

They're laying to rest my special friend today.

Pesky influenza makes me remain on an Indian reservation instead of joining at Cecil's Chapel, Arkansas in the celebration of the life and faith of Dr. James Winifred Cecil.



Doc was easy to get close to. His gentle character was formed by loving parents who survived by the sweat of their brow, and when times were just too hard, pulled up stakes at Cecil's Chapel, Arkansas and followed a Rail Road job to McNary Arizona. His father James R Cecil went to Arizona first, and sent his first pay home. With about sixteen dollars and a bushel of faith, his mother Ruth loaded the little boys and all the earthly possessions she could get in their old car and headed west. After spending her last dollar on gasoline and the remaining dime on something special for the youngest Cecil child, she said, "Boys, we will go as far as this tank of gas will take us." And just when the gas needle started to brush the red "E", Ruth Cecil's eyes were instead fixed on a man walking down the road toward them. It was her husband James, determined to walk easterly until he would find his family.

Even with all his life successes, Jim Cecil could not tolerate being insulated from the common world of his roots. Some could have easily drawn such distinctions, though. James Cecil graduated from North Arizona University, and became a successful CPA. There is even speculation that there was once a viable political path for him that could have included a White House Cabinet appointment. He earned at least three Masters Degrees and a Doctorate, but never stopped studying and learning. Dr Cecil offered to his friends that they would call him Jim. But many of us found a compromise and called him "Doc."

Dr Cecil served through the Foreign Mission Board from 1967-1993. Until 1978, he and Kay, with their two children Naomi and John, served in Hong Kong. Working at the Seminary there, Dr Cecil had unique opportunities as he helped missionaries who labored in China. It was during the Cold War. He interfaced with missionaries and other believers inland even though there were no "official missionaries" in China. Dr Cecil made inland trips and ran interference with Chinese officials. Only Heaven can know how his communication skills and natural diplomacy impacted China, indeed the whole world in those days.

The Cecil Family returned to the United States when one of their children became ill. Dr Cecil worked in Richmond, VA for the Foreign Mission Board where he served as a consultant for volunteer ministries and laity abroad as well as an FMB liaison with state associations. It was during this time that Dr Cecil was the first conference speaker at the new Retreat Center, The Masters Inn. I had the honor of building most of the original Altavista, Virginia complex.

It was also during that time that Dr Cecil served on the Southern Baptist Convention Task Force for Volunteers in Missions. Doc told me that the next year, volunteer missions episodes went from twelve hundred to some twenty-two thousand. Out of the Task Force came what is now the Mission Service Corps.

A "man of God" in the truest sense, Jim devoted his life to the Gospel. He was, always, a Pastor/Teacher. Pastoring churches in Arizona, Illinois, Kentucky, Virginia, Utah, and in China, the mellow tones of his voice and his love for Christ melted hearts. With his knowledge of the Bible and his deep personal relationship with Christ, people would often sit mesmerized gleaning the fruit of his communication gifts and skills. He never claimed the role but Doc could also sing and direct music with the best of them.

His love for education led him to join the academic staff of Mid-Continent College in 1993. He was Professor of Biblical Studies and Christian Education until he became Academic Dean of the Baptist College of the Bible. In 2004, it took the name, "The James W. Cecil College of Bible." Dr Cecil developed Cohort Study Groups where small groups would meet in a church one night a week for a few months. The study was interactive but intensive, requiring little to no out of class time. The sessions were lengthy, but always over too soon. When it was completed, the class would march, cap and gown, in the University Commencement Program to receive their Graduation Certificates along with all the other traditional and non-traditional students. He even facilitated some such certificate programs in Arizona on the Indian Reservation.

But Doc wasn't just a preacher. Dr. Cecil was instrumental in Mid-Continent attaining full University status. He helped develop innovative learning/teaching methods that have contributed to assist non-traditional students to achieve accelerated Degrees while maintaining their regular jobs and lifestyles. Dr Cecil established linkage with numerous Junior Colleges in Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee so that Junior College students could achieve four-year degrees in their own backyards. I remember one year when Doc was commuting by plane from Arizona to hold six class programs, five nights a week, in three states. In the ensuing years the School has experienced growth and prestige in the academic world.

We have a friend who used to say, "When I see on my phone that it's Dr Cecil calling, I know my world is about to change." About everyone who knows him can attest that he had a knack of sharing an idea for a project with such infectious enthusiasm that before you know it, you have volunteered to take it on as your own, even if it was something you really didn't want to do. He would get you into something, then do his "little sidestep," and there, off he goes on to something else. Not even the great actor/dancer Charles Durning could come up with better moves. Dr Cecil was simply the definition of "Delegation," when it comes to project management.

In early 2004, Kay Cecil died, actually in Jim's arms while he was helping her transfer in her hospital room. They had been married 49 years. Doc was devastated. The year before, I had concluded a twelve-year bi-vocational pastorate of a little country church near our home. God had led Thurleen and me to join Vienna 1st Baptist Church where Dr. Cecil was the pastor. I had retired early from Illinois Correctional Industries, started a business, and all too soon closed the business. Doc was a great comfort during those difficult times. As one might imagine, I quickly transitioned to absorb many of Dr. Cecil's pastoral duties. We had become very close and could pretty much complete each other's sentences.

With Kay's sudden passing, he leaned on Thurleen and me a lot. We saw Doc going downhill very rapidly. Kay was nine years older. As we watched, we realized that throughout their long marriage Jim had relegated himself to be "her age" to impede any sense of embarrassment for her. When Kay died, Jim had the sense that his life was over as well. So it was our function to keep him buoyed up with encouragement. My "associate" pastoral duties became full time. I was stunned when he began introducing me as his pastor.

Throughout Kay's illness, her best friend Mary Benson from Arizona would call her often. Her nursing experience could interpret Kay's medical diagnoses and prognosis for the Cecil's. Mary and her husband Jerry had known the Cecil's practically all of each other's lives. Mary and Kay were both professional nurses, and there was a time when Dr Cecil was Mary's family's pastor in Arizona. Both families enjoyed spending time together down through the years. Jerry Benson and Jim Cecil played football together in High School in McNary, Arizona. And Mary's father and Jim's father had worked together on the railroad. To further their

common background, Jim Cecil and Mary Frances Fields were born just four miles apart. Jim, in west Arkansas and Mary in east Oklahoma. Doc called the area "Lapland," where Arkansas laps over into Oklahoma, and where Oklahoma laps over into Arkansas. Jerry Benson passed away in 1996, a victim of Pancreatic Cancer.

We were with Dr. Cecil every day and were growing accustomed to the regular phone calls from and to Arizona. He would tell us all about the calls from his brother Lynn and with Kay's friend Mary and how much the calls meant to him. But one day Thurleen and I looked at each other and said, "do you see what I see in Doc's eyes?" Soon after that he told us, "You know, Mary and I sort of enjoy talking with each other." "I think I'll get two new phones on the same plan so we can talk all we want with unlimited minutes."

I think we saw some romantic glimmers, maybe even before Doc realized it...or at least let himself think so. Soon a real romance blossomed between Jim and Mary. In August 2004 they were married at Lynn and Suzie Cecil's beautiful home in Fountain Hills Arizona. When they returned to Illinois, they asked me to guide them in restating their marriage vows before the church and mid-western friends. Jim and Mary's relationship has been really good for them.

And what a blessing that has been for Native American missions, especially the neglected Southern Arizona tribes. Dr. Cecil probably would have not returned to Arizona, except for Mary. A big double handful of committed Christians might have not been called to Arizona. At least one Indian church has been saved from disbanding and several new bible studys have begun to be seen as new churches. Hundreds of mission team members might have not gone to Arizona to help. And because of the way God chose to connect the dots, I would not have been able to share with Dr. Cecil about three weeks before he died about the six to seven thousand (that we know of) who have come to Christ this year as they were gathering up in Mexico to sneak across the border into the United States

My special friend, Dr Cecil was unique because he practiced "Power Discipleship." It didn't matter who you were. At whatever your level of Christian maturity, he would meet you there and take you to levels far beyond what you thought possible for you. With his extraordinarily gentle gifts of encouragement, edification, and - if needed - diplomacy he would build you up without you even knowing it. Then soon with another nudge you would be replicating yourself. You were caught, then taught, then mentored to bring others into the Kingdom without even knowing it.

Doc taught what Jesus taught. His favorite sermon was, "The Pearl of Great Price." The simple little, two-line parable from Matthew 13 says,

⁴³ ***"Are you listening to this? Really listening?..."***

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶ ***"God's kingdom is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for excellent pearls. Finding one that is flawless, he immediately sells everything and buys it. [The Message]***

Dr Cecil would relate several examples of great people searching the world over for priceless items. Then he would read the parable from Matthew 13. Then he would bid his hearers to imagine themselves in the role of the Jewel merchant searching the world for perfect jewels. Then he would bid his listeners to shift to seeing themselves as jewels.

Suddenly one would see in their heart, "Oooh My! How God loves me!

The hearer would say to himself, "but I'm not flawless...I'm not perfect!!!

And the teaching would take us to Colossians 2:9 ***For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;***
[NKJV] It is Christ who is the Flawless Jewel. But in Christ WE are the Flawless Pearl of Great Price.

Jim Cecil's earthly resting place is beside his first wife Kay and their baby boy Recey. The road in, now blacktop – but deeply carved into the hillsides from a dozen decades of erosion from wagons and old cars, ribbons through pine and hardwood trees. Memories ooze from every turn as one passes a clearing with "Cecil" on the mailbox. Then there is the neat little log home that was built by a nephew's own hands. On the left is Uncle Levi's home. Levi Cecil, who lived into his 90's, remained a handsome tall straight and trim gentleman, dwelling there with his sweet wife. Their farmstead is marked with a few pieces of logging equipment that appear as though they were used not really so long ago.

Look there on the right! See the opening through the trees. See the path that leads over the hill? That goes to the spot where the old home-place used to be. Where Jim Cecil's first memories were imprinted forever. Half a quarter or so, further down the road and crossing a little draw, to the right on the north slope of the next little hill sits the little frame Cecil's Chapel church. Uncle Levi said it just didn't look the same since they covered up the natural wood clapboard siding with this white stuff. The slat type benches and pulpit inside are all made from native pine. The walls, floor, and ceiling are all covered with clear pine tongue and groove one by fours, all milled there in the neighborhood.

In the cemetery on the gently flowing north slope just behind the church lie the remains of many who have gone on to be with the Lord. That's where in 2004, on a morning that began with a threat of stormy weather the sun broke through just in time to paint Kay Cecil's open casket with the most heavenly blue you ever saw. Over the back fence of the cemetery is a long flat valley – now pasture for grazing cattle – once the corn field where young Jim Cecil learned to hoe out the weeds without chopping down the corn stalks.

Thanks Lord, for allowing me to walk by his side all these decades...

Ken Bain, Mission Service Corps - NAMB
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