

## CABF Pioneer - The Rev. Dr. M. R. Cherry

Rushton Lecture & Luncheon, June 2, 20013

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On December 2, 1921, a child was born to Nema Brown Hatter Cherry and Daniel Borthic Cherry, of Franklin, Kentucky. A boy who grew to be a profoundly influential man for many, and a pioneer in our Fellowship. Millard Ross Cherry, known later to everyone simply as Cherry, or Dr. Cherry.

At the time of his memorial service in Pereaux, Mr. Harrison Wright presented an excellent biographical tribute to Cherry, with stories of his youth in Kentucky that perhaps none of the rest of us ever knew. I refer you to this; the recorded service can still be viewed on the funeral home website. Cherry grew up, during the Depression, on a farm in Franklin, Kentucky, with his parents and younger brother. A grandmother was at home as well. Cherry said the family did everything together, yet were not very close. They were very faithful in the Sulphur Springs Baptist Church, where Cherry was baptized as a teenager, licensed to preach at 19, and ordained to the Christian Ministry four weeks after his 20th birthday. Southern Baptist ordinations were typically performed when the call first came, and before theological studies began.

Millard Ross left home to achieve a Bachelor of Arts at Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas, thanks to the pastor of his youth who now was head of the Bible department there. Cherry always valued the shocking moment in class when a professor of English, after Cherry had answered a question in class, then asked, "WHY?" No one in a teaching role had ever truly asked such a thing of Cherry. "What do you think?" He might have traced the root of thinking for himself, and encouraging thinking in others, to that moment.

From Ouachita (1944) he went to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, for his Bachelor of Divinity, achieved in 1948. Over the next eight years he worked towards his Doctorate in Theology, achieved in 1957. One of His mentors was Dr. Dale Moody, professor of theology and Cherry's thesis supervisor. His 1957 thesis was on the Christ hymn of Philippians 2. I'm sure it was Cherry's leadership among us that brought Dr. Moody to the AFB spring sessions at Bridgewater United Baptist Church in June of 1974, and to Acadia's Hayward Lectures of 1982. You can watch Dr. Moody's Hayward lectures on Youtube!

All the while Cherry did his seminary and doctoral work, he was serving as pastor in Southern Baptist Churches. The personal goal of his education - including his doctorate in biblical theology - was to be the best prepared country preacher he could be. He served as pastor in Arkansas, as well as in Taylorsville and Owensboro, Ky. He loved those days and those people.

He was, perhaps, not the typical Southern Baptist Pastor of the mid 20th century. At Baptist Association gatherings, when a speaker would call out, "Everyone who know's they're going to Heaven, stand up!" Pastor Cherry would remain seated. To stand would be to presume upon the Grace of God.

During his university and pastoring days, both his parents died. His father in an accident that may have been suicide; his mother killed in her car, hit by a train. His brother kept on farming, and Cherry even went back to give a hand a few summers after moving to Canada.

Cherry had no plan to enter the academy and be a teacher. But in 1957, Acadia University, Nova Scotia, Canada, sought out a new professor for the School of Theology, and M. R. Cherry, graduating with his Th. D., was recommended by faculty at Southern

Seminary. Cherry always remembered well his visit to this University and this area to be interviewed, in May of 1957. The Kirkconnells and others entertained him. His trip with them over to Delhaven for a picnic and up to the Lookoff was inspiring. The little Baptist University looked promising. He agreed to come... for a year. Salary of \$3,250. per year, with the promise after two years of becoming full professor with a raise of \$50.

The rest is history - his story and our story. For his loving, inspiring influence has been great upon us, and so many. He entered life in the town, University, and School of Theology with energy and enthusiasm. Well he needed these! The workload was demanding, and one year turned into more than thirty. In the early days he got to know the whole university. He ate at the dining hall. He cheered every sports team he possibly could. He was available to advise many students and made many lifelong friends among them. Some of you are they.

Many of us here today could testify about Cherry's encouragement to think through our Faith, to open mind and heart to all that God and this universe holds. I've always been told in his teaching he would get into preaching. His enthusiasm for his subjects was powerful.

Former student Phil Kennedy once shared a pivotal moment when theological doors were opened wide for him and he started to see a whole new world. It was in Cherry's lecture dealing with theories of the atonement. More than one way to view the atoning work of Christ? Cherry's presentation was freeing.

The joy and playfulness of theological work was exemplified by Cherry. Former student Jeff Hosick, remembers Cherry teaching about Origen, the early Christian theologian, who centuries later was declared a heretic. So Cherry lamented in class: "Poor Origen, after 300 years in heaven he was told he had to pack his bags and head to the other place!"

Dr. Cherry followed Dr. Evan Whidden as Dean of the School of Theology, first as Acting Dean, and entered the heart of things, including the subsequent planning and negotiating the formation of the Acadia Divinity College. He was, of course, a leader and a voice at the centre of the challenges and politics of Baptist life, and our seminary, in the tumultuous 1960s. These were not easy days be to the Dean. Cherry presented an address at the fall 1966 meeting of the Eastern Valley Baptist Association: "The Stance of the School." Some of you might remember what occasioned this. Here are a couple quotations...

Since such words as Conservative, Fundamentalist, Liberal, and Modernist are bandied about today and are used as clubs to beat one's theological opponents into submission, perhaps it would be helpful to consider their technical meaning, in order to understand the theological stance of the School of Theology.

The word liberal is also used in another sense to mean simply "openness to the truth." ...The liberal mind grants to every person the right to think for himself. Understood in this general sense, it is to be hoped that the School of Theology is liberal.

Undoubtedly, Cherry was attacked at many times with various theological weapons by his opponents. Yet I can see that, through the tests of time, he proved capable of friendship and respect with folk of many theological stripes. And he kept on standing for truth and freedom.

A lay member of my congregation in Windsor remembers well Dr. Cherry speaking at a youth Convention event in the 1960s: very dynamic and charismatic. The subject of the day was situational ethics, and the young crowd was spellbound by the Southern Baptist Preacher's presentation.

Of course, Cherry became one of us, a Canadian, a Nova Scotian, a neighbour in Wolfville and Kingsport. He began his Canadian citizenship one month after I did, in 1970.

It was only natural that M. R. Cherry was one of the many first participants in what was organized in 1971 as the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship. Among Cherry's own collection of Bulletins is the June 1972 newsletter, with a handwritten note on a blank page that says,

Happy to have you with us,  
Sincerely,  
Marion E. Grant,  
for Membership Committee

Cherry said, at times, that he was not a joiner, but this cause, in the midst of our Baptist life, was vital to him. He was not swayed by the Wentworth Statement of 1971, signed by pastors who decried the formation of special interest groups among Atlantic Baptists. Our fellowship, standing for freedom and theological thinking, needed to exist.

Cherry's own contributions to this Fellowship could be best described by some of you, though the record of bulletins and so forth suggest his part in our cause, the cause of Baptists as Christians of freedom - Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom and religious freedom, as Shurden well has said it. Cherry gave a series of presentations on "Freedom" at our November 1974 meeting at First Baptist Amherst. He got to be host Pastor for our 1989 spring meeting at Pereaux Baptist Church.

Here is an interesting sample from Cherry's lecture at our fall assembly, 1987, at Canning Baptist Church, with the title "Human Sexuality from the Standpoint of Christian Ethics."

It is no simple matter to develop a biblical view of sex and sexuality, yet the attempt must be made if we are to arrive at a Christian understanding. The task is difficult for at least three reasons. First, because not every word of scripture has the same value and authority - there is development in biblical thought. ...Second, because of the difficulty of the biblical models - which to follow and not to follow. Third, because of the difficulty of interpreting the seventh commandment, which lies at the base of all biblical teaching about sex - this only forbids adultery, but Jesus interpreted it to require purity of heart as well as purity in deed (Matthew 5:28).

It was Cherry who brought me along and introduced me to the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship, not to mention the Simpson and Hayward Lectures, the Atlantic Seminar in Theological Education, and other worthy opportunities. His informal conversations with me (I was never his student in a classroom) were great explorations of theology, at some depth. The kind of study of life and the Bible that happens in conversation was brilliantly exemplified by Cherry. So many of us, and thousands of others, were blessed by his keen mind, and memory, and heart, in our talks with him. Cherry has been a great theologian for us, but not published in the usual academic ways. He was not a writer of books and papers. He was a theologian at the grassroots level - in the pulpit, in the classroom, in millions of conversations.

I'll rework a phrase from 2 Corinthians 3, and say of Cherry, He, himself is our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. (3:2) It is Cherry's influence on human hearts and souls that remains his greatest legacy and contribution.

The friendship, counsel, wisdom, and compassion he shared through the years with students, faculty, parishioners, and others, has guided and encouraged us. He spent hours with people, counselling them. He always spoke of not being trained for counselling, and explained that his counselling thus took a long time. But his time was so valued by those who went to him.

Former students, Joyce and Ken Bellous, shared this when I phoned them in the fall to let them know of Cherry's death. "We never made any significant decision without consulting Cherry." Others could testify, "He saved our marriage." "He saved my life." "He saved our family." "He saved my ministry."

Cherry would never claim such things. At most, he would have hoped to have been a channel of God's peace and an instrument of God's grace. People were more important

than things in his world. Humility is a mark of a disciple of Jesus, and we remember a CABF pioneer who was humble and a servant-leader. As we reorganize now, and deal with our present religious politics and theologies, may we be clear and strong as Cherry was, but also humble and compassionate as he.

For many years his own funeral plans were simple and austere. He spoke occasionally to me of these plans, and his papers show a consistent order through the years of hymns and scripture readings and prayers he desired. He had, until near the end, never wanted a sermon, since that would be the opportunity for someone to talk about what a good person Cherry had been. Rather, he chose a bit of Kipling to be read.

As I close with these words, consider the third stanza. I believe the eternal vision here was something our beloved Cherry tasted and lived already, in his first ninety years of life.

#### L'ENVOI by Rudyard Kipling

When Earth's last picture is painted and the tubes are twisted and dried,  
When the oldest colours have faded, and the youngest critic has died,  
We shall rest, and, faith, we shall need it—lie down for an æon or two,  
Till the Master of All Good Workmen shall put us to work anew!

And those that were good shall be happy: they shall sit in a golden chair;  
They shall splash at a ten-league canvas with brushes of comets' hair;  
They shall find real saints to draw from—Magdalene, Peter, and Paul;  
They shall work for an age at a sitting and never be tired at all!

And only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master shall blame;  
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame,  
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate star,  
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It for the God of Things as They Are!