was prompted by my support of a denominational leader.

Moses' encounter with God, in Chapter 3, is best remembered as "the burning bush experience." The key verse sums up the reason for the divine commission issued to Moses, the Egyptian-born son of Hebrew slaves. "Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:10, NAS)

Biblical inquiry into the story of Moses' young adult life necessitates the raising of an important question about God's selection process: Why Moses? Of course, we now recognize him as the greatest prophetic leader of God's Chosen People of the Old Testament. Yet, we dare not miss the implications of choosing a man with such a controversial resume.

In late October of 2008, the General Baptist State Convention of North Carolina met in Fayetteville. I was there, supporting Dr. Ronald Bobo, Pastor of West Side Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis and former Youth Department President of the Baptist World Alliance. Dr. Bobo was one of several men pursuing the presidency of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. However, the Bobo candidacy was not certified because the prerequisite letters of endorsement arrived after the December 31 deadline.

National Baptists will elect the successor to President William J. Shaw who is finishing his second five-year term in September. The convention will meet in Memphis, Tennessee. Two candidates have been certified by the convention's Board of Directors – Dr. Henry J. Lyons of Tampa, Florida and Dr. Julius R. Scruggs of Huntsville, Alabama.

A few weeks ago, I went back North Carolina with Dr. Bobo to attend a midyear session of the state convention. The two of us appeared at a candidates' forum in Statesville. But this time, we were on the stage representing another candidate, Dr. Henry J. Lyons. A former president of the National Baptist Convention, he is seeking a second term as the convention's chieftain. In many ways Dr. Lyons is an unlikely candidate. Ten years ago, he was sent to prison for financial improprieties. His problems with the law led to five years of incarceration.

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During the forum in North Carolina, questions were asked about the fitness of both candidates. Not surprisingly, Dr. Bobo and I responded to several inquiries that were probably on the minds of the Baptists sitting in that city auditorium.

Why should we take Dr. Lyons back? Why should the convention elect him again, considering his troubled past? My response came right out of Exodus 3, right out of the first Sunday School lesson for the month of June.

When God uses a person, the person's past is irrelevant. The Lord saw a unique quality in Moses which Moses did not even see in himself. Contrary to Hollywood's market-driven exaggerations, Moses was a fugitive from justice. Earlier in his life, he murdered a fellow Egyptian and fled the country. He had a price on his head and was well aware of his legal status.

What we witness in Exodus, chapter 3, is a fugitive murderer transformed by the miracle of God's grace to become the Great Emancipator of the Old Testament. You know "the rest of the story." The Old Testament portrays Moses as a heroic leader of the people and as the man of God who challenged the 400-year institution of Egyptian slavery. Although reared by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses is the man God used to bring the Hebrews out of bondage.

No doubt, if Moses had returned to Egypt without the help of God, he would have been arrested and executed. Humiliated and exiled, he became the perfect choice to be used to free God's people from Pharaoh. Rereading the story of Moses should be a wake-up call to those who have a self-righteous and elitist view of God's dealings with men.

Look, God can use anyone He chooses. In fact, He seems to be on the side of the underdog. When we revisit the Scriptures, we hear God expressing His desire to use the weak to unseat the mighty. At the time God called Moses into service, he was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro. According to Genesis 46:34, shepherds were detested by the Egyptians. This makes Moses an even more unlikely candidate to be God's spokesman before Pharaoh. But God uses unexpected and ordinary folk to confound the powerful and proud. (I Corinthians 1:27)

- Dr. Lyons plans to bring IRS-compliance to the entire convention, including every auxiliary and board; and assist every state convention, district association and local church to achieve this kind of financial accountability.
- Dr. Lyons plans to restore the Young Pastors Division which he organized and operated in his first term; and which the current administration disbanded.
- Dr. Lyons plans to make evangelism a priority; the convention a viable resource for developing relevant ministries in our churches; and revive missionary and educational objectives, including American Baptist College.

Lord knows Dr. Lyons can still preach!

I believe Dr. Lyons' administration will affirm the value of all pastors and churches of all sizes and locations. His return to the presidency will signal that once again we have a convention "where everybody is somebody." He will "restore the love we preach and teach" so that people will see that the hope we have in Christ is offered and available to them, regardless of their personal history. His election will be proof that the Christian fellowship is a healing place for the wounded and struggling. Quite simply, I believe electing Dr. Lyons will breathe new life into our convention. Lord knows he can still preach!

Only God could bring Moses back to Egypt as His anointed servant-leader. Only God can bring back Dr. Lyons to the presidency. Only God can work through campaigning and voting to do that. Only God! And, as Dr. Lyons says when preaching, "Praise His holy name!"