

SPEAKING PERSONALLY

Preaching on Tobacco Road

My wife Becky and two sons moved with me from southeast Alabama to Kentucky in January 1989, so I could attend a seminary. In June I was assigned two United Methodist churches about 120 miles southwest of the seminary. Almost all of my church people raised tobacco or worked with it in some capacity. My life was so busy that I decided to start walking the 12 miles from where we were staying to the church, to try to listen to God. During this walk I discovered notices in business windows about a local celebration of the traditional annual Tobacco Day festival. I read how the local kids were involved in different tobacco contests, such as processing and handling, as well as the “spit contest”. While walking past this sign, I would think how wrong this was, and how I should raise this concern in a preaching message. But I also reflected how risky it would be, and how it would probably alienate me from some of the members. While walking through this small town and on the country roads, I began to build relationships with people. The tobacco message continued to burn in my heart, but it seemed like I was running from it.

The Temperance League of Kentucky addresses the issues of alcoholism and other alcohol-related problems, gambling, pornography, and other moral and spiritual issues. After searching its literature and finding nothing about tobacco, I wrote to the executive director, Reverend Claude M Witt, asking why this “killer product” was not included in their attacks. Reverend Witt replied:

“Thank you for your recent letter and concern about tobacco. The Temperance League does oppose the use of tobacco and we discourage its use. We have found that other organizations such as American Lung Associa-

tion and American Heart Association have done a very effective job and because of their efforts we can narrow our scope of emphasis to alcohol and other drugs. We feel there is no reason to duplicate the message.”

I began preparing for my sermon at the seminary. I asked a friend to draw me a white heart with black lettering reading TOBACCO KILLS. I stapled it to a small strip of wood so I could carry it above my head (figure 1).

The twelve-mile walk—Sunday, 19 November 1989

I got up about 6.30 am, got dressed, kissed my wife and two babies goodby, prayed, uncovered my freshly made TOBACCO KILLS sign, and walked out. A little cold mist greeted me as I walked with my sermon title held above my head. As I reached the street a young lady in a pickup truck raised up her middle finger. The impact of that unkind gesture hit me immediately with fear and thoughts of what I had gotten into. Should I turn back? What about the long stretch of country road I would have to walk? About half way on my journey, a big truck passed by—but a quarter mile later it made a dramatic, fast turn around. The truck sped up as it got closer. My body hit the ditch as the truck was about six feet off the road, moving towards me. I immediately got up and started walking on the shoulder of the highway as I could hear the truck turning around again. The big-necked man with his window down asked me: “Are you sure about that?” I answered, “Yes it killed my dad when I was eleven.”

He growled, “Y’all take care of the marijuana and dope and we’ll take care of this.” His last words before speeding off were: “That sign will get you killed around here.” I thought about the black people who had received so much violence and hurt from people in my home state of Alabama. I also thought about how lonely I was on this tobacco road that had been so friendly to me before.

Some of the sermon—Sunday, 19 November 1989

When I reached the church, I hid my sign. I really didn’t know what was going to happen because I knew that my congregation would have told each other of what was going on. When I entered in the sanctuary I discovered that members of the local Baptist church down the street was visiting with us because their heat wasn’t working properly.

Fear and trembling flooded my soul and I never mentioned the word “tobacco”, as I challenged them from the New Testament with James *v*, 7: “Behold the farmer waiteth patiently for the precious fruit of the earth.’ Mr Kentucky farmer—are you waiting patiently



Figure 1 Mike Sawyer, in 1998, holding the same “TOBACCO KILLS” sign he carried along the same Kentucky highway in 1989, when he walked 12 miles (19 km) to the “tobacco-filled” congregation, where he delivered a sermon on the evils of smoking.

for a precious fruit? Are you wasting this precious soil that God gave you to plant a killer instead of a life food for the body to live on? God did not drop cigarettes from the sky for the Hebrews as they wondered in the wilderness. No, it was food for their body. How undermining so many are today to use their farm for such selfish and ungodly gain.”

I shared with them the fact that I couldn't remember a Father's Day but I could vividly remember the painful screams of pain and the grasp of breath my dad would experience as a result of using the product that they would carry to market tomorrow. A young man who had just lost his father because of cigarettes, but was continuing the family tobacco farm, got up before the final amen and stormed out, slamming the door.

After the sermon

Greeting everyone at the door as they were leaving, an older man placed two \$20 bills in my hand and said, “Son, you finally started preaching”. That evening a young school teacher entered the church. She told me: “I haven't been coming to Sunday evening services in the past but if you have the courage to speak the message you did this morning—well, at least I can attend. I wanted to tell you that my widowed mother was with me this morning, and she told me on the way home that she was going to give back her tobacco allotment to the government because she didn't think the \$500 annual allotment cheque was right, because her husband and two brothers had died of tobacco-related deaths.”

Tossed out of the church—Sunday, 26 November 1989

Seven days later I was at the second church, out in the country, facing the largest tobacco field in the county. My sermon scripture was from Psalms *lv*, 12–14 (King James version): “For it was not an enemy that reproached me;

then I could have borne it: neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against me; then I would have hid myself from him: but it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company.”

After the last amen, I told them I loved them and that I would be back tonight. Then the church leader told me as I was stepping down from the old pulpit, “No, you won't be back anymore”.

As my wife and sons were going to the parking lot, the leaders from the other church—including the man who had pressed the \$20 bills in my hand) where I had spoken the “TOBACCO KILLS” sermon—drove up. I quickly gathered that this had been planned. One of the ladies, who had fed my family the best Sunday home-cooked meal ever, was in her car weeping. She was crying, saying: “This is wrong, this is not right.” I was told: “Mike, you need to go somewhere tobacco is not raised and preach against it. This is our income. You must realize that tobacco money pays your salary.”

“Mike, I understand it killed your father. It also killed mine but I still raise tobacco,” said another faithful and sincere member.

“Mike, there is one family who said they would never come back because of your sermon,” said another.

“Mike, tobacco is not as harmful as riding in a vehicle,”

“Mike, I don't raise tobacco but everyone is stopping by my business upset at your sermon,” said an older member.

And finally a member said, “You must realize that even those who don't directly produce tobacco are dependent upon those that do.”

The backdown—Sunday, 26 November 1989

That evening Reverend Sam Clark, district superintendent of the Bowling Green District of the United Methodist Church called, apologising for what had happened. He wanted us to wait until he could visit with us, and then visit with our bishop, Robert Spain. He drove for about three hours on Tuesday, 28 November, to meet with Becky and me. We told him that we could accept what the two churches had done. After meeting with us he made the other part of the trip, an 80-mile drive to Louisville, Kentucky to meet with Bishop Spain. Reverend Clark called us explaining that Bishop Spain had stated that I should have waited about three years before giving the sermons, so that I would have known the people better.

Reverend Clark got the Church Board to vote officially on our coming back to the church. He called us after the meeting to tell us the vote was five for us coming back and two against us returning, but censorship of my sermons would be a part of our coming back. We decided not to return.

Amazingly, less than a month later, a church under a mile from the one where we were



Figure 2 Going to bat against smoking. Mike Sawyer has sponsored two baseball teams in Central Kentucky for boys of 11 and 12 years (including his two sons) under the name “Smoking Kills”. The photograph shows a sign that carries the team name, which Sawyer constructed from discarded cigarette butts. Source: “Lexington Herald-Leader”. Photograph by John Sommers II.

ousted sent us more than \$1000 for my seminary expenses and asked me to join their staff. However, we decided not to join them.

* * *

My father died on 13 January 1964 from emphysema, having smoked two packs of Winstons per day. I owned and operated a bar and whisky business, and an illegal gambling

business in southeast Alabama. My two brothers were murdered while drunk in 1972 and 1985. I was 37 years old when this message was preached in 1989. I graduated as a Master of Divinity in 1992 and recently founded the "Smoking Kills Kids" baseball teams of Kentucky (figure 2).

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An advertisement for Bass Ale, from "Sports Illustrated" (8 June 1998). Extremely small print (five-point font size) in the lower left corner reads "We encourage thinking while drinking".



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