

A Baptist pastor offers some kind words for nonbelievers



CHRIS HIGHLAND
HIGHLAND VIEWS

Though I was raised in a Presbyterian church in north Seattle and was a leader of the youth group, I was invited by a girl I liked (you know teenage boys) to attend a youth gathering at her Baptist church. There was a small house next to the church where we all crowded in one evening to hear Fred, a dynamic young pastor, lead us in Bible study and prayer with a silly sense of humor. He made us all laugh or groan. New kids, like me, were introduced and welcomed.

At the end, when the doorway was crowded with kids, my friend and I slipped past and started down the walkway outside. "Chris!" — the pastor, surrounded by adoring youth, motioned for me to come back. I walked up the stairs where he shook my hand, pulled me close, looked into my eyes, and said, "I love you! See you next week."

Stunned, I left with my "church date." I continued coming to the fellowship, attending conferences and studies, until the church dismissed Fred. We all thought it was because he'd become too popular and maybe that threatened the church elders. We never found out. I never saw Fred again.

I tell this story because it's so vivid — an important moment of my youth, when a man, other than my dad, looked

me in the eye and said he loved me. No pastor I'd ever known had said that to me.

This week's column brought that memory back for me as I recalled how powerful faith can be when it is expressed as love and acceptance.

I asked Johnny Prettyman, lead pastor of the Merrimon Avenue Baptist Church, how his faith tradition views nonbelievers. He replied, "In the traditional Christian faith, which I hold dear, agnostics, atheists and secular people are described in the Bible as treasured lost sheep in need of the Good Shepherd."

His use of the word "tradition" caught my attention — something handed on from generation to generation. Beliefs, practices and holy books are passed along so that those who follow will "hold dear" the essential teachings. Then the pastor gets "pastoral" with his response. He refers to the story of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who leaves the whole herd for one lost sheep. "Treasured lost sheep" reveals the sensitive care of both the pastor and the "Pastor."

I asked him if it is important to change the minds of nonbelievers. His answer was sharp: "I heard an atheist once say to Christians, 'How much do you have to hate a person to not try to change their minds about the most important issue in their life?' It is important to share our faith out of a heart of love, but the change of heart is the free choice of every individual."



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Bridges may be built by people or provided by nature.

The emphasis is once again on love as well as choice. As a secular person, I especially appreciate this emphasis. Free choice seems foundational to important decisions regarding matters of faith. If you really care about another person and you have a definite opinion about an important decision they face, you would try to help them to make the best choice for themselves.

The wider question would be, Who really knows what is best for another person? And, can we live with someone and love them if they freely choose an alternative view?

Pastor Prettyman told me that "a secular worldview is very normal and natural. I'm sure I was born with one. I do believe it was a threat to my soul and a challenge to change. I enjoy learning why people hold to secular

worldviews." This was very honest and makes me want to know more, how "not believing" can feel threatening.

Regarding nature, the pastor explained, "God has given us [dominion, but] there is implied responsibility and stewardship. We need to take care of what He has given us. And as far as naturalism and the supernatural or science and faith ... science has never disproved my faith."

As I see it, science cannot prove or disprove faith. Supernatural beliefs are beyond investigation. I would want to know more about that edge.

It was very encouraging to hear him say, "I think healthy dialogue is absolutely necessary between people of faith and without faith, and I don't believe it happens enough in our community. We are working on it, especially for the sake of needy people all around us."

When he encounters different perspectives, he is curious: "With all people I tend to question what it is they value in life and why."

I was grateful for this pastor's succinct responses and for his final word: "God Bless you as you seek to bridge a gap with the sacred and secular mindsets."

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com

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chris_highland
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