

Review of Walker L. Knight's *Struggle for Integrity*
Oakhurst Baptist Church Library Committee
February, 2007

This book review is about integrity: the integrity of a man and the integrity of a church about whom the man writes. That man is Walker L. Knight, a member of Oakhurst for forty-eight years. That church is Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, my church for the past six years. Harold Hoffman told me about Walker's book, *Struggle for Integrity* (1969), four months ago. I borrowed a copy from the church library and read it four times, astonished each time. Last week I bought a used book for myself from an Amazon bookseller.

The Man of Integrity

First, about the word *integrity*. Marv Knox, editor of the *Baptist Standard*, wrote an article in The Whitsitt Journal in 2002 entitled: *Walker Knight: Perfectly Consistent Integrity* when Walker won the Whitsitt Courage Award. The virtue of *consistency* is, indeed, a primary meaning of *integrity*, but the word is far more complex and requires the examination of context. Its meaning also embraces the virtues of self-integration or wholeness, standing firmly for something, having moral purpose. Sometimes, in the proper context, the word implies courage. I don't personally know this fellow member of Oakhurst, nor did I know, until this review, much about his background as a journalist. Baptist traditions are not my heritage and after joining Oakhurst I could hardly utter the word *Baptist* to anyone outside Oakhurst for two years. But after living with several of this man's works for eight weeks, reading testimonials from friends and colleagues, studying for the first time the struggle of the moderates of the Southern Baptist Convention against fundamentalism and the doctrine of inerrancy, I offer a simple judgment. Walker's life and works are more than just *consistent*. He possesses all of those virtues embodied in the word *integrity* and more: he is a man of great courage.

The Journalist

Walker is also a man of great humility. He, himself, would never admit to this, but he is one of this era's most prominent religious journalists. He has produced more than a dozen books, some in collaboration with others; numerous recorded lectures available in university libraries; and countless articles during his distinguished career. His subject matter has ranged from race to the occult. One of his books has been translated into seven languages. He earned a journalism degree at Baylor University and realized during a brief pastorate internship there that his calling was to be a "mere journalist." His private papers will be inherited by Mercer University, which awarded him an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity in 1981. I suspect that few people at Oakhurst know this.

Many Oakhurst members probably don't know this either: a phrase from one of Walker's editorials found its way into President Jimmy Carter's speech of March

26, 1979, hailing the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Walker's name subsequently appeared in major national publications. In the *Time* version, Hugh Sidey writes, "The President was so taken with the thoughts [in Walker's editorial] that he melded them into his speech ("Peace, like war, is waged")...."

One of Walker's opinion pieces, published in 2004, was entitled "Editors Under Fire." Indeed. He had worked "under fire" for more than forty years, first as associate editor of the *Baptist Standard*, 1950-1959; then as editorial director of the former Home Missions Board of the SBC and editor of *Home Missions Magazine* (now *Missions USA*) 1959-1983; and finally, in 1983, as founding editor of *SBC Today* (now *Baptist Today*). The latter national news journal for moderate Baptists opened its first office in space donated by Oakhurst.

It should be no surprise then, that Walker has won many other professional awards, including the Religious Freedom Award from the Associated Baptist Press in 1979. More to the point of this review, Walker was a civil rights and freedom of speech activist. He wielded his pen with such power, conviction, tenacity, and moral authority on matters of race, peace, gender, sexuality, and social justice, that Nell worried every day during certain confrontational times within the SBC that Walker would be fired from his job at the Home Missions Board. During this time, he was probably the recipient of more furious letters-to-the editor than all his successors combined.

Even during his days at the *SBC Today*, Walker's days were "difficult" writes Knox. "The early months at the *SBC Today* were unsettled, with finances uncertain and the future undetermined...." Knox adds. "He'd retired from the Home Mission Board, and we watched what he'd spent his career building being systematically dismantled. It had to be painful, but he was so determined to tell the truth and give other people a safe space to have their say."

The Book

It was while working for the Home Missions Board that Walker published *Struggle for Integrity*. John Nichol tells us that the idea for the title comes from a poem by Russian dissident Yevgeny Yevtushenko. You can read this poem in John Nichol's sermon preached in November 2006. The book's *Forward* was written by George W. Webber, noted New York theologian and author of several books in the Sixties, especially *God's Colony in Man's World* (1960). This influential work, about setting up city missions in Harlem, has a final chapter entitled *Integrity of the Church*. Most of the photographs in Walker's book are by Don Rutledge, nationally known photo-journalist whom Walker persuaded to work for the SBC Home Mission Board. Walker discloses in his *Acknowledgements*, that Kay Streater, Kathe Swint, and Dallas Lee wrote short sections of the book. Walker also honors John Nichol's "pervading contribution" that includes three chapters and several unforgettable sermons. Nevertheless, this is a seamless work and

Walker's voice is strong and direct. He's the consummate reporter with a keen eye and a keen ear for dialogue.

"This is an impressive and important book," Webber writes in the *Foreword*...Walker Knight has now provided us with a moving and honest picture of a church in the typical anguish of a changing neighborhood." The congregation was "in the midst of a community in transition..." *Changing neighborhood. Community in transition*. These were code words for "black families are moving into all-white neighborhoods." When he wrote the book, Walker had been a member of Oakhurst for "nearly ten years." He makes it clear in his first chapter, "Community Lost," that not many members faced the issue of "a changing neighborhood" in theological terms.

All that changed when John Nichol arrived as the new pastor in November, 1966. In fact, the heart of this book records the first 20 months of his pastorate. Nichol, faced with declining church membership, "saw the fragmentation of the Oakhurst community as constituting the raw material from which could be fashioned a fellowship of reconciliation." Some months after he arrived he wrote in the church's newspaper, "The witness of our churches has become so compromised that simple integrity is now called courage." The Christmas party of 1966 became the "first integrated activity of this type that the church had sponsored." Even so, [t]he first Sunday that two Negro children came for Sunday School there was a tenseness in the air..." About Negroes attending Oakhurst, Walker wrote, "Some church members just could not believe it until they had seen it."

These dissenters would witness more of the "crisis of integration" as Oakhurst faced the challenge of witnessing to the "transitional areas." Nichol stubbornly refused to let the membership vote on whether or not to allow Negroes become members. He preached over and over again that "you cannot lose your integrity and become one with your culture but you must live above your culture" as a witness for Christ. *A witness for Christ* were Nichol's key words. Later, when a member of an Atlanta church wrote in the *Christian Index* that his church, "a church of integrity," was meeting this crisis by selling out and moving to the suburbs, Nichol reacted with moral outrage: He wrote his first letter to the editor.

A Constitution article, based on a subsequent interview with Nichol, boldly announced in a large four-column headline: OAKHURST BAPTISTS PLAN TO INTEGRATE," a claim Nichol had very carefully avoided. This set off a bombshell at Oakhurst, including threats of a petition asking Nichol to resign. One prominent deacon told Nichol, "I'll stand by you, Pastor, no matter what happens." Later he added, "I didn't know the whole sky was going to fall..." The next Sunday after the article's publication, fearful members saw only two Negroes show up to worship, "a mother and daughter who had been there before." That Sunday John Nichol delivered a "milestone" sermon memorialized in Chapter 6, reminding Oakhurst members what was demanded of them as Christians. He quoted Bonhoeffer: "Christ died for the world, not for the church."

In 1967, Oakhurst invited Negro children, for the first time, to Vacation Bible School. Twenty-one Negro children enrolled, causing a small group of church members to defect to suburban churches. Finally, the first Negro family came to “test” the church. The head of the family, a supervisory chaplain at the state mental hospital, pointedly told Nichol, “I have real reservations about a white Sunday school teacher teaching my children about the love of God.” Despite tensions, rumors, and at least one unpleasant anonymous letter, they stayed and became members. Meanwhile, Oakhurst was being “reduced more and more to a committed core....”

Walker writes that while Nichol’s first year dealt with the “crises of integration,” his second year faced the “crises of ministry.” What followed was the “Crises of Endurance,” the title of Walker’s next-to-last chapter. The strength of Nichol’s own endurance was signified in two Nichol sermons. The first, about the Negro’s “struggle for equality,” marked the day of mourning after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., a day that went unobserved by most Southern Baptist ministers. Then, the Sunday after the assassination of Robert Kennedy, Nichol’s sermon drew a parallel between the deaths of Kennedy and King. Some of the church members reacted to those “hated names” as “Southerners first and Christians second.” Rumors quickly spread that many families were seeking other church homes.

Nichol’s final remarkable sermon in the book, “The Challenge of Endurance,” was preached twenty months after arriving at Oakhurst. “I am aware,” he told the congregation, that “Sunday attendance is down, Training Union is down, and the budget is down.” But he added, “Brethren, I believe God is here in our midst.”

The book contains these events and much more, including an impassioned, eloquent meditation by Alverta Wright (unnamed but recognizable) in a chapter entitled “Retreats to Advance;” the persistent, and sometimes bitter, lack of consensus within the church membership; the declining membership requiring the sale of the new buildings across from the present sanctuary.

The Church

But Oakhurst didn’t die from the sad exodus of 1200 Oakhurst members during these years, as did many other courageous churches. In 1969, Warren Woolf read *The Struggle for Integrity* and he and Sue changed their church membership to Oakhurst. In 2001, after the Atlanta newspaper article announced that Oakhurst had been expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention for ordaining a gay minister, my daughter and I also found our way to this beloved fellowship. My sister is gay. My daughter’s brother-in-law is gay. We could not countenance a congregation that excluded any children of God.

Dave Hilton stirred my heart in Patchwork last Sunday when he said, "I believe that God's goal is to create a more just world. That gives me hope." Those words offer me hope, too. But as John Nichol reminded us last November, as Knox wrote earlier in the Whitsett Journal, and as Walker reminds us in his book, while God is working, "the struggle for integrity never ceases," for us, corporately, or for us as individuals. Over the years at Oakhurst, the "integration problem" segued into the "woman deacon/minister problem", then segued again into the "gay deacon/minister problem." Oakhurst members and leaders refused to frame these issues as "problems", but rather as opportunities to consistently follow the message of Christ, as recorded in the Oakhurst Covenant: *In this fellowship, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Therefore, we reject any status in this fellowship in terms of church office, possessions, education, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental ability, physical ability, or other distinctions.*

But even "the problem of integration" is far from over, as Pastor Lanny Peters reminded us during a recent sermon. Some people who call themselves Christians, abjectly and tragically fail the test of *integrity*. But this wonderful, absorbing book, describing Oakhurst's great, difficult moral test of forty years ago, ends in triumph. Fortunately, it was also a time of humble, resolute heroes, "the Saints of Oakhurst," as Walker calls them. He dedicates his book to these Saints, as well as to Nell and "our children." We have some of those Saints among us: these people of integrity; these people of consistency who practiced, as Jesus did, inclusive love.

In Warren's moving tribute following this review, he tells us that "the church would not have become a haven for seeking souls without Walker's creative thoughts and writings." We urge you to borrow this book from our library, then buy a copy on the Internet for your own bookshelf. It is a template for struggles yet to come. It embodies the Oakhurst soul, or "Soul Freedom," as some Baptists, like Walker, might say.

Carolyn Copenhaver

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Tributes and Commentaries

Statement of Warren Woolf
Oakhurst Member Since 1969

While working on the staff of the Baptist Home Mission Board, I got to know Walker Knight quite well. My family had been members of First Baptist in Atlanta for many years, and we had seen that church break apart over the race issue. The pastor tried to ride the fence, and refused to take a stand. We had read

some reports about Oakhurst Baptist, but, when *Struggle for Integrity* was published, we immediately got a copy and read it. During those days, there was a drug store where the E. Lake MARTA station now stands. I recall stopping in the store one day, and John Nichol was there having something to drink at the soda fountain. I met him at that time, and, when he learned that we lived only about three blocks from the church, he told me that we were the kind of folks who should go to the church in their neighborhood (this was the time when the great exodus was taking place).

It was really good news to Sue, David, and me when we read that John Nichol had told the church that they could take a vote on whether they were going to be a church, but they could not vote on whether or not they would accept blacks into the church. So, on a Sunday in November 1969, Sue, David, and I joined Oakhurst. On that same day, a young black man also joined. A year or so later, I was elected to be a deacon, and I was ordained along with a fine young black man, Warren Davis.

We are very grateful for the leadership which Walker has given to Oakhurst across the years. Although John Nichol was an excellent preacher, the church would not have become a haven for seeking souls without Walker's creative thoughts and writings.

Dec. 15, 2006

Statement of Carolyn Hall
Oakhurst Member

I think this book is a must-read for all Oakhurst members. It explains in detail the struggle that the church went through that ultimately led us to become the church that we are today.

Jan. 2007

Statement of Lamar Murphy, Jr.
Out of State Oakhurst Member

Walker Knight was far more than the author of "Struggle for Integrity." He was a leader, conscious and individual mentor for many of us who lived through those difficult times. I was doubly blind to the early concerns about the changing neighborhood around the church. First, while I started attending Oakhurst when I could walk there for services, when my family moved, I was no longer aware of local changes. Second, as a teenager my understanding of God's intent was pretty straightforward. We are all equal in God's eyes, so why should anyone worry about skin color or economic differences? Only after the increasing tension and occasional open friction arose did I realize the church was in crisis. Strikingly, my own struggle for faith and spiritual integrity was emerging in

almost a parallel course with Oakhurst.

I was searching for certainty about God. I visited other churches, read scripture with an eye toward inconsistency and discrepancy, and even tried to apply my newly-learned Boolean algebra to prove the existence of God. All fruitless, of course. During this spiritually miserable journey, I sought the wisdom of the elders...without much success. My queries were greeted with skepticism, anger, bromides, dismissal, occasional encouragement and--much to my dismay and shock--at least one warning of satanical influence. One Sunday I began talking with Walker about my spiritual search as we strolled from the Sunday School building to the church for worship service. We stopped on the sidewalk across from the rear of the church and continued the conversation for another hour, neither of us ever going to the service. Aspects of our discussion remain vivid to me to this day and have become a cornerstone of my faith. Walker listened to my every doubt and concern, addressing them with thoughtful dignity. Rather than argue with me, or advise me, or try to convince me of his view, he simply shared his view of God, the Bible, faith and even an admission that he had occasional doubts and spiritually trying times as well. Walker treated me as an equal child of God with legitimate and understandable concerns. His love, kindness, patience, insight and candor were remarkable. In the prism of time, I see clearly that our conversation was a pivotal moment in my journey of faith, for I came to realize that I would never prove anything about God. I would either accept his love and great mercy, or I would not. My choice. No external evidence would ever affirm or deny God's existence for me. It was not about outside proof, but about my internal spiritual "calculus." I have chosen to cling to that faith, and God has allowed me to serve and has blessed me wonderfully. I recently saw Walker and confirmed that he--as I would expect--did not recall our discussion.

Among the younger set, Walker was revered as a voice of reason--a perspective he would have undoubtedly discouraged in his humility. His influence ranged far beyond us, however, and provided a steady hand, voice and example that helped Oakhurst Baptist Church on its path that continues to evolve to this day. He was far from alone in this effort. As his book illustrates, a core of dedicated and God-loving men and women first anchored our church in stormy times, then took the helm and steered a course for the future, a course of promise in God's will.

Springfield, Virginia, January 25, 2007

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[Reprints of the Whitsitt Journal article announcing Walker’s award and a detailed history of his career are available in the Oakhurst Library. Reprinted by permission.]

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