

Dentistry and ministry work side by side for Leroy Bradshaw



The tooth is out!
Once more again
The throbbing, jumping
Nerves are stilled.

Reader, would you avoid
This pain?
Then have your crumbling
Teeth well filled.
-David Bares (1810-1876)

The obscure poet, David Bates, who wrote the above lines may be forgotten, but his “throbbing, jumping nerves” are well known to anyone who has ever had a bad tooth and needed a dentist.

But where does a dentist go when the “Throbbing, jumping nerves” are his? That’s what Leroy Bradshaw wanted to know when he finished dental school and returned to Blackstone to practice dentistry with his father, Dr. T.C. Bradshaw

Leroy had everything a young man should want: a good profession, a beautiful wife, a nice house, healthy children...but he was miserable.

“For the first six or eight years, we were really dissatisfied here,” Leroy recalled, “I was in debt and our marriage almost failed.” This wasn’t where I was supposed to be, thought Leroy. What had happened to his dream of being a minister? He had let it go so easily.

“After two weeks at William and Mary, I decided going into the ministry wasn’t a good idea because I couldn’t get a good grade in English.” So Leroy took biology, got A’s, got approval, and ended up...a dentist.

Then he applied to seminary, and again someone tried to discourage him.

Disparaging thought began to decay his self-esteem. *Once more again the throbbing, jumping nerves...* Now he had a major cavity. No dentist could remove this pain.

Fortunately, dentistry hadn’t kept Leroy from being active in the Baptist church. When he and his wife Sylvia went to a medical missions conference, they never suspected when he returned home he would be exulting: *The tooth is out!* And that their marriage would be repaired.

Leroy, now a minister of Jonesboro Baptist Church for the past five years, still revisits that turning point in his life for inspiration.

“We were studying the Book of Jonah,” said Leroy, when his teacher startled him with a revelation: ‘You are just like Jonah, trying to go somewhere other than where God wants you to be.’”

Leroy had never linked himself personally to the parables in the Bible. He had always read them like he read biology: objectively, rationally...safely.

Now, without warning, like a monster from the sea, the Bible opened its great mouth and swallowed him. Instead of being outside reading it, Leroy was inside—being read by it!

He was Jonah! Blackstone is where I’m supposed to be, he realized. Leroy gave up fighting himself and found peace.

Leroy frequently reaches down into the Book of Jonah to touch that pearl of wisdom he had been shown in the belly of the whale.

The painful tooth that was extracted had been transformed into a pearl of wisdom.

When Leroy came out of the Book of Jonah, he took charge of his life and gave himself permission to be who he was. It was OK to be a small town dentist and the minister he really wanted to be.

The similarity between the opened mouth of the whale and the opened mouth of the dental patient is not lost to Leroy.

The words of the dentist and the minister seem to come from one mouth: at some time in your life you have to surrender to God (and the dentist); at some point the pain of sin (a decayed tooth) is less than the fear of the Lord (the dentist); at some point, you have to let Christ (the dentist) reach inside and heal you.

“And the person has to accept the filling (Word),” Leroy added, happy to discover yet another metaphorical bridge between his worldly and spiritual life. “A person has to take responsibility for the care of his teeth (spiritual life).

“Through neglect and abuse, the teeth (one’s whole life) break down.” Everything about dentistry is perfect for teaching and preaching, Leroy discovered.

To bring this story back from the deep, having been inside one whale of a metaphor, take a look at how the Bradshaws have taken their dentistry/ministry abroad. “The more we give away, the more returns to us,” said Leroy, when asked why they go on missions.

Since 1981 they have spent their vacations in mission work, both in Appalachia and in Haiti, once and last month in Columbia. The Bradshaws have found this gift of their talents maintains the bridge between the ministry and dentistry.

Sylvia, who works as her husband’s assistant, picked up a fruit jar containing 188 decayed and broken teeth they had extracted from the mouths of the Columbian poor.

In place of these teeth, the Bradshaws hope seeds of Bible study had been planted “They will come with a tooth ache and at the same time get their spiritual needs answered,” said Sylvia.