

**News**

- [Sports](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Business](#)
- [E-Technology](#)
- [Southern Style](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Home & Garden](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Weather](#)

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**Online postcards**

**Online crossword**

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[Home](#) | [Mississippi News](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Letter](#)


March 30, 2003

## Sunday morning with Dr. Roger Parrott

**By Eric Stringfellow**  
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I am a third generation Christian college president, so this is somewhat family business to me. In fact, I work today at the desk my grandfather used as president in 1938. I grew up in a president's home and had the advantage of always seeing colleges from the inside. I did my undergraduate degree at the school where my father was president, and then went on for a Ph.D. in higher education administration. My greatest asset is being married 28 years to my best friend, best critic and best supporter — who taught at the college level for many years, so she understands and appreciates the value of all I do in my work. I couldn't do it a day without her.

Everyone sees the new buildings of Belhaven, the significance of our arts program, the new football team, and the doubling of our enrollment in the past six years. But what I'm most proud of is our worldview curriculum. Belhaven College took a bold step in 1999 to revolutionize its required general core curriculum by requiring a two-year course of study focused around thematic topics and arranged on an historical time line, which helps students understand and contrast a Christian worldview with the marketplace of history's ideas.



**Rick Guy** / The Clarion-Ledger

"What fuel you put into your car, or food into your body, determines the outcome. I'm always puzzled when Christians believe you can put almost anything into your mind and all will come out well."

All students follow an integrated study of the great movements and ideas in history, literature, the fine arts, Bible, philosophy and theology. No other school in America has had the courage to totally change its general core curriculum to get away from the disjointed approach that characterizes American higher education today. And, along with that curriculum, I'm proud that we are now the only school in America that requires all students to take a course in biblical principles of marriage.

We tend to preach and pray that God is leading us, but too often we don't live as if that is really true. I'm focused these days on the idea that we have put too much energy into building motorboats for ministry that we try to run primarily on our own power. They may go fast for a short period of time, but they break down, or eventually run out of gas. Instead, we need to be building sailboats that catch the wind of God, and have limitless potential. They may not go as fast, but when sailing on God's wind, we can go forever and only where He wants to direct us.

Finishing well most sticks in my mind. I remember driving out of Detroit after

MaryLou and I poured our hearts into pastoring an inner-city church that we deeply loved. I remember hugging MaryLou after finishing my doctorate — and she finished hers the next year. I remember raising money on a gigantic challenge grant when I was a vice president for development, and we were out of time, donors and the president was in the hospital — we made it.

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I remember when I was the U.S. director for the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, working to bring together a World Church Congress before the fall of communism, and the thrill when the Russian delegation came into a hall of 10,000 church leaders. I remember my kids at ages one and three, holding hands as we walked through a not-yet-opened library I built as we were leaving Sterling College where I had been president. And I pray it is a very long time before I have a last memory of Belhaven College.

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Inaccurate perceptions nationally, along with some of our own insecurities, which are fed by those perceptions, keep us from breaking through to hit full stride. Although we'd all like to do even better, I don't know of a state that has made as much progress in the last 30 years in racial reconciliation, the arts and education as has Mississippi. Those are three areas where we are especially focused at Belhaven, and I'm proud of our progress through these last three decades.

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My childhood memories and lessons from my parents? Family vacations to see every inch of America. My mom standing in the rain to watch my freshman football game. Listening to my dad preach. Sunday dinner. Never leaving for school without a prayer at the doorway. Unquestionable family security. From my parents I learned the value of education, the importance of Godly confidence and decisiveness, to look at the big picture and imagine what could be, to never be afraid of those things that are difficult, to sit down front at church, and to always pay cash.

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The family background pointed me in this direction, but even more importantly, it was at an evangelical Christian college like Belhaven that I became grounded in my faith and became prepared to live as a Christian.

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I learned firsthand the value of this Christian higher education as a vital component of building our personal faith and the church. My calling is to Christ-centered higher education. While I respect and admire those who serve schools with a mission that is not faith based, for me, this job is too tough, and I would only do it if I could fully integrate faith into every aspect of college life.

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Belhaven did turn a corner, and that was a difficult time. But we then stepped on the gas and haven't looked back. We are one of the fastest growing schools in America, having doubled our enrollment in the past six years to over 2,000 students. We've added eight new academic programs, masters level degrees in business and education, have new campuses in Memphis and Orlando. We have five new buildings with another one or two on the way, are one of the most computer-wired campuses, added three intercollegiate sports and raised our faculty salaries significantly.

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We are the only evangelical college in America with degrees in all four of the arts: dance, theatre, visual art and music. We have a highly respected fast-track academic

program designed specifically for adult students. This list goes on and on of God's blessings to Belhaven. While much of higher education is cutting back around the country, we are enjoying a wonderful time of continued growth.

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I love to fly-fish and play golf, neither of which I do as often as I should. I've decided that if I could get a trout to rise to a dry fly in Mississippi, this would be the perfect place to live. But my best relaxation comes around the dinner table at home where our family can't seem to go too long without laughing about something. It is fun.

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I went to Eastern Nazarene College in Boston. I was a psychology major, played intercollegiate soccer and tennis, worked on the yearbook, made lots of friends, and dated MaryLou. Dad was president of the college. Except for a couple of incidents, that was much more positive than negative.

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In our house it was always assumed that you would earn a Ph.D., not just go to college. So both of my brothers have their doctorates, as does my wife and my sister-in-law. Mom and Dad always promised they would pay the tuition as long as my brothers and I wanted to go to school, and without that, I'm not sure if we could have made it.

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In college I was pastor on Sunday, did wedding photography on Friday or Saturday nights, and worked in a camera store the rest of the week. I've never been afraid to work hard, although that may have been the start of my learning to work smart and juggle many things.

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In January I started my eighth year as president of Belhaven. And after much prayer and consideration, I have decided that if God would make Belhaven the place where I retire, I'd be wonderfully pleased. But I want my future to always be in God's hands, so someday the Lord may call me to some other place of leadership, but I genuinely pray that the day never comes.

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A college will have more impact on a student than any other institution, except the family and the media. I believe to make the most important decisions of life, while being supported by a Christian faculty and learning from a framework of faith, are vital to assuring your life will be firmly grounded. Belhaven is not here to simply offer a campus environment that reflects a Christ-honoring lifestyle. Our main purpose is to teach every discipline from a foundation of faith and truth. We want students to understand how God's truth fits into every aspect of life

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We don't want one thing more than what God would have for us, but I am convinced that the Lord wants us to be the best choice for traditional-age evangelical students of the South who want a Christ-centered education that is denominationally broad; to be the leader internationally in influencing the church with the arts; and to provide for adult students an academic program that is built on a foundation of faith and equips them for success in their work immediately.

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