

Out of the Baptist Box

Texas pastor Ed Young Jr. doesn't fit anybody's mold. He's comfortable around charismatics and is refreshingly open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Tall, lanky and ready with a quick smile, Ed Young strides on stage in tennis shoes, stone-washed jeans, a collarless white shirt and a feathery thin gray sports coat. It is easy to think of him as a college student trapped in a 46-year-old man's body.

Tonight this son of a longtime pastor and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) carries a light blue umbrella with a brown handle. That is a small prop compared to the tanks, beds and automobiles that have served as backdrops at his Fellowship Church in suburban Dallas.

Young opens his message about spiritual authority by describing a fishing trip to Central America a few years ago. On the remote island where he and his son stayed, two men got in a feud. One man named Gabriel reacted by stealing the other's bottle of rum, getting drunk and trying to paddle to the faraway mainland.

That tale forms the refrain for Young's message: "Do the push back, jump in the kayak and 'go Gabriel.'"

"All of us have gone Gabriel," Young says to the youthful crowd packing 9,300-seat Gwinnett Arena just north of Atlanta. "All of us have these authority issues. Say you have a boss who's an idiot. Do you push back or submit to authority?"

"How do you react if someone tells you, 'No, you can't stay out 30 minutes late,' 'You can't sit there,' [or] 'You can't

play the whole game.’ God is a God of authority. Could it be God has people in your life and mine to mold us and shape us?”

Young employs biblical examples of rebellion—Adam and Eve, Satan and his followers, and King Saul—to segue to the umbrella twirling by his side. It represents God’s authority.

Young admits he hates umbrellas; Lisa, his wife of 25 years, loves them. Yet, during last summer’s unusual Texas downpours, he would have looked silly walking around without one. Likewise, he advises the audience, they need to get under the protection of what God has placed over them.

“You want to be perfected? Get right here,” he says, pointing to the covering overhead. “People are chipping away at all this junk to make you and me into a beautiful diamond.”

He follows by leaping across the stage, just moments after physically imitating David crawling through the cave where he could have killed Saul. At the end of a 45-minute talk, and after issuing an altar call that mixes humor with Scripture, Young kneels and says, “I want to challenge you to put the other knee down and surrender to God.”

After a prayer for people struggling with rebellion, the speaker invites those who want to follow Christ to walk forward. Hundreds flow into the aisles, with the front of the stage so jammed many hang back on the sides.

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Is this response simply an emotional one, as is typical of

youth meetings? Perhaps. The unusual element of this Forward 2007 conference is its sponsor: Free Chapel Worship Center, whose charismatic pastor, Jentezen Franklin, had just shared the podium with Young at Hillsong Church's annual conference in Sydney, Australia.

In the last two years the peripatetic Southern Baptist pastor has appeared in a flock of Pentecostal-charismatic venues. Among his hosts have been the New Jersey Assemblies of God (AG), Kevin Gerald of the Champions Centre, Bishop T.D. Jakes' Potter's House and Casey Treat's Christian Faith Center.

Young has invited Jakes to his church's last two leadership conferences, a move that brought him criticism from some Southern Baptists. And popular speaker and best-selling author Joyce Meyer endorsed his latest book, *Outrageous, Contagious Joy*, which also rankled some within the SBC.

One might wonder: What is a Southern Baptist pastor—whose denomination is often at odds with Pentecostals—doing at so many charismatic meetings? “He’s out of the box,” says longtime family friend Mike Hamlet, who at one time was an associate pastor at the church Young’s father leads. “But Ed’s going to take every opportunity to reach people for Jesus Christ without compromising his integrity.”

Young has seen Fellowship Church mushroom from 150 in 1990 to more than 24,000 at five sites across Texas and in Miami. And though he doesn’t consider himself charismatic, Young says he has learned a great deal from charismatics.

“In the charismatic movement, the leaders and people I know are more kingdom-minded than any other denominations,” says

Young, mentioning that AG pastor J. Don George of Calvary Church in Dallas encouraged Fellowship Church's growth in its early years. "So many of the people that I observed growing up were more competitive. I also like the entrepreneurial style of so many charismatic churches and people. There is a greater expectancy of seeing God move."

Gerald, who met Young when the latter spoke at a Champions' Centre leadership conference two years ago, isn't concerned about their theological differences, saying the two have more in common than with some pastors of their respective denominations. Their relationship may reflect a ministry trend in which pastoral fellowship is grounded more in a common approach to life and ministry than in theological unity.

"I think a lot of that is driven by the reality that people no longer pick a church to belong to based on exactness in theology or denominational ties," Gerald says. "More and more people pick their church because they like its culture and what it provides for them and their families."

Free Chapel's Franklin is another admirer, calling Young a phenomenal communicator whose transparency and creative thinking are impressive. "We are brothers in Christ but not identical twins," Franklin says. "We are united by our fellowship in Jesus Christ and respect the differences we have doctrinally. In this way we are able to focus on the things we are both passionate about: our churches and our families."

Departing From the Norm

By his own description, Young is afflicted with attention-deficit disorder, a trait that surfaces during an interview.

Energetic and smiling while gesturing to emphasize a point, Young is like the Energizer Bunny on espresso.

The son of a pastor whose career spans nearly five decades, Young is much like the music minister who once told an audience he'd been Southern Baptist since before he was born. That heritage shows in Young's preaching, such as his willingness to use the S-word. "We have to call sin, sin," Young insists. "We have to talk about how it's all about the gospel. It's all about ... Jesus. ... I can talk to you about 10 ways to live a positive life, but without the gospel we're toast."

He learned such views from his father, Edwin Young, who served four congregations in the Carolinas before going to Second Baptist Church of Houston in 1978. There, Edwin Young joined the SBC's conservative resurgence and served as denominational president from 1992 to 1994.

Lately, conservatives have taken on an anti-charismatic bent, pushing through anti-tongues policies at the SBC's international and North American mission boards' meetings. They may be the ones out of step, though. Recent research shows 50 percent of SBC pastors believe in the validity of a private prayer language.

Count Ed Young among those supportive of charismatics' influence on Southern Baptists' worship, prayer ministry and openness to the Holy Spirit. As evidence, he points to healing services of his youth in which ministers used anointing oil and laid hands on people. The latter practice was replicated at his father's church recently.

Although Ed Young believes in the gifts of the Spirit and that God still heals, he doesn't lay claim to a traditional charismatic experience. Nor are tongues practiced openly at the church's main campus in Grapevine, Texas.

Still, a significant percentage of staffers and members come from Pentecostal and charismatic circles. A survey five years ago showed the leading denominational background was AG. Their pastor suspects that if some were miked during a service, listeners would likely hear a heavenly language.

The church departs from Southern Baptist norms in other ways. Young has invited women to speak at some of its weekend worship services. And even though it is affiliated with a statewide conservative group that lines up with the national convention, Fellowship contributes far less than the 10 percent SBC leaders advocate for the denomination's cooperative missions program.

Young doesn't attribute that to any animosity, saying Fellowship is so large it does most of its own missions outreach. Yet the only time he attended a denominational gathering was to give a talk at the national pastors conference eight years ago.

But the policy that would upset many Southern Baptists is Young's eschewing of their model of democratic church governance. Believing creativity emerges out of order, not chaos, Young says that a church is not a democracy but a theocracy. "I think a church needs to be staff-led, and leaders need to be freed up to lead," Young says.

"Every time the children of Israel voted, they voted outside

the will of God. You have this big voting thing, you have a side that wins, a side that loses, and after a while, your church is full of losers. I just think we need to concentrate on unity.”

Church Growth

Young may veer from established Baptist norms, but it is hard to argue with his success in growing a church that is as large as his father’s, where he was an associate pastor for nine years before starting Fellowship. Ninety-five percent of its growth comes through word-of-mouth—Fellowship has never held a formal evangelism seminar.

“Ed Young understands the importance of developing lay leaders and entrusting them with the privilege of ministry,” says Warren Bird, director of research for the Leadership Network think tank. “One reason he has become a mentor to so many other pastors is his permission-giving approach that encourages pastors to find better ways to reach out and make disciples.”

Fellowship Church oversees more than 5,600 volunteers who work at least once a month and a full-time staff of just 235. Tabbing many churches as consumer-oriented, Young says more Christians need to look for a place of service. When someone steps outside self-interest they will get fed, he says.

“A lot of people say, ‘I want a Bible study,’” Young says. “The last thing a lot of believers need is another Bible study. You know what they need? They need to find a place to serve. Our game is to reach people who are far away from God, who are disillusioned about Christianity or who are believers

who want to reach people.”

Such vision inspires staff members such as Tracy Barnes, campus pastor at Fellowship Church’s Fort Worth location. Barnes returned to Texas in 1997 after spending 18 years as pastor of an SBC church in Pennsylvania’s Dutch country. “He’s one of those leaders who sees around the corner before we get to the corner,” Barnes says. “We as a staff have learned to trust his leadership.”

That includes rolling with the punches; the joke among staffers is that the “FC” in their logo stands for “frequent change.”

Yet their pastor’s foresight helps people appreciate innate abilities that they sometimes don’t realize they have. That is the assessment of Laura Strickland, who became director of the church’s TV ministry 12 years after she joined the staff as a receptionist.

“When he sees different leadership qualities he’ll place us in different opportunities and that’s how we learn,” says Strickland, one of the female speakers at Fellowship. “He has confidence in our decision-making ability. Each ... job and position has developed a stronger part of leadership in me.”

One of Young’s creeds is that a church should include three equal camps of nonbelievers, new converts and mature Christians. The church’s ability to attract people who don’t know the Bible is one quality that drew Dennis Brewer to Fellowship. A 52-year-old attorney who spent 20 years in an AG congregation, Brewer became a fixture after visiting Fellowship with his wife about a year after it opened.

Although public tongues and prophesying aren't there, Barnes says the church's spontaneous, joyful worship and the regular appearance of visitors who previously were not involved in any church let him know God is present. "When I look back, I see that God was leading us," says Barnes, who has taught Sunday school and now does volunteer legal work. "It's been one of the greatest experiences of our lives."

Stirring the Pot

Young's critics are few, but his openness to other views sometimes stirs the pot. Last January the conservative Southern Baptist Texan newsletter published a story about Jakes' appearance at Fellowship's leadership conference that included a potshot from Jerry Johnson, president of Baptist-affiliated Criswell College in Dallas.

"Some [pastors] might not have the discernment to separate the meat from the bones there, and really, to beware of the heresy," Johnson told the Texan, referring to Jakes' Oneness Pentecostal background. "That is a heresy against classic Christianity, the confessions and the creeds."

Although Johnson declined to comment further for Charisma, an SBC pastor who has also criticized Young for having Meyer endorse his latest book faults him for drifting too close to the Word-Faith camp. Ken Silva, who leads a home fellowship in New Hampshire and oversees a pair of apologetics Web sites, says he isn't a cessationist but is upset with Young for his association with prosperity preachers.

"In my mind, T.D. Jakes is in the Word-Faith camp," Silva says. "When he comes into a Southern Baptist church, let's

explore that. [Young] is considered orthodox within the mainstream of the Southern Baptist Convention. What is he doing, not in the charismatic camp, but in the Word-Faith camp?"

Despite the article's skeptical tone, Texan editor Gary Ledbetter says the story was simply an attempt to air an issue that had prompted inquiries from several readers. "Ed Young's ministry is held in high regard," says Ledbetter, director of communications for the Southern Baptists of Texas. "He's an innovative pastor, and as an innovative pastor he's going to do some things that are seen as pushing the envelope. I've heard him preach, and he's right on, evangelistic and theologically correct."

The senior pastor of First Baptist of North Spartanburg, South Carolina, Hamlet says Young's unusual style is bound to attract naysayers. However, he thinks two factors temper their gripes: Southern Baptists' cherished belief in the autonomy of the local church and the sincerity of the young-minded leader.

"He and I talked about it," Hamlet says of Jakes' appearance. "It was a conference on leadership issues, not theological issues. Knowing him as I've known him all his life, I trust Ed's heart and his desire. He wants to see people reached and will do everything to see them brought up in the Lord."

So, in the future, members and visitors can expect to see more of Young's unorthodox illustrations—driving a Ferrari on stage for a talk on dating, using a tank as a vivid example of spiritual warfare and preaching from a bed to discuss the sexual revolution. "After seeking God, the answer is creativity," Young says. "You've got to discover who you are. Once you [do] ... then I believe that creativity will go and

flow in your life.”

For the thousands who watch Young live or on his weekly television program that is broadcast worldwide, that creative spark is fueling their desire to draw closer to God.

Ken Walker is a freelance writer living in Huntington, West Virginia.