

One Word to Abide By for the New Year

A pastor I know has a practice I now find myself adopting.

Dr. David Uth said at Ridgecrest a few years back that at the start of each new year, the Lord gives him a single word as the focus of his ministry that year. One time the word was “one,” as in unity and oneness. Another time, it was “mission.”

He had an interesting story about that. He was pastoring the dynamic First Baptist Church (FBC) of West Monroe, Louisiana. It was the first Sunday of the new year, and two men from a church in Florida had come to hear him preach, representing the pastor search team from FBC Orlando.

David had no idea they were in town.

That Saturday night, the two men drove around West Monroe. They were unimpressed. “I don’t think there’s anything for us here,” said one. The other said, “Let’s stay and hear him preach tomorrow. We’re already here.”

Then, one said, “I want to do a little test. If he says the word ‘mission’ in the sermon tomorrow, that’s a sign the Lord wants us to continue with him.”

David smiled in telling this story.

“I must have used the word ‘mission’ a hundred times in that sermon that morning!” He’s been at First Orlando perhaps 10 years now, being wonderfully used of the Lord.

God gave me a word at the start of this year. And boy, was it ever the right word.

“Abide.”

I'm not even sure at what point or even how the word came to me. I just know it did.

Jesus said, "Abide in Me, and I in you" (John 15:4, NASB). He said, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (v. 7). And, "If you keep my commands, you will abide in my love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (v. 10).

I don't recall the circumstances of His giving me the word, but I wrote on it at the start of this year.

I was not asking for a word, not in the sense Dr. Uth did, a word for a new year.

But the Lord knew.

God knew the changes and stresses I would be facing in 2016. I had no clue what was coming. The changes would be almost total, the stresses from many sides and threatening my peace.

January was the one-year anniversary of my wife's sudden death, making 2015 the saddest year of my life. That was also the month my son, Neil, announced plans to move his family to Mobile, Alabama to be near his work. With my other son in North Carolina and my daughter in Missouri, this would leave me with no family member anywhere close. After living in metro New Orleans for 26 years, things were changing.

February I met Bertha Fagan. That weekend (February 12-14) I was with Dr. Joe Young in the Mississippi Delta, working with five churches. I finished up late Sunday night at Parchman, across the highway from the state penitentiary, and drove two hours south to Jackson. The next day, the 15th, I sketched for nearly four hours at the retirement celebration of Dr. David Michel, one of the leaders in the Mississippi Baptist Convention. And at 1:30, Bertha Fagan and I met for lunch. She never touched her food.

Bertha is the widow of a seminary classmate, Dr. Gary Fagan. They pastored churches; led Youth For Christ in Jackson, Mississippi and Atlanta; and served as missionaries in Malawi and Brazil. After preaching twice one Sunday in May 2014, Gary had an aneurysm that night, and God took him to heaven a few days later. Bertha and I had never met. But we had connected slightly on Facebook. I had texted to ask if she would be willing to meet me for lunch.

We sat there talking for two hours, and then I drove home to New Orleans, dog-tired. But I was back in Jackson that Friday night. And the next day.

We knew quickly the Lord had matched us. "This is the Lord's doing; It is marvelous in our eyes," Psalm 118:23 says.

Life as I had known it was changing; God was knitting a new thing.

Summer. My treasured pastor of eight years left. My son and his family had moved away. I put my house on the market. Bertha and I started looking for homes in the Jackson, Mississippi area.

Many a night, anxiety threatened to overwhelm me: *Can I do this? Can I sell this house for enough money to buy a new home? Where will we live? Can I be a husband to another woman? I was never the greatest husband in the world. What kind of adjustments will be required? Can I do this?*

"Abide."

Again and again in the middle of the night, that word came to me.

I would speak that word to my anxious spirit. "Abide in Him, Joe." Fix my mind on the Lord Jesus. Let His words occupy my mind. Thank Him for all He has done.

And peace came.

That process repeated itself throughout the year. I was getting my house ready to sell, supplying pulpits, preaching revivals and holding senior events in churches across this part of the world and running by to see Bertha as often as possible. We talked on the phone for an hour every night. Meanwhile, we were trying to find ways to introduce each other to our families. We wondered about how to merge our lives and our homes, worried somewhat about merging finances and saw a marriage counselor to make sure we were doing this right. (He assured us we were amazingly matched.)

Autumn. We found the house. It was a dream house, the kind I would never have thought I could have afforded. I gave the owner a contract stating my intention of buying the house by October 1 on the condition of my house selling. My realtor was helping me get my house ready to sell. We had lived there for over 22 years. The house was paid for, but the accumulation of stuff for all those years made the job almost nightmarish.

October. I sold the house, bought the other house and moved. And I abided in Christ. That was the secret of doing all this, keeping my sanity and retaining my peace.

Bertha and my daughter-in-law Julie helped place things in the new home. And ever since, Bertha comes over several days a week (14 miles from where she lives), bringing things and installing them here in the house where she will soon be living. She is energetic, creative, dedicated, ever-patient and endlessly smiling.

December. We will be married soon. The plan is to simply walk into the chapel at our church in Jackson with the minister and a couple of witnesses, exchange vows and then inform our families that we've "done the deed."

There will be a lot more challenges, more situations that threaten to overwhelm us, no doubt. As Bertha and I have said

on numerous occasions, it takes faith to remarry at the age we are (mid-70s). We cannot do this in our strength, make these decisions in our wisdom or go forward except by faith. We will abide in Him.

Abiding in Christ. That's the only way.

I doubt seriously if the Lord plans to give me another word for 2017. I expect "abide" was His word for me for all time. And I'm good with that. What better place is there to live except in His hands, in His will, in His heart? {eoa}

*After five years as director of missions for the 100 Southern Baptist churches of metro New Orleans, **Joe McKee** retired on June 1, 2009. These days, he has an office at the First Baptist Church of Kenner, where he's working on three books and trying to accept every speaking/preaching invitation that comes his way.*

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