

A Faithful Soldier
Charles Jerry Vines
by Nancy Lee Smith

“A preacher must be both soldier and shepherd. He must nourish, defend, and teach; he must have teeth in his mouth, and be able to bite and fight.”
-Martin Luther

In an interview right before his retirement, a news reporter asked Jerry Vines the question, “Let’s just say that you could gather every single person on the First Coast to listen to your last sermon here, what would be your message?”

Vines answered saying he would speak on a familiar passage from the third chapter of the book of John. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

He then added, “That’s the whole thing in a nutshell.”

Proclaiming the message of God’s love from John 3:16 has been the *nutshell* of Jerry Vines’ ministry for over 50 years. From small country churches in the red hills of Georgia to meetings with United States Presidents, Jerry Vines’ ministry has flourished. His retirement from the pastorate and his new focus on preachers marks the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new one.

Hearing a message of love from Jerry Vines may not be what some people expect from the nationally known preacher. Indeed, his sermons, his opinions, and his writings cause some to label him controversial, even contentious. “Any time a man preaches the truth of Scripture, that in and of itself becomes controversial in our culture, especially,” Vines says. “We’re in a culture which says that truth is relative, that there is no absolute truth. And a Bible preacher takes the view that there is absolute truth. And so, I think that in and of itself lends itself to controversy.”

Those who know him say Jerry Vines is unassuming and modest. “He’s a very warm and gentle spirit,” his wife, the former Janet Denney of Atlanta, says. While God gave Vines a humble and gentle spirit, God also prepared him from youth to be a stalwart defender of Christianity and the truth of the Bible in some of our time’s most volatile spiritual and political battles. Though never serving in the military, Jerry Vines has proven to be a faithful soldier of the Lord who has *fought a good fight* against liberalism in the Southern Baptist Convention and defended the inerrancy of the Word of God. Vines is both *soldier* and *shepherd* and has been for over 50 years in ministry.

GROWING UP A COUNTRY BOY

Charles Jerry Vines was born September 22, 1937, in Carroll County, Georgia, as his mother describes it, “way up on a hill in the country.” His childhood was rural and simple, according to him.

Ruby Vines was a homemaker. “She was the quiet one,” Vines says. His father, Clarence, drove a bread truck and sold insurance and furniture, among other things.

Vines says his outgoing father was a salesman. “He could really sell.” The family moved often, as they could afford better homes.

Brenda Young, Vines’ younger sister, remembers a tale her father liked to tell about mischievous young Jerry. “This all happened before I came along,” Young recounts, “but apparently, local boys loved to hang out over at a local barn. I don’t know what went on there, but it was a magnet for a young boy. I think it somehow involved the trading and selling of mules, but I am not sure.

“Daddy deemed it a dangerous place for Jerry to be and told him not to go there anymore. One day, Jerry came home with mud on his shoes, and Daddy asked him where the mud came from and asked if he had been to the mule barn. Jerry said the mud was from a mud puddle on the sidewalk and, no, he had not been to the barn.

“So, Daddy asked Jerry to show him the mud puddle on the sidewalk and sure enough, Jerry produced a mud puddle on a sidewalk near home. Daddy told him he was getting a spanking when they got back home. Jerry apparently asked why. Daddy replied that the mud in the puddle was brown and that the mud on his shoes was *mule barn red*.”

Jerry and his boyhood friends found all kinds of fun, sometimes in places not about entertainment at all. Vines is known as a compassionate man now, but as a boy that may not have always held true. In his hometown, as Vines tells it, “They had stores all around the square, and one of them was old Dr. Brock’s dental office up on the second floor. In those days, they didn’t have painkillers. And so you could hear them yelling up there as they were drilling. That was our horror show. We would stand down there and listen to them yell.”

As a kid, Vines wanted to be a coach, and he had athletic talent, according to Mrs. Maxwell, his sixth grade teacher. Perhaps because of that, a highly competitive spirit developed in him. “He was a terrible loser. Any kind of competition, he wanted to *win*,” according to Vines’ sister, Brenda Young. “Football, basketball, bowling, he did not want to lose.” A spirit of competition and a hunger for victory were part of his early drive.

Jerry was a normal Southern boy in many respects, but the touch of God’s hand on his life manifested itself early. Even as a young boy, Jerry sat on the church’s second pew and took notes on the preacher’s sermons. “I knew then the Lord was dealing with him,” Mrs. Maxwell says. She taught Vines during the week at school and sang in the church choir on Sundays.

Jerry came to know Christ early in life. “I was nine,” Vines says, “and it happened on a Sunday night. A friend came by the house and said he was going to join the church and wanted me to go to church with him. And so I did, and we went by the preacher’s office. He explained the plan of salvation. And so that night in the evening service, I accepted Christ as my Savior.”

People close to Vines noticed God’s hand of protection on young Jerry’s life. “Jerry fell while climbing a tree,” Vines sister recalls, “and a limb caught him under his arm. He was cut badly. Daddy said that after the doctor had taken care of it, he told Daddy that if the limb had gone any-*any*-farther, Jerry would not have made it to the

hospital. He would have bled to death. He still has the V-shaped scar. The Lord was preparing him even at an early age,” she said.

ANSWERING HIS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF’S CALL

As a teenager, young Jerry heard the unmistakable call of God. “I was called to preach when I was 16,” Vines reflects. “It was pretty definite that that’s what God wanted me to do.” He adds, “I think the key is that you just surrender to God and be anything he wants you to be.”

Young Jerry was influenced by his Grandpa Johnson. “He was unique in his day in that he was a college graduate,” Vines remembers. “He was a businessman. He was called to preach late in life. He ate two desserts at every meal, yet he was thin as a rail. He was self-taught in terms of the Scriptures and really taught me the pre-millennial return of Christ and had never read a book on the subject. His firm convictions, his unwavering stand I think certainly helped me to take strong stands.”

Another man who disciplined young Vines was the minister of music of his local church, Mr. John Atherton. Atherton was a “very, very spiritual Christian,” Vines recalls. “He had gone to Wheaton College; and he was a real Bible student.”

His parents were not surprised when at the age of 16, Jerry shared his call into ministry with them. “We could see a light in his room at night,” his mother said. “We weren’t surprised he went into the ministry. We could tell he was studying a lot.”

Jerry’s rural family possessed a reverence for pastors, and his parents’ reaction to his call into the ministry was positive. “They were very supportive, very supportive,” he says.

“In fact, when I announced my call to preach that Sunday morning, my dad came down and with tears said, ‘You can count on me,’ which I’ve never forgotten. And, I could. I was always able to count on him.”

PREACHING THE WORD

On a rainy night in North Georgia in the 1950s, the recently ordained Jerry Vines preached his first sermon. Nerves as sharp as needles unsettled the young preacher as he prepared to step into the pulpit of the Shady Grove Baptist Church in Carrollton.

He had asked his friend, Charles Vaughn, to accompany him and to lead the singing for the service. Vines asked Vaughn to sing one hymn after another to consume time and to ease his stress. Finally, Vines’ time came.

His first sermon lasted somewhere between 15 and 20 minutes. Jerry Vines now admits he was “absolutely scared to death.” According to him, about eight people fought the “gully-washer” of rain to show up at church on a Wednesday night. He titled his message *On to the Goal*, based on sermons he had heard his pastor preach. Since then, Vines says he has been “absolutely convinced of the power of preaching God’s Word.”

HIS QUEST FOR SOULS

Only two books comprised the young preacher's personal library. They were the *Holy Bible* and George W. Truett's *A Quest for Souls*. Even though his library was small, the contents of the two books focused young Jerry's ministry on soul winning and on standing for the truth of the Bible.

The young Vines wrote copious notes in the margins of both books and lived what he found there. For example, Truett says, "We are to make it a point constantly to encourage people." Vines did this.

"Dr. Vines has always been an encouragement to me," Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham says, "even during times of public ridicule. He has reminded me to stand firm in the faith regardless of public pressure to soften the message of our Lord and Savior."

Vines also noted Truett's words on soul winning. "The Spirit of God does teach, guide and empower the servants of Jesus, in this holiest task of all, this work of winning souls to Christ," Truett says. Jerry Vines' ministry has been focused on soul winning for over fifty years.

Missionary Kathy Gould writes to Vines, "Not only has God used you to personally harvest souls, but He has also abundantly used you to train, encourage and enable multitudes of us workers that we, too, may go out and work the fields."

When asked recently if he knew how many souls he has led to the Lord in his half-century of ministry, Vines quietly replied, "No, I don't have any clue on that. In all of our churches, we've been blessed. We've seen a lot of people saved in our churches. So, I wouldn't have any way to know. Job said, 'My witness is in Heaven, and my record is on high.' So, when we get to Heaven, we'll see what it is. It's not enough, I'm sure of that."

Vines adds that he considers soul winning to be the focal point of a Christian's life. He says, "I think it is important to be a witness. I think that's what makes your faith really come alive, and the ultimate point of it all is to share with others what Christ has done for you. And, I think that's the bottom line, to encourage others to know Christ as their Savior."

LEARNING DEFENSIVE STRATEGIES

Upon graduating from high school in 1955, young Jerry faced a decision about college. Vines asked his pastor for advice. He recommended Mercer University in Macon because it was a Christian institution and because he knew Jerry wanted to preach in Georgia. Jerry enrolled at Mercer where he majored in Christianity. "I minored in Greek and philosophy," he explains. "I had a double minor."

While a freshman at Mercer, Jerry faced the biggest crisis of faith he had ever known. The young preacher's faith, born and nourished in the red clay of North Georgia, had never been questioned by scholars. In a message entitled *The B-I-B-L-E* preached

October 23, 2005, at First Baptist, Jacksonville, Vines told his congregation about the crisis.

“I had been brought up in a Bible-believing church. I had been taught that the Bible was the inspired Word of God. So, I went away to college to study to preach the Gospel. I remember my first classes. I went into classes where very intelligent, very highly educated men made statements like this: ‘Any man who says the Bible is without error is a fool.’ I heard statements like this: ‘You can’t believe all the miracles really happened in the Bible.’

“And so, you see, this brought a crisis in my life. On the one hand, I had been taught by my pastor and my Sunday School teachers that the Bible was the inspired Word of God. Now, here were men with Ph.D. degrees saying, ‘That’s not true. What you have heard previously is not the case.’

“And so, I came to a time of crisis in my life. I was going to a school in Macon, Georgia, and I remember as an 18-year-old freshman in college, I made my way one afternoon out to a park there in Macon, Georgia-Baconsfield Park. I went out there, and I remember kneeling out there in that wooded area, and I remember I had a copy of my Bible. I said to the Lord, I said, ‘Lord, I’ve been taught that this Bible is Your Word. I am now hearing that it is not Your Word, and, Lord, they are smarter than I will ever be, but, Lord, You have taught me. I have been taught by those I respect that the Bible is God’s Word. I will take what they say by faith; I will believe that the Bible is inspired.’

“That’s been 50 years ago and I’m going to say beyond question, I know that this Bible is no ordinary book. The Bible is the inspired Word of God.” That crisis of faith armed young Jerry to defend the Word of God at all costs. He had earned his stripes as soldier in God’s army.

God’s protective hand continued to cover the young preacher boy. He did not have a car while attending Mercer, so he hitchhiked from Carrollton to Macon. “Mama and I would take him part of the way,” Brenda Young says, “and he would hitch the rest of the way. What he may or may not know is that when he got out of the car, Mama would drive down the road to where he couldn’t see us and stop and wait until somebody picked him up. I remember turning around in the seat, watching and waiting for him to get a ride. She never left until he had a ride.”

In 1957, Vines accepted the pastorate at Bethesda Baptist Church in Carrollton, Georgia. He had previously pastored at Centralhatchee Baptist Church in Franklin, Georgia. In 1959, Vines graduated from Mercer University in Macon with his bachelor’s degree.

FALLING OFF JACOB’S LADDER

On the third Sunday of May in 1960, the young pastor met the love of his life. “Well, I was pastor of Bethesda Baptist Church,” Vines says, “and it was a Homecoming Sunday. Janet had come down with her family. There were some family connections to that area, and she walked in that Sunday. I was going to preach on *Jacob’s Ladder*,

and Janet came in, and I fell off the ladder. She was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen in my life." Jerry then said, "I'm going to marry that girl!"

And he did.

Young Janet Denney of Atlanta was visiting Carrollton. She says it was God who turned her heart there that Sunday. "I went in with my parents and a sorority sister of my sister's from the University of Georgia. I didn't think anything about him, about Jerry Vines, to be honest with you. I thought, 'He's cute.' But that was it."

Jerry wanted to meet this beauty before she left the church. He stationed himself at the door and searched her left hand for a ring.

Jerry had trouble reaching Miss Denney because of her busy schedule. "Well, I met him the third Sunday in May," she adds, "but we didn't date until July. He didn't find me at home. I had a *great* job. I worked for the Georgia Power Company; I had the time of my life!"

He finally reached her. "The *corker* came when he asked me to find a revival, if possible," Janet recalls. "This was before we ended up at a movie. I tried to locate a revival as I said I would. Luckily, I could not find one. Hurray! Actually, I only called one church.

"So, you can say we had one normal date. We were together every weekend as I traveled to Carrollton from Atlanta. It was 50 miles one way. Just being with each other was all we desired. He was a pastor, and he needed to be in Carrollton. Sometimes, he came to see me on Wednesday night. A hundred miles for a goodnight kiss!" Their first date was July 29, and they were engaged on August 16.

Janet says her heart told her she loved him. "I had been engaged to a boy, and he was a wonderful person, but I kept moving the date back. God had other plans. God did it. I had nothing to do with it. I just went, and there he was. My whole life changed on that third Sunday in May. *My whole life.*

"No, I didn't fall off the ladder. He did! I just got up and walked out and went back to Atlanta. I left him at the bottom of the ladder."

BOOT CAMP

Jerry and Janet married on December 17, 1960. Two weeks later, they left Georgia and headed to New Orleans, Louisiana. Young Jerry began seminary classes there. "We were married two weeks and went off to graduate school the first time," Janet recalls. "A 32-foot trailer by eight feet wide. No air-conditioning in New Orleans. Then I became with child and deathly sick. I just about died. I really did. So, we had to leave and go to our first church." The couple left New Orleans to accept the pastorate at Second Baptist Church in Cedartown, Georgia.

Their first child, Joy, was born in Rome, Georgia, in November of 1961. Vines' sister recalls, "When Joy was born in Rome, Georgia, Daddy, Mama and I rushed up to the hospital to see her. Jerry was there at the window-hogging all the space. I couldn't

get anywhere near it. He couldn't take his eyes off her. When I finally did get a peek, she was worth the wait. She was a beautiful, olive-skinned, brown-haired angel."

Jerry then pastored at Eureka Baptist Church in Carroll County, Georgia. The family stayed for one year. Their twins, Jim and Jodi, were born in June of 1963.

In 1964, the growing family headed back to New Orleans so Jerry could finish his seminary training. Jerry attended classes, preached on Sundays and worked on the seminary ground crew to support his young family.

In 1965, young Jerry accepted the pastorate for the second time at Second Baptist Church in Cedartown, Georgia. He desired to complete his seminary training at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, so Jerry commuted the 500 miles between New Orleans and Cedartown each week for nine months.

While Vines worked hard to pastor his flock, he was also a dedicated father. "We would have our family devotions at night," says daughter Jodi Vines. "We would all pile on the bed and have devotional time. Somebody would start laughing. Then, we'd all laugh. We would tattle on each other for 'peeking during the prayer.'"

Ergun and Emir Caner, in their book *The Sacred Trust*, share a story of Vines' dedication to his calling while in Cedartown. "Every Friday Vines would board a train in New Orleans and ride all night to get home. Arriving in Cedartown early on Saturday morning, he would run home, shower and shave, and then spend his Saturdays on visitation. He averaged thirty visits a day each Saturday and would then preach and lead the church all day Sunday.

"Early Monday morning, Janet would pack Jerry a lunch, and he would board the train in Cedartown and ride all day to New Orleans, studying for the next day's classes. Apparently, however, the grueling schedule inspired Jerry Vines

"Vines maintained a high A average, and the church baptized 110 people in the same period!"

In 1966, the hard work paid off and Vines received his Bachelor of Divinity degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

TOUR OF DUTY: GEORGIA

In 1967, Vines accepted the pastorate at First Baptist Church in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. The Vines family stayed there one year. Jonathan, their fourth and last child, was born in nearby Chattanooga, Tennessee.

In 1969, Vines accepted the pastorate at West Rome Baptist Church in Rome, Georgia. "The continuing growth that took place during the first pastorate of Brother Jerry Vines is illustrated by the increase in membership from 1,250 in January 1970 to 1,514 in January 1971," according to church records. "By April, the membership had grown to 1,534," according to *The Centennial History of West Rome Baptist Church*.

In addition to growing the church, the new pastor had vision for spreading the Gospel including a radio program, a deaf ministry, a bus ministry, a children's church service and a church bookstore.

Vines' children remember that his impact in Rome spread beyond the church. "We'd get to go watch Dad do his radio show in Rome, Georgia called *What's the Good Word?*," oldest son Jim Vines recollects.

"Dad was also the chaplain of the West Rome High School Chieftains," says Joy Vines Williams. "We'd go to the football games with him on Friday nights and run under the bleachers. We'd get to ride the football bus with him. Sometimes, on Saturdays, we'd go watch some of the youth compete in track meets."

Vines' competitive spirit accompanied him to each and every church he pastored. His sister says he just about made himself sick when he tried to win a Burger King whopper-eating contest at West Rome Baptist Church.

In the midst of serving as chaplain for the high school, visiting the lost, preaching on Sundays and Wednesdays, and being a husband and father, Jerry Vines attended Luther Rice Seminary and earned his Doctor of Theology degree in 1974.

Vines' education at Luther Rice honed his already sharp skills for defending the truth of the Word of God. The seminary's statement of beliefs reads in part, "We believe that both the Old and New Testaments are verbally inspired by God and are inerrant in the original writings. Through the providence of God, the Scriptures have been preserved and are the supreme and final and adequate authority in faith and life." God's training of His soldier continued.

TOUR OF DUTY: ALABAMA

In 1974, Jerry Vines was offered the pastorate at Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama. An excerpt from *History of Dauphin Way Baptist Church* by Betty Bolling Vinson reads, "The Pulpit Committee had been busy seeking to find God's man to lead Dauphin Way. Many trips had been made to many churches to hear prospective candidates. In early June, the committee received a letter from Dr. Homer Lindsay, Sr., Pastor Emeritus of the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida. Dr. Lindsay recommended a young preacher who was pastor of the West Rome Baptist Church in Rome, Georgia, Dr. Charles Jerry Vines."

The Pulpit Committee extended a call to Jerry Vines, and he accepted it informing the church he would move to Mobile the last of August and would preach in the pulpit the first Sunday in September.

Vines asked the Pulpit Committee to share a letter he prepared stating the philosophy of his ministry. The letter illustrates Vines' goals. In a recent interview, Vines said, "I've got two purposes in my ministry and always will. The first is to lead people to Christ, and the second is to help Christians grow." Vines' letter to the Dauphin Way congregation stated the same purposes.

It reads in part, “The preaching of the Word of God will be central in the ministry of the pastor The whole Word of God will be preached without fear or favor.” Later, it reads, “Visitation to win the lost will be given top priority in all the activities of the church. The goal will be to evangelize the city of Mobile for Jesus Christ.”

The early influence of Truett’s *A Quest for Souls* had again manifested itself in the life and ministry of Jerry Vines. God’s soldier was stationed in Alabama.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

The years in Mobile, Alabama were hard, according to Janet. Nevertheless, she says Jerry did some of his best preaching there. One memorable sermon preached at Dauphin Way was entitled *Our Ascended Lord*. Daniel Akin, President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, shares, “I first met Dr. Vines through his sermon, *Our Ascended Lord*. I have listened to that message more than 100 times.”

Hayes Wicker, Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Naples, Florida, and President of the Florida Baptist Convention, agrees. “When I heard Dr. Vines preach his famous message on the Ascension, I believed then in the 1970’s and still do today, that it is the greatest single sermon of our generation.”

Vines himself comments on *Our Ascended Lord* saying, “I probably have had more response and more continual response through the years on that message than any other message I’ve ever preached. The first time was in 1977 at Dauphin Way. There has hardly been a week from then until now that I haven’t heard someone refer to that message—someone call me, someone write me, see someone in passing who was blessed by that sermon. I don’t take any credit for it. I feel like the Lord used it.”

Because of Vines’ commitment to preach the Word and to win souls, the attacks on him and on his family were strong. Janet never had a peaceful feeling about being there, yet she knew it was God’s will for her husband.

Vines was also committed to his family responsibilities. “Dad, Jim, and Jon went for Jim’s football bowl championship from Mobile to Birmingham,” Joy Vines Williams recalls. “On their way home, their car broke down in the middle of the night. They hitchhiked a ride, and he had to preach the next morning. My parents made sacrifices that we never even thought about until we became adults and parents ourselves.”

FULFILLING GOD’S MISSION

Church members at Dauphin Way noticed differences in their young pastor. “He was younger, he believed in his people studying the Word along with him, that the familiar ‘pulpit uniform’ of dark suits was a thing of the past,” according to Vinson.

Vines believed in a committed people, desired the worship services to be informal and flexible. While at Dauphin Way, Vines also inaugurated a new training program and began his verse-by-verse expository preaching. The new pastor’s leadership led to church growth.

By early October, after Vines arrived in September, attendance at all services had increased, and attendance at the morning worship service had increased to such an extent that the 8:15 am service was resumed, Vinson reports. “The pace of the services was rapid, dynamic and evangelistic in nature.”

Vines’ ministry moved beyond the city limits of Mobile into the state of Alabama. In 1975, “Dr. Vines was honored and surprised by being elected President of the Pastor’s Conference of the Alabama Baptist State Convention when it met in Huntsville,” Vinson adds.

In 1976, Jerry Vines received another honor and another sign of his growing influence. He was elected President of the Pastor’s Conference of the Southern Baptist Convention in June. “A telegram was sent from the church to Dr. Vines congratulating him on this honor,” Vinson notes.

God was guiding His faithful soldier, Jerry Vines. His training for defending God’s Word was about to be tested in the Southern Baptist Convention.

When asked what experiences in ministry built his faith the most, Vines remembers the difficult times. “We’ve had wonderful churches,” Vines says, “but then we’ve had times in churches that were challenging. Those are the times when you really grow the most.

“Faith grows better under pressure, I think. When things are easy, you don’t mature as much. It is kind of like the butterfly in the cocoon, it is that restriction there that causes it to grow. I don’t know that I can point to any one experience, but probably a number of them.”

In 1980, the Vines family left Dauphin Way. Jerry Vines accepted the pastorate at West Rome Baptist Church in Rome, Georgia, for the second time. For a short time, the Vines’ were home awaiting God’s orders.

TOUR OF DUTY: FLORIDA

In 1982, Jerry Vines accepted the call to become co-pastor with Dr. Homer G. Lindsay, Jr., at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida. Lindsay and Vines had been friends for years and had vacationed together many times.

“I rolled the window up on his finger one time,” Vines says. “We were going to take a short cut back to where we were staying, and we wound up on top of a hill. The road ran out and we had to turn the car around, so he got out.

“It was just like we were up on a postage stamp, and it was hot. He got out and was kind of directing me so we didn’t fall off the hill. I was going to turn the air back on ‘cause I had the windows down to hear his directions. I was going to roll the windows up and get the car cool for him, but he had his hand in the window, and I rolled up the window. He started yelling. I thought a rattlesnake had bitten him.”

Lindsay pursued Vines. He wanted Vines to pastor the downtown church with him. In fact, Homer called Jerry "the greatest preacher in America" on many occasions. The friendship and love between the two pastors only grew as time passed.

Guinell Freeman, former Minister of Education at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, appreciated the uniqueness of serving two pastors in one church. By all accounts, the partnership worked. Freeman recalls phenomenal church growth from 1982 until 1993. She also remembers innovative church programs Vines initiated. For example, Vines started a doctrinal Bible study during the church training hour after his arrival at the church. He also started the Thursday business luncheons featuring the music of the Jim Reed Ensemble. Downtown workers could buy a hot meal and hear an uplifting message for only \$3.00. The Thursday business luncheons continue today, although the price has gone up slightly.

TAKING THE OFFENSIVE

As Vines and Lindsay served together at First Baptist, Jacksonville, in the 1980s, the battle lines within the Southern Baptist Convention became more defined. Jerry Vines, faithful soldier, was sent to front lines of war. Reflecting on that time, Vines says, "The Convention was decidedly headed in a liberal direction back when I went to college and in the early years of my pastorate. Several of us were concerned about it and wanted to do something to turn the Convention back to its conservative roots. When I was President of the Convention, those two years were very intense years because the struggle between the liberals and the conservatives in the Convention had reached its peak.

"Fortunately, with God's help, through a series of elections of Presidents, the appointments were able to be made that would turn our institutions back. So really, my last year as President of the Convention pretty well set the pattern for the future. From that time until this, things have turned around, and now the Convention is going in a decidedly conservative direction."

Viewed historically, Vines served at a pivotal point. He adds, "I didn't tip it over conservatively. Just the whole movement itself and the changing in the trustees in the institutions reached a tipping point at that time."

Others in ministry reflect on Vines' Convention Presidency. Joseph Lee, Senior Pastor of the Grand Highway Baptist Church in Clermont, Florida, writes to Dr. Vines, "We will always be indebted to you for not only being a major player in changing the course of the Southern Baptist Convention from the destructive path of liberalism and returning it to its biblical heritage and roots but, also, for your tremendous example and integrity as a holy man of God demonstrated by your adherence and love for the Scriptures and your burning passion to reach the precious souls of mankind."

Charles Stanley says, "Following my appointment as President of the Southern Baptist Convention, God spoke to me very clearly that Jerry was to be the next President. He was elected the following year." The year was 1987, and Jerry Vines preached a sermon entitled, *A Baptist and His Bible*. The sermon electrified the Convention. Vines, God's faithful soldier, used his skill as a scholar and theologian to defend the truth of the Word of God.

At one point in the message, Vines said, “When you force the Bible to pay tribute at every little ‘toll gate’ of rational opinion, eventually you give away every part of the Bible. You begin by giving up the Genesis account of creation; next, you dissect the historical parts of the Bible; then, the miracles have to go. Before it is over you are picking and choosing from the very words of Jesus....When you start trying to separate the Word from Scripture, you wind up with a fictitious creation, three Isaiah’s, exaggerated miracles and a speechless Jesus. Before it is over, you have a Bible full of holes instead of a whole Bible!”

He received numerous standing ovations during the message. The same year, Jerry Vines was nominated as President of the Southern Baptist Convention. “San Antonio was where he was elected President,” Janet Vines says. “Everything was against him. There was a man from Dallas, Texas, who bought up every room in that area so that our people had nowhere to stay. So, people came and slept in their cars. We had friends who did that to vote, and then they went back home that day. He won by about 800 votes. It was the most nerve-wracking day of my life.”

Vines agrees the battle in the Convention was heated and had been for some time. “Some of you know that a number of years ago some of us were involved in a battle for the Bible in the Southern Baptist Convention,” Vines preached in November 2005. “Our Southern Baptist Convention had drifted away from the fundamentals of the faith. Our seminaries were places where those who believed there were errors in the Bible were teaching young preacher boys.

“Some of us became greatly burdened about it,” Vines said. “Dr. Adrian Rogers and a number of us got involved, and we had meetings. We started going to the Convention and taking our stand. It was not easy to do. We basically committed denominational suicide.”

Later in the message, Vines said, “In 1979, Dr. Rogers was elected President of the Southern Baptist Convention. We just didn’t believe it was possible. All the papers were against us. They maligned us; they made fun of us. I was eventually elected President of the Convention myself. I was one of seven men elected President of the Southern Baptist Convention who are known as the Conservative Resurgence Presidents.” The battle for the Bible was won due to the efforts of faithful soldiers like Dr. Adrian Rogers and Dr. Jerry Vines.

Serving as President of the Convention required Vines to travel and to spend time away from the pulpit. Because Homer Lindsay, Jr., could preach in Jerry’s absence, he was able to meet the demands of his Presidency.

A FALLEN COMRADE

In February 2000, Dr. Homer G. Lindsay, Jr., passed away. The entire church body grieved, but none more than Jerry Vines. His friend, pastor and fellow faithful soldier had died.

Jerry Vines truly loved Homer Lindsay, Jr., as evidenced by what one church staff member witnessed before Lindsay’s passing. “I watched Jerry Vines lean over Dr.

Lindsay about three hours before he died,” he remembers, “and say with tears streaming off of his cheeks and falling onto Dr Lindsay's face, ‘I love you, Homer. I am going to preach the Word now.’ With that, Vines went to preach at church on Sunday night, and Dr. Lindsay was gone shortly after the service.” There was a deep affection between these two soldiers of God.

At Lindsay’s funeral, Vines quoted II Kings 4:9 about Elisha, great prophet of God. “And she said unto her husband, Behold now, I perceive that this [is] an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually.” Vines then said, “I don’t know of a Scripture that more epitomizes to me the life and ministry of Homer Lindsay, Jr., than right there. This is a holy man of God which passeth by us continually. It reminds me of his character. I’m so thankful this man of God passed by me, touched me. He passed by Jacksonville, and he has left his mark on the city of Jacksonville.”

After Lindsay’s death, Vines took up the mantle of pastoring the 28,000-member downtown Jacksonville church by himself. When asked about the church, Vines says, “I live and breathe the ministry of the First Baptist Church here and have going on 24 years now. My total life, my total interest, my total love in ministry is directed to this fellowship here. The dearest people in the world to me are here.”

A NEW TOUR OF DUTY

In May 2005, Jerry Vines announced his retirement to his congregation in Jacksonville. “Twenty-three years ago this July God brought me, with Janet and our children, to First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida,” the letter reads. “Little did we know the great blessings and joy the Lord would bring to us. These have been glorious years. Thousands have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Christians have grown in their faith. Hundreds of young people have gone forth to serve our Lord.”

The letter continues, “After much prayer, and confident of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the time has come to announce my retirement as your pastor. In no way am I retiring from the Gospel ministry. I plan to devote whatever remaining time the Lord Jesus gives me to a ministry of Bible preaching, teaching and writing, and a ministry to preachers, as He opens doors of opportunity.

“The time has come for a new and younger leadership to lead the church in the challenge of sharing the story of Jesus with a rapidly growing and expanding city.”

With the letter, Vines’ congregation was first saddened, then joyous for the new opportunities waiting for their beloved pastor. When Vines was asked about his continued ministry, he reiterated his two purposes which are leading souls to Christ and helping Christians grow.

But he also adds, “The particular avenue it seems God is moving me in to accomplish those now is to have a ministry to preachers, to provide materials for preachers, to provide conferences for preachers to help them to learn how to do the job. So I hope to do that.”

PASSING THE TORCH TO FUTURE SOLDIERS

When asked what his hopes are for the next generation of pastors, Vines said, “I hope the next generation of pastors will return to the preaching and the exposition of God’s Word-taking books of the Bible and preaching them right through. There is a little trend away from that right now with more emphasis on preaching to felt needs and pop psychology and these kinds of things. That’s all faddish, and it’s kind of like cotton candy-it’s sweet to the taste, but there is no substance.

“The people need substance, because when they hit the real issues of life and the real problems of life, they need more than ‘just smile and be happy.’ They need some basis to give them the strength they need to go through the tough times. So, I’m hoping that’s what our preachers will preach.”

Jerry Vines, a faithful soldier of Christ, has served in ministry for over fifty years. The boy who used to listen to dental patients holler for fun in Carrollton’s square developed into one of our nation’s most decorated generals of the faith.

In a recent television interview, Vines spoke of God’s love. “My grandfather used to call me Jeremiah,” Vines says, “and I think maybe at times, I’ve been kind of like that Old Testament prophet . . . because he took bold stands. But, in the midst of those bold stands, he had a heart of real love and compassion for people. And when you love people, you love them enough to tell them the truth, and also you love them enough to give them hope. When people hear me preach, I want them to leave with the hope that God loves us.”

A FAITHFUL SOLDIER

“My dad was and is faithful,” says youngest son Jon Vines. “Faithful to the Lord. Faithful to his family. Faithful to his church. Faithful to his calling. And faithful to his friends. He is the most reliable person I have ever known. If he says he is going to do something, he does it. He said during the funeral services of his father that he could always count on his dad. Well, our family could and always can count on our dad.”

Jerry Vines was recently asked how he wants to be remembered. He said simply, “Well, I guess I just want to be remembered as a person who preached God’s Word and tried to encourage people to know the Lord and live for the Lord. I’d be happy to just be known as just a Baptist preacher.”

Baptist preacher, expositor of the Word, scholar, father, husband, grandfather, perhaps even modern day Jeremiah-all are names for Jerry Vines, a preacher and a soldier who has shared the message of God’s love for over fifty years.

Martin Luther said a preacher must be soldier and shepherd. Jerry Vines is both. Yet, he is something else. Guided from the beginning by the *Holy Bible* and George W. Truett’s *A Quest for Souls*, Jerry Vines has been God’s *soul-dier*. His quest for over fifty years has been to preach the Word and to win souls for Christ. As he moves from full-time preaching to a ministry to pastors, Vines’ quest will continue.

Well done, thou good and faithful *soul-dier*.