

“The Social Ethics Tradition of McAfee School of Theology”
Founders Day Address
McAfee School of Theology
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Introduction & Greetings

President Underwood, Provost Davis, VP Appel, Dean DeLoach, faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors, church friends, and all who have gathered today: I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is truly an honor to have the opportunity to offer reflections on McAfee Founders’ Day as the 2018-19 academic year begins.

I would like to recognize my family who are present today, including....

Founders Day traditions exist to remind a school’s current generation of its history, to take us back to our founding narrative and core convictions. These trips down memory lane are of little value if they are mere exercises in nostalgia. They matter if they both anchor us in where we have come from and invite us to reach forward with renewed vision. That is what I will seek to do this morning. My focus will be on the Christian social ethics tradition as it has existed at McAfee School of Theology.

Historical Context

Most everyone in this room knows that McAfee School of Theology was founded in 1995-96 to provide an alternative approach to theological education from that which was beginning to prevail in the Southern Baptist seminaries. Once these schools had been captured by the movement led by the now disgraced, but then triumphant, Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler, large numbers of Baptist exiles believed that the denominational seminaries could no longer serve as the training ground for the kinds of ministers we wanted in our churches.

Mercer University, a school founded in 1833 to advance a learned Baptist ministry, was one natural place to start a new seminary. James and Carolyn McAfee provided the extraordinarily generous founding endowment. Hundreds of Baptist churches and individuals offered their prayers, dollars, students, and other support. Many who were present from the very beginning remain loyal McAfee supporters. We stand on their shoulders, and there is no way adequately to express our gratitude. If you were involved in any way in the founding of McAfee, please stand that we may recognize you.

McAfee’s founding principles, though framed in positive language, allude to the conflict then raging in the SBC. I am working through them as I offer the following comments.

McAfee would treasure Scripture deeply. But our seminary would follow the example of the 1963 Baptist Faith & Message statement in making Jesus Christ the center of biblical interpretation, testing all claims to biblical authority against his person, work, and teaching.

McAfee would train Christian ministers who would pursue various vocations, but all would be committed to the Church. McAfee's graduates would be richly trained in Christian history and theology. They would be effective proclaimers of the Gospel, and compassionate ministers in both personal and social settings. They would be spiritually well-formed and emotionally mature. This is still a vision worth pursuing, isn't it?

From the outset, McAfee followed Jesus' inclusive example and trained women and men on equal terms, the most obvious direct repudiation of SBC trends. McAfee committed itself to being distinctively Baptist, in the way that Mercer University has understood its Baptist identity, with fierce commitments to freedom of conscience, an expansive, tolerant community of inquiry, and free churches in a free state.

McAfee and Christian Social Ethics

That last phrase especially takes us into the world of Christian social ethics, which is my academic discipline and therefore the center of the known universe. 😊

It is perhaps less well-known than it should be that a substantial part of the fight in the Southern Baptist Convention from 1979 until the takeover was complete in the early 1990s -- concerned Christian social ethics. I am using that term to mean Christian convictions and practices in relation to the nation-state, government, and politics.

It is now very clear that a substantial part of the agenda of at least some of the people who took over the SBC was to align the Convention with the newly emerging Christian Right led by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and their icky ilk. (Nice, huh?)

This ambitious project proved fabulously "successful." The SBC essentially became the largest bloc within the Christian Right. Its social ethics agenda shifted accordingly. This took place almost overnight in the SBC ethics agency and more slowly in the seminaries.

Two men were teaching Christian ethics full-time at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary during the period in which McAfee School of Theology was being founded. Those two individuals were seasoned scholar Glen Stassen and callow youth David Gushee. Both of us were offering a brand of Christian ethics that was not acceptable to the new regime at Southern and in the SBC. We were therefore doomed.

Glen had been teaching at Southern since 1976, carrying on what might be described as a *white progressive Baptist Christian ethical tradition* traceable at least to the 1930s and JB Weatherspoon, and certainly to the 1950s and the legendary Henlee Barnette.

Adherents of this tradition were committed to challenging white racism, including in Southern Baptist churches. They actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement and the racial integration of our schools and churches. They undertook peacemaking in the context of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. They practiced economic simplicity, advocated for economic justice, and demonstrated concern for the poor. They supported the ecological movement and greened their lifestyles. They advocated equality for women in all sectors of life. They stood up

for domestic and global human rights. They were committed to the separation of church and state and supportive of controversial early '60s SCOTUS rulings to that effect. When immigrants flowed into the United States after 1965, they worked for equal citizenship, hospitality, and inclusion.

Mercer University at least arguably also stands in this Southern white progressive ethics tradition. This became especially visible in the pivotal days of the early 1960s, when Mercer integrated voluntarily, before the state schools, with very strong support provided by legendary figures in the Mercer Religion department like Joe Hendricks. Today, Mercer's participation in this progressive ethical tradition is visible in many academic offerings, co-curricular opportunities, and Mercer on Mission. It is part of the deep culture of the university.

That progressive Baptist ethical tradition was of little interest to those who took power in the SBC. Their ethical agenda focused on a theologizing of women's subordination to male leaders in church and family, an elevation of abortion as the central moral issue of the day, and fierce opposition to any acceptance of what was then called homosexuality. They were hawkish Cold Warriors rather than nuclear abolitionists, tax cutters rather than advocates for the poor, and indifferent if not opposed to the environmental movement. And on race, even though they sometimes advocated for interracial dialogue and reconciliation, they tended to oppose most policy measures sought by advocates for racial minorities in the US.

The SBC fundamentalists were not interested in a big tent. They did not foresee schools in which, perhaps, one ethicist offered a conservative vision and one offered a progressive view. So, during that 1995-96 period, the two SBTS ethicists moved on. I went to Union University in west Tennessee. Glen Stassen went to Fuller Seminary in Pasadena. He served there, with great distinction, until his death in 2014. Either one of us could have come to McAfee when the school was building its founding faculty. The timing was right, but McAfee's founding faculty did not include an ethicist. Weep not for us; we are used to it.

McAfee, Stassen, and the Progressive Baptist Tradition

But, hark, good news -- McAfee School of Theology very soon did hire professors in the white progressive Baptist ethical tradition. In fact, it hired three – Larry McSwain, Graham Walker, and finally myself. Larry McSwain taught church and community and some Christian ethics at Southern before the takeover and then did the same at McAfee. Graham Walker's "theology and" courses, such as theology and economics, reflect this tradition. And I have had the privilege to carry it forward since arriving here to teach Christian ethics in 2007.

Beginning in 2016, the Glen Stassen family, notably Glen's sister Kathleen (Keen) and son Bill, initiated conversations with me, and ultimately with President Underwood and his development staff, about the possibility of funding work in Glen's spirit here at Mercer University.

Much had transpired in academia, church, and culture to make Mercer especially appealing to the Stassen family, and to make a gift especially urgent.

White evangelical Christianity appeared to have regressed to a reactionary mode, heavily tinged by racial anxieties stoked by the election of Barack Obama as president and by negative reaction to cultural developments like the legalization of gay marriage. Evangelicals hunkered down and turned right. Not even the somewhat progressive Fuller Seminary seemed interested in carrying forward the Stassen lineage.

With a deep desire to advance progressive Christian work in Christian ethics, the Stassen family concluded that Mercer is the university best positioned to carry on his legacy. Therefore in 2017 the family gave a substantial gift to the Center for Theology and Public Life to accomplish this purpose. We are deeply grateful, and the work is well underway. [At this time I would like to ask Kathleen Stassen Berger, and William Stassen, to stand so that we might recognize you.]

The Stassen family is not just Minnesota Nice but Minnesota Modest. It does not seek attention and is not especially interested in anything being named for Glen or the Stassen family. I must violate their preferences, then, by mentioning one use to which their generous gift is being put. We have created a Stassen Scholarship at McAfee to fund the education of one student each year who has special interest and potential in Christian ethics. Our first recipient this fall is Ian Madden. Ian, please stand so that we may recognize you.

New Frontiers

I would suggest that by now the progressive Baptist Christian ethical tradition is one of the most notable characteristics of who we have become at McAfee. Our progressive ethical commitments link us to Mercer's heritage and mission, show up in many of our classes, are fundamental to the vocation of many of our faculty and students, and are expressed in many forms of activism and service.

New frontiers are coming into view. One of these has to do with the controverted issue of LGBTQ inclusion in our school and in our churches. Perhaps some of you know that I have written a bit about this subject. Here at McAfee, we are trying to do something difficult – provide safe, inclusive space for all our students, including our LGBTQ students, while also hosting classroom conversations in which honest, free inquiry related to all relevant biblical, theological, pastoral, and ethical issues can take place. This environment sets us apart from a great many schools.

One more frontier. Attentive ears might have noticed that I named our historic tradition as the white progressive Baptist Christian ethical tradition. That is our heritage. I could have named it even more specifically as the white straight married male progressive Baptist Christian...you get the idea.

But over the years, by God's providence, McAfee has evolved. Now over half of our students are African-American. We also have been blessed with Afro-Caribbean, Hispanic, Asian, Asian-American, and many other kinds of students. This racial-ethnic diversity is now part of who we are, and all trendlines suggest it will intensify in years to come – because we are located in urban Atlanta, because we have become the seminary of choice for many people of color, and because minority churches are simply producing disproportionately more people interested in seminary

than white churches are. This new multiracial McAfee reality has the potential to make us a better school, to enable us to better achieve our mission and to meet our founding principles. But we have to work in some distinctive new ways to make that happen.

Speaking for myself for a moment, I can say this – it is one thing for a white straight upper-middle-class US citizen Christian male to attempt to stand in empathetic solidarity with those who do not share my privileged social locations. But it is something altogether different, and far richer, when academic communities become permeated by the voices and life experiences of people who come from all different races, places, and cultures. And when they become *so* permeated that they move from being majority culture schools to which others are hospitably welcomed, to schools in which a diverse faculty, staff, and students pioneer a new culture in which no one group dominates.

This building of a new shared culture is one of the things that we are beginning to learn how to do at McAfee. It will be the project of the next generation, which we must all undertake together. It is hard work. But it is hard to imagine any other viable future for a theological seminary in Atlanta in the middle of the 21st century. On the eve of the 400th anniversary of the introduction of African slavery into this continent, with its constant negation of the teachings and spirit of Jesus Christ, it is hard to imagine anything more historically significant – or that looks more like the Gospel.

Glen Stassen saw this. He saw that his role was to leverage his privilege and power to equip, encourage, and advance those who had less power, those who were on the margins. Near the end of his life he sponsored the gay student group at Fuller. He taught numerous students of color and eagerly sought to mentor them and create opportunities for them. He tried so hard not just to get it right on race but to get out of the way so that new voices could be established in positions of power. He knew that the ethical thing to do, if you are a privileged white guy, is to leverage your power, for now, in order ultimately to give it up in favor of those who have never had it.

That, my sisters and brothers, sounds a lot like really good Christian social ethics -- not just in a progressive Baptist tradition, but in the way of Jesus, who said, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all.”