

Nashville, Tennessee

Associated Baptist Press

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August 25, 1998

(98-63)

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Walker Knight to receive ABP Religious Freedom Award

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Veteran Baptist editor and publisher Walker Knight has been chosen to receive the 1998 Religious Freedom Award presented by Associated Baptist Press.

Knight, 74, will become the fifth recipient of the ABP award, which was established in 1994 by directors of the news service based in Jacksonville, Fla. It honors individuals whose achievements advance the principle and practice of religious freedom, particularly in the field of journalism.

The award honors a four-decade career in Baptist journalism.

A Kentucky native and graduate of Baylor University, Knight worked 10 years as associate editor of the Baptist Standard, state news journal for Texas Baptists.

He then worked 25 years as director of editorial services at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. As editor of the agency's general-circulation magazine, Missions USA, he advocated civil rights and social justice in an era when many Baptists in the South did not share his views.

After retiring from that post, Knight founded the independent newspaper Baptists Today in 1983. He retired as the paper's editor in 1988 but stayed on part time as publisher another five years. He recently came out of retirement to be the paper's interim editor after his successor, Jack Harwell, retired last year.

Originally called SBC Today, the paper was the flagship publication for moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention in their unsuccessful fight to prevent a conservative SBC takeover in the 1980s.

In 1991, directors voted to change the paper's name to Baptists Today to reflect a broader focus and closer ties to the newly formed Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Knight's journalism career "exemplifies the spirit of the Religious Freedom Award," said Philip Poole, chair of the ABP board's awards committee. He described Knight as a mentor and colleague to others in the profession and a defender of a free press amid denominational strife.

Knight is the author of six books and contributed to others. He was a founder of the Alliance of Baptists and delivered the Alliance's covenant address in 1993. He also was a founder of the Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society and edited the society's Whitsitt Journal from 1993 to 1998.

He received an honorary doctorate from Mercer University in 1981 and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's Distinguished Service Award in 1973.

He is married to the former Iva Nell Moseley. They have four children and four grandchildren.

Previous recipients of the Religious Freedom Award are former Florida Baptist editor Jack Brymer, the religion staff of the Dallas Morning News, New York Times correspondent Gustav Niebuhr and author and activist Will Campbell.

Knight is scheduled to accept the award at a Sept. 18 banquet in Atlanta.

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-- By Bob Allen

Jerry Clower dies following heart surgery

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- Jerry Clower, star of the Grand Ole Opry and a co-host of the "Country Crossroads" cable television show, died Aug. 24.

Clower, 71, died in Jackson, Miss., of cardiorespiratory arrest, five days after undergoing heart-bypass surgery.

Clower, of Yazoo City, Miss., was a comedian best known for telling stories about his rural Southern upbringing with themes such as church revivals, county fairs, cotton farming and crappie fishing.

His routines often included references to his Christian faith. He had been a Baptist since accepting Christ at a revival in 1939 and was a deacon in his church.

He recorded his first album in 1970, and went on to sell 7 million records and four best-selling books during a 28-year career. He performed regularly on the Grand Ole Opry and performed up to 200 dates a year, mostly in small towns.

He was a co-host of "Country Crossroads" cable TV show produced by the Southern Baptist Convention, which airs on the ACTS channel.

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-- By ABP staff

'True worship is rare,' Barna tells church leaders

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Although worship is vital, it is rare among American Christians, religion researcher George Barna has been telling church leaders.

"Worship is a non-negotiable obligation and privilege of every Christian," Barna said in his "Inward, Outward and Upward: Ministry That Transforms Lives" seminar he has conducted nationwide.

"We agree that when it comes to worship, God deserves it, the Bible commands it, and churches try to facilitate it," he stressed. "But we have a problem when it comes to worship. ... True worship is rare."

His organization, Barna Research Group, polled a cross-section of American Christians who attend churches about worship.

"Thirty-two percent have never experienced God's presence" in worship, Barna reported. "Forty-four percent have not experienced his presence in the past year." And the younger the person, the less likely she or he has experienced that presence, he added.

To compound the problem, most Christians don't understand worship, he noted. "When asked to define what worship means, two out of three had no idea or offered bogus responses, like, 'attend church,' 'being a church member' or 'believing God exists.'"

Only one third of church-going adults identify worshipping God as "the most important responsibility of a Christian," Barna said. And less than half of them defined worship as a "top priority" in their lives.

Barna defined worship as "interact(ing) with God in a very real and personal way."

Three sets of obstacles prevent worship, Barna observed.

First, cultural obstacles get in the way, he said.

Some people suffer from "Burger King spirituality," he claimed. They think they should "have it your way" in worship, believing their desires are all that matters. "They will reject the church if it doesn't meet their specifications regarding facilities, programs, music, etc."

Another cultural obstacle is the "worship is for wimps" syndrome, he said. This viewpoint sees worship as an admission of weakness.

Personal obstacles also get in the way of worship, Barna added.

Some people misunderstand the purpose of worship, he explained, noting only 25 percent of church-going adults correctly said worship is for the sake of honoring God.

Other people misunderstand the content of worship, believing worship is about activities, not about developing a relationship with God, he said. Still others fail to understand the outcomes of worship, mistaking hymn-singing, giving offerings and even seeing their friends for worship.

The church also is guilty of putting up obstacles to worship, he said.

"Sometimes, we get the wrong focus, trying to please people instead of trying to please God," he said. Churches also place the wrong emphasis, encouraging people to learn about God rather than interact with God.

Churches often evaluate worship incorrectly, measuring enthusiasm, attendance and professionalism instead of intimacy, humility and awe. "That's why they have no life transformation going on," he said.

Churches sometimes set the wrong goals for worship, striving for "human comfort rather than divine confrontation," he said. Consequently, they wind up "expecting non-Christian attenders to worship a God they don't truly know."

Unfortunately, "all it takes is one of those (worship missteps) to paralyze your church," Barna charged.

Barna's organization surveyed effective churches across the nation, and he developed six elements to consider for facilitating true worship:

-- "Instill an appropriate understanding of worship," he advised.

"The focus needs to be on God, not us. We worship for God's benefit," he stressed. "The reason why we're doing this is God commands it, God deserves it, it pleases him."

"Worship is as much an attitude as an activity," he added, "and the right heart allows intimacy with God."

-- "Encourage people to make a deep, personal commitment to Christ," Barna urged.

"Quality worship experience depends upon us; we must bring something to the table," he said. "Worship is inside, and it comes out."

-- "Promote a personal commitment to true worship," he added.

"Worship is more than an understanding of what worship is and why we should do it," he maintained. "The appropriate reason is because we love him."

But worship requires preparation, he said. Barna's polling showed four items that Christians who have experienced God say are vital for worship. Eighty percent cited prayer, 60 percent pointed to the sermon, 58 percent said they must read the Bible and 43 percent stressed quiet time.

"We also must expect God's presence" in worship, Barna said. The "any old event is fine" attitude will not do for worship, which requires diligence, he explained.

-- "Provide people with a worship experience that connects them to God," he insisted.

Music is the first key to this experience, he said.

"Quantity makes a difference," he added. "It usually takes 20 minutes or more of uninterrupted music for

people to be prepared to worship. That's enough to focus people's minds, calm and soften their hearts and establish intimacy with God."

Participatory music best facilitates worship for most people, he reported. "It must be accessible to people, most of whom know nothing about music. They're typically better off having a single style done well than a multiple of styles."

And music leadership must be worshipful, not performance-oriented, he declared.

Preaching/teaching is the second key to a worshipful experience, he said.

"Prepare people to hear the truth," he urged. "Worshiping churches have not given up on the concept of confession. Get people to accept the Bible as the source of truth. And help them understand Christianity is not about finding the path of least resistance in life."

Preaching also needs to be applicable to everyday life, and it needs to be presented on people's level -- 6th to 8th grade comprehension, for a short span of time.

The third key to building a positive worship experience is a worship-friendly environment, Barna noted.

This includes intercessory prayer for the worship service, worshipful ambiance in the room and an attitude of sincerity and authenticity.

-- "Worship should be led by an effective worship leader," Barna recounted.

An effective worship leader, he said, should be "completely sold out to Jesus Christ;" a humble, kind, loving, repentant Christian; a student of the Bible who is devoted to prayer; a true leader; a skilled musician; submissive to the church's leaders; an intense worshiper; willing to follow the Holy Spirit's leading; authentic and genuine; sensitive to the worship environment; and still growing spiritually.

-- The worship experience should be "challenged by regular and honest evaluation," Barna said.

"How many people experienced God?" he asked, citing the first criteria. Other aspects of worship that should be examined include performance vs. experience; the compelling nature of the experience; the sense of humility and awe among the people; excitement about worshipping together; and dedication to private worship.

"A commitment to implementing necessary change" to make worship meaningful is absolutely necessary, Barna said, acknowledging, "This takes courage."

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Barna offers 5 priorities for worshipping churches

DALLAS (ABP) -- How can your church place a priority on worship?

Religion researcher George Barna offers five ideas for what is required:

-- "Leaders in the church must demand that we engage in true worship."

-- "People in the church must refuse to accept empty worship events. They've got to hold leaders to higher standards."

-- "Establish worship experience -- rather than worship service attendance -- as a benchmark of Christian development."

-- "Be open to being uncomfortable in worship -- allowing spontaneity, allowing our senses to be flooded, allowing God to interact with us. We're communicating with an amazing God."

-- "Recognize true worship is a key to church growth and church health. Two things allow a church to grow -- relationships between people on the outside and people on the inside, and a relationship with God through a regular connection with God."

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-- By Marv Knox

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