

Interview With Dr. Rev. W. Braxton Cooley of the First Baptist Church of Steelton,  
Pennsylvania.

Narrator: Rev. Cooley
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Interviewers: Tom Wallace and Nysha King
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Nysha King: "Rev. Cooley where and when, were you born?"

Rev. Cooley: "I was born in North Carolina, Wake County, North Carolina, I grew up in Raleigh. That was is 1934."

Nysha: "Has your family always lived in the same area?"

Cooley: "Yes, yes, my mother and father were both from the same area. As a matter of fact my mother was from wake county, my father was from the adjacent county, but he moved into wake county and that's where they originally met."

Nysha: "How many children were in your family?"

Cooley: "There were seven, four girls and three boys, and of the girls there were twins, the twins are in between the older and the younger, and three boys and I am the youngest of the seven."

Nysha: "So were you all very close?"

Cooley: "Well yes and no, I put it that way due to circumstances, being the youngest, my father left home, deserted my family about three months before I was born, even though my mother kept us together, worked very hard, very loving caring individual, yet a very strong person and she kept us together with a great deal of family assistance from her family side, to help feed us and clothe us and keep us together as a family."

T. Wallace: "With your father leaving at a young age that probably meant that you were going to have to grow up as a young man a lot earlier, how did you deal with that as a small child?"

Cooley: "Well as a an extremely small child at first, it seemed almost normal in as much as I never knew my father being in my home with us a night in my entire life, however there was some strangeness about it when I would listen to my brothers and sisters who would remember my father being home. The greatest impact was the entrance into school, when I saw the other kids with their fathers and their fathers would come to school be with them at certain school activities, and I was not quite old enough to understand why, my father, didn't, wasn't home with us. As a matter of fact there was a period of time that I became very, very bitter, in terms of my father, I wavered back and forth trying to rationalize at a very early age that may be he had his reasons for leaving home, and I later discovered that his reason was alcohol and women, and I don't know how the two of them go together but that was basically the reason he deserted the family."

Tom: "Now what kind of role did your brothers play for you then?"

Cooley: "My, well I was, I am three years older, ah, three years younger than, my, the brother that I am next to and my older brother was oh I guess about six or seven years older than I, and he was a little wiser and street wise, so therefore he did not, he didn't hang around me or allow me to hang around him very much, and of course, my , the middle brother, who was three years older than I, he and I became pretty close, and of course three years difference he became interested in girls long before I knew that there was a difference between girls and boys, so for quite a span there, I was a loner in terms of the family, and grew very close to my sister, sisters, and my mother. Now my older sister I hated her with a passion, as a kid growing up, because she pretty much had the responsibility, for looking after me while my mother was out working.

And with that responsibility also with the responsibility of paddling me when ever she thought it was necessary, and often times I didn't deem it as being necessary, but I got paddled anyway. So I grew up with a strong dislike for her, but latter, you know, later understood that this was a part of her frustration of being some what saddled with the responsibility of when she, herself, was pretty much a kid , having to look after me."

Nysha: "So since you said that you spent a lot of time with your sisters, what kind of things did or activities did you do?"

Cooley: " Well at that age, I think they mainly kept me out of trouble, and I was a great source of frustration to their boy friends because I was always around (with a laugh), and didn't realize it at that time, and in a sense tried to substitute their boyfriends as male figures you know, in my own life, and many of them I got very close to, now mind you, at that time we were living in the rural areas, right outside the city limit, so there wasn't a great deal of things to do other than, I learned how to play checkers and play cards, and paper mache all sorts of things, my sisters pretty much coddled me and kept me out of difficulty."

Nysha: "So you spent most of your time with them, or did you get a chance to associate with other children?"

Cooley: "At school, I, associated a great deal with the kids, of my age, but as a result of growing pretty much close with my sisters, I learned at a very early age in a matter of equality for women was never an issue for me, because I always saw my sisters, as my equal or if not, my superior. And so that was never a struggle or an issue that I had to deal with, and through out my life it impact me to the extent that all of my life, my close, close friends turned out to be females, I have a couple or well several close male friends, but most of my life I learned how to bond and relate to females, and I have been able to work extremely well with females, even some of my earlier jobs I had females as supervisors, had no problem with it at all, I have supervised females, and I

just learned how to work well with and respect , females."

Nysha: "Now where most of your friends that you went to school with, were they from the same town or did they, were there a lot of kids that came in from out of town?"

Cooley: "No now basically were talking the early ages of school, we're talking' rural schools, in, the county school, so they were, most of them were from the farm background. And very interestingly though, I grew up, I was born in the rural area, we never farmed, we worked, helped people work on the farm, but we never had a farm of our own. Ah, so all of them were basically from the county and rural area, so we had similar kinds of backgrounds."

Nysha: "So the place was segregated or...?"

Cooley: "Extremely segregated, this, your talking' back in the early forties when historically, and forty one I think it may have been. And I grew up... I was born and grew up with signs , this would sound foreign to the two of you , colored's, there are fountains here for whites and fountain for colored's at that time, and the back door, you sat in the back of the bus. That was the social order of that day."

Nysha: "So, this seemed pretty normal to you, or did you question it?"

Cooley: "Oh it was extremely normal, that was all I knew, when I was born this was in vogue, it was only after I reached high school, at that time, I was in the city limits of Raleigh, it was when I reached High school I began to see text books that were shipped down from the from the white high school to the "colored" high school, and I saw names of individuals who I knew, it was at that time I began to question segregation."

Tom: "Now when you were going to high school it was in the early fifties?"

Cooley: "Yes correct."

Tom: "What was your initial feeling about the civil rights movement?"

Cooley: "Well in the early fifties there was very little talk about civil rights. It was

in 1954, at that time I had already graduated from high school and was in college, when Martin Luther King was coming on the scene, I embraced his ideas very supportive of his ideas, I felt very strongly that segregation was inherently wrong, and it should be ended, I did all that I could to end, help to end. It was after that I got out of college, I came out of college and went to a graduate college, got a masters, I worked for a year as a librarian at a high school, about forty or fifty miles away from my home town of Raleigh. And the second year that I was out of my masters, I got a position at A&T, North Carolina A&T State University, and I was there when Jesse Jackson was a Senior, and he was president of the student body and I marched with, Jesse, and other of the students some of the names I have long since have forgotten, but the faces I can still see, they were student and I was a staff person. So I felt very strongly and did what I considered to be my part and all that I could do to help in the student rights movement. There were times that I would take my car and be at the bus station when young students who were mostly white students, from the north would come into Greensboro to be apart of the demonstrations and so forth, and would pick them up, at the bus station, and take them to where ever quarters where they were residing in mostly in the homes of African American individuals in Greensboro.

So, yes It did impact me. I felt very strongly I can't say that I became extremely bitter because I didn't really even before I understood King's philosophy I didn't feel bitterness was the answer to getting, the social order changed, I felt that we had to work in the system. And that idea seemed a little docile to some, but I still felt we had to gets laws changed, because there were laws on the books, that relegated and subjugated African-Americans. Where as, on the other hand, they, those same laws, gave freedom, the other side of the law rather, gave freedom to whites."

Nysha: "Where you able to go to the Washington Speech?"

Cooley: "No, I was not able to go, I was very supportive of the idea, would love to of gone, I was working, working my way through college, I was in college at the time of the march on Washington D.C., as a matter of fact I worked my all the way through elementary, high school, college and graduate school so I did not have money, my family could not afford to assist me to go to school, I think my mother may have bought one book for me in while I was in college, and that was out of desperation when a Professor unfortunately said any student have his or her own book he was going to flunk, not considering the fact that I had a B+ average in his class, he was still going to flunk me because I didn't have the book. I was using books from the library to keep up with my homework, I couldn't afford the books, it was as simple as that." Nysha- " Since you were so active in the movement, how do you think things have changed, have they changed since you were active in the movement?"

Rev. Cooley- " Yes, I think that basically, African Americans have become very complacent in terms of where we think we are. I think a quite another of gains that were realized have been turned back, you know affirmative action. Quite a number of attitudes have changed, on the part of whites, in that sense, I think we have started losing ground, we don't have the kind of support from our fellow white brothers and sisters in trying to tear down, every vestige of discrimination based upon race and ethnicity..."

Nysha- " Do you think because its hard to see because...?"

Rev Cooley- " Yes I think that's a part of it, it, I have people to tell me, that well O.K., you have arrived, I have not arrived. You are a college graduate, you have two masters, and you have a doctorate, and you could of had two doctorates if you had written the dissertation for the second one. That doesn't mean that I have arrived! I still have to struggle as an African American man. I'm still discriminated against, even though I hold a position with the state, and the first African American who ever held that

position, I have been with the state for 25 and 1/2 years, I have been in this position almost ten years, I am director of chaplaincy services for the commonwealth, of Pennsylvania. And I run into a great deal of discrimination, I run into a great deal of resistance of some of the people who I supervise, and there are certain of the areas of the state that I go into, to check on the facilities and some of my employees that I dare not to try to spend a night in some of those communities. So, ah-uh(slight laugh), that's the perception, some people have the perception, that there is no more discrimination and that there is no more segregation, and I think in one sense of the word the problem is probably greater today than it was say 35-40 years ago. In that sense that when I was growing up as a kid there was no mistake about what was expected, from whites to blacks. The signs were there, the laws were on the books, so you knew in terms legally, attitudinally, you knew where people were coming from. Today it is more subtle, its, you are identified as a black person two blocks away. I have had some situation where I have talked to people on the phone, they didn't know what color I was, and they'd slip into some of the subtle, and in some cases not so subtle expressions relative to race, only to be totally horrified when they discovered that I am an African American man, and that I really held a little bit of their destiny in my hand, and yet, with the grace and the love, that I believe that King talked about, not hold those things against them, but work towards changing the attitudes of those people."

Nysha- " You have all this responsibility, how do you balance having this job, being the pastor of this church, and being in charge of the community...county chaplains...?"

Rev. Cooley- " No, no, no, state!"

Nysha- " Oh, oh, OK state, sorry."

Rev. Cooley- " O.K. it is a great deal of responsibility, and it does call for a fine balancing act, but I love what I'm doing. Let me just go back a little bit. I started preaching

when I was twelve years old, OK, twelve years old I started preaching. So I feel a sense of calling to the ministry that I'm involved in. I have special training, in the area of clinical pastoral education, and clinical psychology. Which really equips me to work with people, supervise people, and to train people to do ministry in psychiatric and mental retardation hospitals and centers and facilities and so forth. So, yes it is difficult. If it were not for the fact that I love so much what I am doing, and that I have a sense of calling to what I am doing, I would not be able to do it. Additionally my wife is a PHD, handicapped from a stroke, I take care of her also. I get her up in the mornings, see to it that she gets her bath, and I dress her, I prepare her breakfast and I driver her to her office, and I get her into her office and then I go to my office. Basically by the time I get to my office I have done almost what you would call a half days work. But my commitment to her as my wife for almost forty years, my love for her as one who has stood with me and stood by me, who has encouraged me, who wiped the tears and perspiration from my forehead, I feel a that sense of commitment to her in seeing to it that she is well cared for. We just recently built a new house, we lived in Dutch colonial house in the Susquehanna township with her handicapped she was pretty much locked in the house, once we got in, getting up to the bedroom by lift and I was not comfortable with her ability to go in and out of that lift, so I , proceeded to build a house, a ranch type house, with all of the modern conveniences. Intercom system, everything that she would need to call for help, security, what ever you can think of was put into that house, but almost my life savings building that house for her so that she could be comfortable. In the month that we have been in there I think she has enjoyed about 5 years worth of living in a months time.

So in answer to your question, yes it is a great deal of responsibility. But I love what I am doing, I get energy and inspiration out of realizing that I have helped someone and that keeps me going. I exercise to keep my energy level up, and when I



play I play! We have an understanding, my wife and I have an understanding that every 6-8 weeks, I'm going to take a week get in a car and just get lost, I go to a hotel, motel check in, a couple good books, and um I may get up at 11:00 in the morning. And when I get I come back home, I'm renewed and refreshed. It's hard, but if it was easy every one would be doing it."

\* Here Rev. Cooley gives a summery of the chronological history of his education, jobs etc. up to his current responsibilities and concerns for the church. He ends by saying, "But back to your statement uh question, it does keep me going. But I've always had a very high energy level. And not that I so much have a Savior's complex. But it's that I've had a high energy level. I do psychologically know the difference between doing and being. I it's just that I don't always, I don't always carry that out. I understand the difference. So, I work hard and I repeat again and I'll be redundant, I love what I'm doing it gives me a great deal of satisfaction. It is."

Nysha- "Is your health suffering at all?"

Rev Cooley- "Not really. Psycho-dynamically, I understand myself pretty well... uh coming from a psychological background. Uh, I've had some health problems, but they been muscular, skeletal types of things rather than physiological...that is I've been involved in some accidents. Some of my psychology friends would say, well you know that's really remotely and indirectly related to all of the things you're involved in and doing. You're probably stressed out." But I don't really think so. I'm in good health."  
(Rev. Cooley goes on to state the extent of his injuries).

Tom- "Um, From talking with other people that I've interviewed, there's a lot of feeling that the community's changed a lot. That it's changing, not falling apart, but it's changing, just because the world is changing...fast paced... what do you think is the one thing,

because this a real bright spot in the community, what do you think is the focus of a church to help them?"

Rev Cooley- "Ah, that's a very interesting question. Ah, The community is so diverse and it's pretty difficult for a church today to focus on one particular problem. Let me give you an example. Ah, I talked a great deal about family life early in my ministry, And in that family life, even though I came from, in retrospect a broken family, I've had a very cohesive family life with my wife and two children. In talking about family life often times we lose perspective on the fact that historically we've known the family as being husband, wife, and children. Well, there are other types of families now and one of the things we are driving at here is to recognize that there are other types of families where the male who decided to be the mother and father to the children or the male who decided to adopt children and opened up his home to the children, or whether it's the female who is the head of the house. And in most instances that is the case. One of the things that we have been trying to do for the last few years and have not met with a great deal of success is to provide for a single ministry. A ministry to embrace those persons who are for the parents without partners, but those individuals who have just passed that age that we consider is marriage age and try to minister to their needs. Another issue that I'm struggling with right now is the issue of drugs in the community. How can we as a church reach out to the community without being judgmental and seeing these individuals as God's little people, God's children, and embrace them in trying to help them find ways to work through the drug addiction, get into some type of treatment so that they can overcome and become whole. Ah, I spent a good part of today with ah persons who have passed through the thrust hold of addiction, and another one who is incarcerated and will be let out only if he can get into some treatment. The problems, the community problems are so diverse, it is really hard to do but just a few things, otherwise you're going to find yourself beaten

in the wind and not get very much accomplished. Ah, I find myself like many other people, really confused about which task to take on and which battle to try to fight."

Nysha- "When you were growing up, you've had a lot of education, you said you have your Masters, are there any teachers that stick out in your mind for encouraging you to go for your career?"

Rev. Cooley- "Oh yes ah I have a uh high school teacher in my home town. She's ah quite aged. That was a real bright star in my life when I was in high school. She was my homeroom teacher. As a matter of fact, my homeroom teacher followed the class all the way to senior. She was very, very encouraging to me. When I'd get depressed about not having; I worked all night when I was in high school trying to support myself, trying to help my mother out, and Mrs. ah, Liggin was her name, Miss Liggin, she never married she just sort of took me in as one of her children. I remember very fondly the time when class dues were due and I don't know if they still do that in high school, and I didn't have the money. Somehow, my dues got mysteriously paid for and I learned later that it was Ms. Liggin who had paid my class dues. And every time that you know, I'd be down, she'd say, "OK Bradley, enough of the pity party. You've been there long enough. Come on, get up! Let's get it together!" And she'd put her arm around me and give me a little hug and push me along. And she'd have me over to her house to scrub up floors or do little things. I'd probably half do them but in retrospect, that was her way of encouraging me and you have to well, you may not be able to plug into this. But in the days of strict segregation the African-American teachers were really Johnny- on- the spot. They showed concern for the students, they encouraged the students, and I was in that bunch. So, yes my homeroom teacher was one of those persons who really stands out as a real hero in my life. And every time I'm in my hometown, I always go by to see her."

Nysha- "You said you had (not audible here) Was that a common situation for teenagers?"

Rev. Cooley- "Not all, many of them had parents to support them and other family members had means that were able to assist. There were a few of us, who had to work. If we went to school we had to earn our way, we had to pay our way. And in college one of the families I worked for was a white family. I was the caretaker of their home. I had the keys to the house. I went and came as though I lived there and I didn't. It was in one of the richest parts of my home city. I had the keys to the car. I was very protective of that home and that car. I did not get any money from them, but they paid my tuition. The money went directly to school, and that was a real blessing. Otherwise, I would not have been able to have gone to school. So, on the weekends I worked. I worked at a drug store; I drove the delivery truck. And when I wasn't working at the drug store I would work at the grocery store bagging groceries. You know, to make a little extra money so that I could go to school. And the ironic thing was that I to be in there working as a student from Shaw University, as a black student, black person working, there would be a white fella working from State College out on Hillsborough Street. The store would probably be paying him three times as much as I was being paid. So, which meant that I had to double or triple the amount of work that I did. In order to get just enough money to buy the clothes and the things that I needed for my own nepitude. The very first suit that I ever owned , I brought myself. I have been buying my clothes ever since."

Nysha ❏ "So with you in school and work, there must not have been a lot of time to date."

Rev. Cooley- "No, as a matter fact, the entire time I was in college I never went to a single basketball game or football game. I never went to ah, I didn't go to my prom. I didn't have the time. As a matter of fact, the uh, young lady that I married, I almost lost her because there was another guy who took her to the prom. He took an interest in her, you know. But I put a quick end to that. It was nothing physical you know, I just turned on the charm."

Nysha- "What kind of goals did you have ah, when you were in school and in college? What did you plan on doing?"

Rev. Cooley- "Keep in mind now, I was in the church a very early age. And as I said I started preaching when I was about twelve years old. So, I was in a very warm, supportive, caring church that kept me encouraged, the older members of that congregation female, male and female, always encourage me. You know like, boy you've got to keep up your grades, you've got to work hard. You need to go to college if you're going to be a minister. You really need to go to college to make it. So I was focused, all of my young life, towards the ministry. There was never a question in my mind as to what I was going to do. There was no question, what are you going to do? I knew. So, I went to college, my college degree was in Social Studies and Christian education. So I didn't have to float around and find myself. I knew where I was going."

Nysha ■■■"So you have two kids. Do you think they're as focused as you are?"

\* Here Rev. Cooley goes on to talk about the differences between his daughter and son. His daughter was always wanted to be a doctor from age three. She is currently surgery and anesthesiology at Cornell University. His son the oldest was not quite as focused and almost end up flunking out of Pittsburgh State. He finally got his act together, finished school and now has a position with the state in Social Security as the judicator for disability.

Nysha- "So did you bring your kids up the same way you were brought up?"

\* Here Rev. Cooley's answer to this question is yes and he goes on to say when and where his children were born, how they grew up surrounded by education and practically grew up on the college campuses while he was studying there. He also talks about different pasturing opportunities he took on as a young preacher. He goes on to talk about how the family made

their way to Steelton. He and his family have been in Steelton for 23-1/2 years and he considers it his "last stopping place".

Tom- "You were talking about how at the age of twelve you started off with religion and it was a very important part of you life (Not audible here)...different degrees that religious faith always stayed with you through your education. That always carried you through. How far has it brought, not even from a philosophical standpoint, but how far has it brought you? Like you just said this is the last place. Are you tired? Are you ready to stop? You've dealt with a lot of people ah, a lot of hard things to deal with. Are you worn out?"

Rev. Cooley- "No, not really. I'm sixty-two, I will be sixty-three in August, August the twenty-third. Religion has played a tremendous role in my life. Ah, I`m not certain what would have happened had it not been for the warm embrace of the church at a very early age in my life. A young man who lives in Alaquippa, Pennsylvania, and he's a bishop in another church out there, who discovered me, he was a college student and he discovered me as a young kid, and introduced me to the Lord, directed me towards God. And uh, in my own limited understanding, I made an embrace of religion and committed myself. I think that was probably one of the greatest thing that could have happened in my life. Religion gave me a sense of worth; I didn't have much of that before because of the social journey that I had gone through; broken family, growing up in a very strict, starch, segregated society. And through this young man who is an old man now, taught me that I was somebody and that God loved me and that he never made any junk because he made me, I was truly worthwhile. And so it gave me a sense of worth and as I grew in my faith for a couple of years or so, I began to feel the need to do for others as he had done for me. I interpreted that pretty much as a call to the ministry. And so, throughout my life all of my ups and downs,

all of my mistakes, all of my triumphs and with all of my failures, it has been my faith believing that all things work together for good for them who love the Lord. And so, each, each failure that I've experienced, they've been so numerous you can't even really catalogue them and go back and talk about them, have been not so much failures but learning experiences that allowed me to triumph over what I might have considered failures. And uh, somehow, where and I don't where I came to develop the philosophy that uh I could do anything, even though there was not a single person in the history my family that I could find at that time who had even graduated from elementary school. Ah, and I managed through the embrace and the encouragement of the church to get through the high school. And it was the church people who said, "You need to go to college. If you're going to be a minister, you need to college." And after I got through college some of those same people said you really need to go further and further your education because who knows what type of people you are going to be dealing with so over the years the years, that was born out to be true, I worked with governors, I've worked with judges, I've meet presidents I have ministered to senators, I have the opportunity in my life time to travel abroad, and to meet presidents of foreign countries and so forth, and sit in the hall of congress or their equivalence to the hall of congress in some African countries, and I think primarily because of the direction that my life turned in the church because I went to these countries with missionaries and missionaries who have connections have lead me into the presidential palaces of some of these places, religion has played a significant role, it has helped to mold me, there have been many, many times that I could have deserted my family, I could walked away, times have been tough, they haven't always been easy, I could have disappeared, but I felt a strong commitment to my family , I felt a strong commitment to my vows, the vows say that, 'Until death till we part, in sickness and in health.' So in 1988 when my wife had her stroke, she was rendered basically

helpless, very sharp mind, the doctors and the therapist and so forth felt that she needed to stay active in something constructive if at all possible, in order to do means that I have to physically see to it that, she is able to get to her work, that is why I built this house, almost not quite a quarter of a million dollars, which is not much in this day and time but it was the type of things that I put in the house to make her comfortable, I don't know if I answered your question."

Tom- "That was great, thank you very much."

-----End of Interview-----