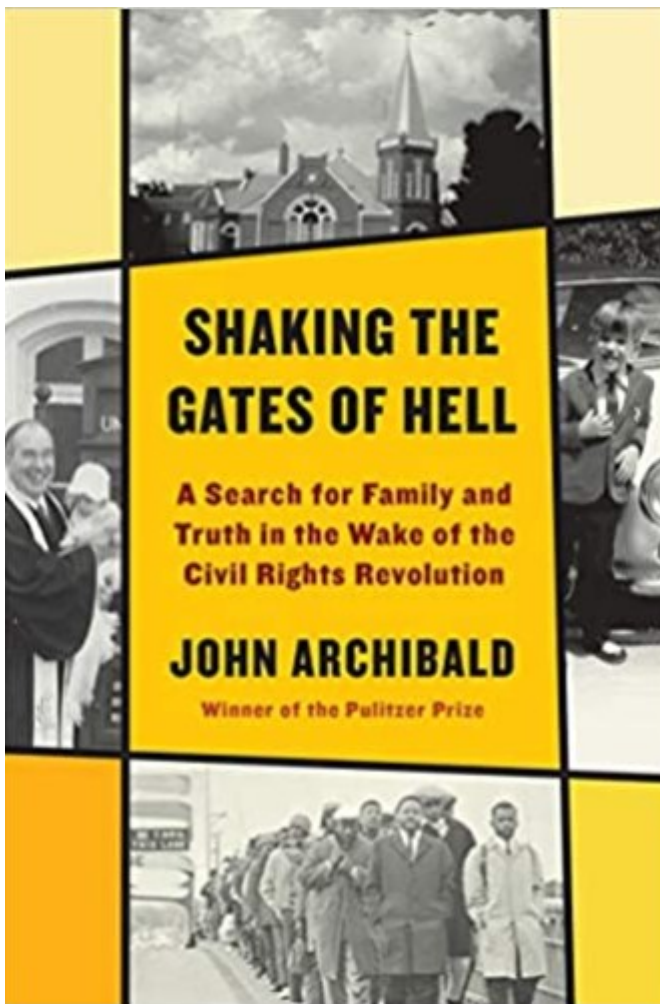


A truth-telling child of Southern Methodism

Journalist John Archibald turns the spotlight on himself, his preacher father, and White Christians' failures.

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [November 17, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Shaking the Gates of Hell

A Search for Family and Truth in the Wake of the Civil Rights Revolution

By John Archibald

Knopf

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Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist John Archibald has written an amazing book that's a must-read for all preachers, if you dare. Ever the witty, incessant gadfly, Archibald's reporting has led to the downfall of Alabama's sleazy governor Robert Bentley, the exposure of corrupt utility companies, and the spotlighting of the horrendous human cost of bad local governance.

Now Archibald turns the spotlight on himself and his beloved Methodist preacher father, Bob. Sired by generations of pious, self-sacrificing Methodist preachers, John remembers his happy childhood at Methodist camp in the summer, family tenting trips all over creation as his dad introduced the kids to the wonders of nature, and his youth in a succession of sleepy Alabama towns where Bob served as preacher to the Methodists.

Bob was retired by the time I got to Alabama as bishop, but I immediately sought him out, so revered was his reputation for his loving pastoral work and for "doing the right thing" in the 1960s. When I was bishop, more than once I invited John to breakfast to give him my episcopal blessing after reading one of his courageous newspaper pieces, so proud was I that Alabama Methodism had produced such a truth-telling journalist. As it turns out, my church can't take much credit for John's truth telling.

Pastor Bob meticulously filed a lifetime of his sermons. Son John went back and read them all. In *Shaking the Gates of Hell*, John compares what was happening in Alabama and the world with what his dad was preaching at the time. (Who among us preachers could stand such scrutiny?) Bob's sermons show that he was a gentle, good man, a universally beloved and attentive pastor. Rather than be a preacher whose sermons "will shake the gates of hell" (John Wesley's definition of good preaching), Bob became the kind, dignified, attentive pastor to those who, in their modest, folksy Methodism, gave aid and comfort to a society that gave African Americans hell.

John loves his father deeply, gratefully but not unreservedly. One Sunday in 1963, Bob preached a sermon that was titled, with unintentional irony, “Too Late.” Just before he entered the pulpit, 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed in Birmingham. John characterizes his dad’s sermon that day as “a tepid treatise on missing the boat, which itself missed the boat.”

As the civil rights bill was being debated in Congress, the closest Bob came to speaking up on “the race question” was to say in a sermon, “We look at the racial demonstrations which make us so uncomfortable, and there is the tendency to long for the antebellum splendor of the Old South, where people knew their place. But we cannot live in the past, and we must not try. We must do something today about the bias and prejudice in our hearts now.” About that sermon, John writes, “I cringe at the tone of futile inevitability, at the thought of longing for antebellum splendor. My gut physically hurts.” Still, at least Dad was “starting to say it. In a South that was still insane.”

The gap between what White Methodists were telling themselves on Sunday and the fiery revolution that was going on around them is vividly, painfully portrayed. Throughout the book, the son keeps asking himself questions: Why did Dad not say more? Why did he not try to leverage some of his congregation’s love for him in order to speak up more directly for racial justice? In his heart of hearts, Dad knew that Alabama was wrong—so what kept him from calling White supremacy a sin?

Family and friends gave John reasons for his father’s reticence: He could have put his family in danger. The bishop might have punished him by sticking him in less prestigious churches. He loved you too much to allow others to hurt you because of what he preached.

John refuses their rationales and laments that in his sermons his father “didn’t use the words Black, or white, or segregation. . . . He hid behind phrases like the church-approved ‘brotherhood of man,’ and developed a euphemism for racial injustice, preaching several times on the dangers of ‘snobbery.’ It was less loaded, less explosive.”

In its shuttling back and forth from what was happening in the world to what was being said (and not said) in church, in its portrayal of the complexities, subtleties, and resilience of White supremacy, in its anguish over the failure of a beloved, good-hearted pastor to stand up and speak out as a courageous preacher, Archibald may

have given us the best book we've got on the urgency of truthful preaching, specifically Christian preaching's obligation to tell the truth about White racism.

The book opens with what Archibald calls "The Letter" and carries on a constant conversation with it throughout the book. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was published, in the *Century* and elsewhere, just days after Archibald was born. He was never allowed to read the letter in school or even in history classes at the University of Alabama. When he finally read the letter, in his first job as a reporter for the *Birmingham News*, it opened his eyes and named realities that had heretofore been unmentionable. It was the letter, not his dad's sermons or scripture, not the teachings of his church or school, that became the lens through which Archibald would make sense of his world and his life.

Archibald finds it noteworthy that King wrote the letter to a group of genteel White liberal clergy who saw themselves as supportive allies. The evil of White moderate cautious racism is unmasked. The way that Methodist clergy justified silence on the basis of their pastoral love and care of their congregations evokes some of Archibald's most severe critique. It's well deserved and more relevant than ever.

With eyes wide open, wiser but sadder because of the impact of the letter, Archibald is able to see and to name sin beyond the bounds of his Alabama childhood. When Trump is elected, Archibald hears the cadences of George Wallace all over again. When conservative Methodists speak of "biblical fidelity," he suspects that race is somewhere behind it.

Archibald's love for and indebtedness to the Methodist church that raised him accounts for his anger that the White mainline church is still missing in action on most important issues of our day. A couple of years ago, the United Methodist bishop of Alabama urged a fellow bishop not to travel to Alabama to marry two Methodist men. Why? The time is not right. It will look bad to the outside world. The press will abuse us. We ought to be cautious about how to act "on a complex issue that is polarizing our society." For Archibald, this bishop's caution is best understood through the letter: "Better to wait. Better to wait."

John's older brother, Murray, was married to a man in their church in Delaware in 2012. The couple had founded a ministry for LGBTQ youth in Rehoboth Beach. "That's where [Murray] and Steve found their pulpits," says John. Love for Murray, and for Steve, gave Bob the push he needed to speak out in defense of "the full

inclusion of Gay and Lesbian people in the United Methodist Church.” At the 1992 UMC General Conference, “in front of all the Methodist preachers and laypeople who were quoting the Bible to condemn gays and lesbians and his own son,” quiet, self-effacing Bob took to the floor and with a clear voice declared, “It is not a choice, and it is not a choice for us either. Jesus said to love. And love is unconditional.”

When he returned to Alabama, Bob was condemned and threatened. “One preacher told him to his face that he had known the Archibald family for generations and had respect for all of them. ‘Not anymore,’ the man said. ‘Not anymore.’”

Archibald reports that his father learned something in receiving the fierce, angry responses: “He found that it didn’t bother him. It didn’t bother him at all.”

Few of us preachers—particularly those in the Southeast, and especially those who are Methodists—will be able to evade this book. In his scathing, often sarcastic criticism of our church and its clergy, there is a sense in which John may have a higher theology of preaching than we do, as well as a deeper love for the church.

I’ll say this for Bob Archibald and his preaching, as well as for the flawed, fallen, finite UMC: for all their faults, they and the Lord somehow produced an eloquent, engaging, truth-telling writer in John Archibald. He has given us one of the best books on race, preaching, and the church that I know.