

1991 T. B. Maston Christian Ethics Award to Patricia Ayres

The Trustees of the T. B. Maston Scholarship Foundation Present the Third T. B. Maston Christian Ethics Award to Patricia Ayres

In grateful acknowledgement of, and in profound appreciation for, decades of steadfast, creative, and personally sacrificial commitment to the cause of Christian Ethics, including highly responsible involvement on behalf of children and families, juvenile justice, women's concerns, world hunger relief, poverty and the poor, peace with justice, community betterment, social ministries in local churches, and denominational service particularly through the state and national Christian Life Commissions.

Patricia Ayres has faithfully exemplified the teaching of *1 John 2:6* that characterized T. B. Maston through a lifetime of work in support of applied Christianity, "He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked."

*Fort Worth, Texas
October 25, 1991*

Response by Patricia Ayres

My sincere gratitude to Jase Jones, Browning Ware, the officers and board of the T. B. Maston Scholarship Foundation for this distinguished honor. Warm greetings to you, Mrs. Maston, and to the many very special friends who are gathered here to remember and celebrate the life of Dr. and Mrs. Maston.

Foy Valentine, your words are eloquent as always though they only occasionally make contact with the reality of the Patsy Ayres I know. I am reminded of Bonhoeffer's lines:

Am I really that which other men tell of?

Or am I only what I myself know of myself? (1)

When asked if I would accept this award I felt humbled, and highly honored, of course. I also felt troubled. So many could have been so honored: those who have studied under Dr. Maston and have served in positions of pastoral and denominational leadership, those who have made significant contributions in scholarship and teaching . . . so many who, through the influence of Dr. Maston's teaching, writing, and counsel have held high the imperative of seeing the implication of the gospel in every area of life . . . so many who have been nurtured by the grace and strength found in the home and family life of Dr. and Mrs. Maston. I am also keenly aware tonight of how many of you have had a profound influence on my own pilgrimage.

As I thought about this occasion, *2 Timothy 2:2* came to mind:

What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. (2)

My prayer is that whatever recognition comes from this award might point yet others to your accomplishments - to the life and witness of Dr. and Mrs. Maston - and ultimately, of course, to the Lord we all serve.

As a young woman fresh out of college, I plunged into the world of the late '50s and '60s full of idealism - out to tackle the world in my own strength and from a worldly perspective. I was appalled at the racism, economic injustice, and violence which plagues society. Angered by the

intransigence of structures, embittered by the seeming unresponsiveness of the church, and despairing of a God who would let it all be that way. I needed very much to hear the words of advice Ralph Phelps says Dr. Maston gave him from time to time.

You must stay sweet, my boy. There's no way to do the work of the Lord except in the spirit of the Lord. (3)

I did not hear those words, but I saw them lived out by those of you who, in God's time, came dealing effectively, creatively, and from a perspective of hope with the very issues which had led me to despair. In time I learned and claimed for myself your source of power and joy.

Through these new friends, I had the opportunity to meet Dr. and Mrs. Maston, to visit in their home, and to experience first-hand, if only briefly, their proverbial grace and warmth.

Dr. Maston was particularly interested when Bob and I moved to Tennessee. He promptly wrote to tell me of their roots there. I was especially pleased when an opportunity to speak on hunger took me to Carson-Newman. Dr. Maston would have been proud of the involvement of many of the students in an outreach program to nearby Appalachian communities, as well as the strong witness to the call to justice in Scripture of some of the faculty who taught them. One could imagine the footsteps of Dr. and Mrs. Maston under towering trees that fall day.

The last time I saw Mrs. Maston, I was literally following in her footsteps. It was time for the Tuesday afternoon session of the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans. As I entered the Superdome, there were Luke Williams, Gene, and Mrs. Maston starting up to look for a seat. Together we ascended higher and higher, ramp after ramp. I was trying valiantly to keep up and at every level, Luke would look back with that twinkle in his eye which said, "Shall I ask Mrs. Maston to stop so that you can rest?" Well, we finally found seats at the very top level, and the rest of that afternoon is history; but that ascent to me encapsulated the grace and dignity, the quiet strength and persistence which typify Mrs. Maston. And it was a sort of parable of the Maston style of leadership - staying far enough ahead to challenge those who followed, but not too far ahead for the followers to stay involved.

As I pondered the witness of the Maston family which we honor primarily, of course, because it points us to the Lord - I believe a definitive word for their life together and for our life together as Christians is *compassion*. Henri Nouwen reminds us in his book by that name that:

The word compassion is derived from the Latin words pati and cum, which together mean "to suffer with." Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness fear confusion and anguish. . . . Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion into the condition of being human. (4)

For we Baptists, the crucible for living out the faith in community is the local church. In the context of my personal spiritual experience mentioned earlier, I became a member of First Baptist Church in San Antonio during the pastorate of Jimmy Allen. What I experienced there was pastor and people striving to build a compassionate community. The authenticity of that effort drew people to the fellowship and to commitment to Christ. Some came from the inner city streets - the hungry who were being fed, the homeless who were being housed, the refugees who were begin resettled through the church's ministries. Some came from the broader community seeking a place of healing and acceptance. Others came because they saw the gospel validated in that compassionate setting.

Every congregation - by how it worships, relates to one another and to strangers, by how it serves the larger community - shows forth its understanding of the Gospel. No wonder the

Mastons have given of themselves so unstintingly to Gambrell Street through the years, showing forth the importance of the local church.

Since the local church is the setting in which through Bible study, preaching, and other learning opportunities, people are helped to come to understand the impact of their faith on family, personal lifestyle and justice issues, Dr. Maston was among those who saw the need for an entity at the state and national level to help individuals and churches with this great challenge. Out of their vision, the Texas and SBC Christian Life Commissions were born. (5)

It has been my great privilege to serve on the Texas Commission under the leadership of James Dunn and Phil Strickland, and on the SBC Christian Life Commission under the leadership of Foy Valentine. Despite the daunting breadth of their agendas and perennially inadequate levels of funding and staffing, these agencies have produced quantities of excellent materials on many, many subjects and through conferences, speaking opportunities, and publications have done much to challenge our thinking about the ethical issues of the day. Moreover, they have had influence for good far beyond our Baptist constituencies, and have had significant impact on public discourse and public policy.

Those who conceived the Christian Life Commissions functioning within the context of denominational life had a very practical vision. When we choose to work cooperatively to forward the Gospel, it is highly beneficial to have ongoing communication among those involved in every aspect of our effort: our thinking about ethics, our strategy for mission and evangelism, our understanding of the laity, our literature and theological education, our structure and so on. So that while each area has its own particular assignments and expertise, the cross-fertilization of ideas will build a cohesive community with a common purpose and the cause of ethics will be fully integrated in the life and witness of the group.

The complexity of issues facing us today, the stewardship of resources, and a spirit of common purpose require, I believe, that we find ways of working cooperatively with others who, out of a perspective of faith, share our concerns. For example, we stand with other Baptists in support of the work of the Baptist Joint Committee under the leadership of James Dunn in the struggle to maintain our hard-won religious freedom and to uphold the cherished principle of separation of church and state. For the past fifteen years, I have been involved at the local and national level with Bread for the World, a broad coalition of individual Christians, a number of them Baptists, congregations and denominational groups committed to effecting public policy that impacts hungry people and helping people to be better stewards of their citizenship by searching Scripture, studying issues, and developing legislation which will effect the well-being of countless persons around the globe.

In a recent article, Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit who has lived many years in El Salvador, challenges us

to awake from the sleep of inhumanity, to see the world as one gigantic cross for millions of people "entire crucified peoples" dying of war, poverty and injustice. (6)

I believe "to awaken from the sleep of inhumanity" is to take an accounting of where we are complicit in the suffering of the world. Then we can choose to walk with the suffering by our personal involvement in their concerns, by stewarding our resources to help them and by impacting public policy. We cannot escape our responsibility to act compassionately in the midst of the pervasive reality of the growing gap between rich and poor within nations and among nations.

Another worldwide phenomenon is the intermingling of culture and peoples. Daily, we hear reports of the hatred, suspicion, and violence brought on by distrust among these groups. Yet there is great potential for strengthening our witness among these peoples and there is great

promise for our understanding of the Gospel in experiencing and building on the insights to be found in these diverse cultures and nationalities.

But how can we meet that challenge when, in our relatively homogeneous settings, such as churches and communities, we have such difficulty trusting and affirming the sub-groups in our midst - young and old, women and men - those representing diverse educational or ethnic backgrounds or varying worship styles? It seems easier to disengage and polarize.

Bill Moyers, in a recent speech, addressed the growing feeling of disengagement and alienation from the political process of so many in our communities and nation. He called for an "ethic of cooperation." Whereas he was addressing secular political realities, his words certainly ring true for the polity of the groupings into which we gather ourselves to do the Lord's work, particularly given our Baptist emphasis on democracy. The ethic of cooperation, he said, "means recognizing our capacity to create a political culture that nurtures obligation, reciprocity and trust resulting in policies that have wide public support."

Moyers quotes Vaclav Havel as saying about his country that there is need "to inject ideas of spirituality, mutual understanding, and mutual tolerance into affairs of State." (7)

Can we pray for less? To be God's compassionate people awakened to the needs of a world of incomprehensible suffering and brokenness demands the faithful and well-informed commitment of every individual. More than that, it demands that our churches and other associations be communities of compassion, communities of empowerment which enable every individual and group to make effective their gifts in service.

These thoughts bring us again to the particular community of compassion we celebrate tonight, the family of T. B. Maston. May those of us in that extended family be worthy witnesses to what we have seen and heard.

Endnotes

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*
(New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 221

Bible text: *New Revised Standard Version Bible*
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(Nashville, Broadman Press, 1979) p. 195

Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*
(New York, Image Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1983), p. 4

Jimmy R. Allen, "To His Denomination," in *An Approach to Christian Ethics*, p. 39

Jon Sobrino, S. J., "Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity," *The Christian Century*, April 1991, p. 366

Bill Moyers in an Address, *America's Vision of the Future*, to the National Legislative Education Foundation Democratic Issues Conference, March 1991