

The patriarch next door: Defining faith

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

In this issue, Krista Tippett [recalls](#) that as a teen she was eager to leave Oklahoma and a Southern Baptist grandfather who represented a “small, closed world defined by judgment.” According to him, “Every Catholic and Jew, every atheist in China and every northern Baptist in Chicago, for that matter—every non-Southern Baptist—[was] damned.”

I wonder how many of us have a figure like that grandfather in our past—someone with a dominant personality whose strong faith, although it seemed confining, helped us define what our religion was and was not. For me that person is Mr. Estep, the patriarch of a family of ardent Baptists who lived next door when I was growing up. As there were only 20 feet between our houses, we could see into their kitchen and they could see into ours. In the days before air conditioning, we could pretty much hear everything that was happening in each other’s houses—my parents in an occasional argument, Mr. and Mrs. Estep and their five children singing four-part harmony to “Blessed Assurance” with the mom at the piano. Occasionally the boys would bring out their trumpets, which irritated my father, who was sympathetic to their Christian fervor but believed that everybody should be quiet after dark.

Mr. Estep ran a tight ship: church on Sunday morning, Baptist Young People’s Union followed by a Sunday evening song service with more trumpets, and Wednesday evening prayer service. He neither smoked nor drank alcohol, and his children, my chums, assured me that my parents, who did both, were in big trouble. The Esteps never went to a dance or a movie, never played cards or laid eyes on a Sunday newspaper. Occasionally I went to church with them in the evening. I excelled at Bible memorization and flirted with the girls (there were many more there than at my tiny Presbyterian Westminster Fellowship). My parents allowed me to go as long as I was with the Presbyterian tribe on Sunday mornings.

As I bridled at my neighbors' theological and eschatological exclusivism and came to understand the conflicts between their biblical literalism and what I was learning about the world, the Esteps and their religion defined for me what my religion was not. It occurs to me that my religion may have done the same thing for them.

Recently I've been thinking more about Mr. Estep. I remember that he taught me to throw a knuckleball and pitch quitoes. I remember Mr. Estep and my father sitting on our patio on summer evenings talking, Dad smoking Camel after Camel, me listening to them talk until drowsiness drove me to bed. I recall Mr. Estep's interest in my attending divinity school (at an institution he wouldn't have touched with a ten-foot pole), his inquiries about my progress and his solemn handshake at my ordination—surely the only time he was ever inside a Presbyterian church—and his statement, "We're partly responsible for this, you know." Years later, when Mrs. Estep and my father were gone and my mother was very sick, Mr. Estep checked on her regularly, did her shopping and drove her to the doctor's office. He showed me what to aspire to in kindness and neighborliness. There's plenty of room in heaven for him—and for all of the Esteps, so long as they don't get out their trumpets after dark.