

FIRE IN MY

BONES 

Roy Key



SWORD

IN MY SOUL

FIRE



IN MY BONES

Roy Key

1201 Timber Top Dr.

Rogers, AR 72756

621-5757

royrck@earthlink.net

1996



SWORD

IN MY SOUL

“If I say ‘I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,’
there is within me something
like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.”
(*Jeremiah 20:9*)

“This child
is destined
for the falling and the rising
of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be opposed,
so that the thoughts of many hearts
will be revealed --
and a sword
will pierce your own soul, too.”
(*Luke 2:34-35*)

FIRE IN MY BONES

Blazing shafts from the Eternal Sun,
from which I turned in shivers,
facing Eastward from the crimsoned West,
refused to die, till smoldering embers
burst into fierce flame and melted marrow,
sealed within my bones,
that could not be contained.

Atop the frozen Calvary there burned
a Cross that lighted up this frigid life
and summoned me to share my muted
peace, the silent song that swelled and burst
my soul, till liquid fire upon
these unlocked lips
lit flames of war.

O God of grace, let now the melting flow
from Glacial Golgotha baptize us in
one Name, that we may speak with one
unmuted voice, set free from our
soul-shattering weight of shame,
the Gospel of the One
Who loves us so.

Roy Key
5-24-97

FIRE IN MY BONES -- SWORD IN MY SOUL

Introduction

The fire burned, and the sword was unsheathed to strike.

That was a long time ago. The other night, though, the flames leaped anew, and the sword stabbed deep. Rummaging through my files, I ran across a yellowed sheaf, hand-written 40 years ago. Its title: "Fire In My Bones." Neglected for four decades, there in rough draft lay a couple of chapters, with a skeletal outline of the rest of a text. Behind them in faded type was a first draft of those two chapters.

The work was never finished. I was too busy.

I was busy writing for a Church of Christ magazine, Eugene Smith's *Gospel Broadcast*. I had written for a number of other journals: Earnest Beam's unity-promoting *Christian Forum*, Jimmy Lovell's missionary-oriented *West Coast Christian* (and later *California Christian*), O. H. Tallman's issue-packed *Response*. I had even made the pages of the prestigious *Gospel Advocate* and *Christian Standard*. It all became a problem. My busyness increased.

I was busy answering heresy charges in the *Preceptor* and *Gospel Guardian*. Big guns, as well as small caliber bore, were alike trained in my direction, and I was weary dodging shrapnel. I wanted to make a statement to those beyond the Church of Christ. We were a laughing stock among mainline churches and the scourge of the rest. I wanted to present another face. To cry that there is a ferment at work that will not leave us the same.

Further, I wanted to say to my fellow Church of Christ members that I am attempting only to be a herald of "Good News," not a subversive saboteur. I know the orthodox line. I have believed it, taught it, debated it... and now I challenge it. But, I do so as compassionately and caringly as I know how.

On re-reading those neglected pages, I knew why I hadn't finished the book. I as surely knew why even yet I must try to do so

That is a long story, though, and I should start at the beginning.

1

PILLAR OF FIRE BY NIGHT

Running Scared

As a child I was scared. I was born scared. I grew up scared. My early years could properly be titled “Running Scared.” I was afraid of the dark, and I was afraid of God. I think I was more afraid of God than of the dark, but the dark was mighty scary.

Older cousins got bloody fun hiding behind dark doors, waiting for me to walk through. Wrapped in wild screams and bear hugs that left no breath with which to scream back, I could only collapse.

Out in the dark was the “Booger Man,” so the old folks said, waiting to grab boys and girls who were “bad. And “bad” is what we felt we were most of the time. We were not at all eager to be outside after dusk. The night’s thick shadows were filled with an awesome Unknown. An Unknown eager at any instant to gobble up the Known, so it seemed.

Night, also, was associated with sickness and death. “The night air is poison,” some old saying held. And it was at night, a few weird folk claimed, that the dead walked. There were no funeral homes in our little town. When one died, neighbors went into the home, washed, dressed the body and sat up all night with the corpse. After a funeral, in my mind’s eye I continued to see the face of the deceased. At night only by running, jumping in bed and yanking the cover up past my chin, could I feel safer, though the eerie fear did not disappear.

As a teenager I was selected, along with Clyde, a friend my age, to sit up with the body of a neighbor. I don’t know why no adults were available. Evidently Clyde was not as fearful as I, for he went to sleep. My eyes, however, were hypnotically fixed on Mr. Odell. At times he appeared to be rising up out of the casket. I was not afraid of him when he was alive, but in the darkness of death I was petrified.

Presumably for protection, my father kept a gun, a 32 blue steel Smith and Wesson pistol. At first it stayed in the top drawer of a chest. On a memorable night when Daddy was gone a would-be housebreaker tried to shake open our front door. Mother Sue got the gun, loaded it and standing before the door, called (I can still hear her words): “Lay a hand on that door again, and I will empty this gun into it.” That gun stood for protection. It stood, as well, for danger... and death.

There is still more to the gun *and* the dark. Or the gun *in* the dark. Daddy frequently got up in his sleep, thinking someone was either breaking into the house or outside prowling around it. At such times he grabbed the pistol and fired in the direction of the suspected villain. One night he almost hit one of the field hands. The next morning Jabbo said, “Mr. Charlie, last night them bullets was going ‘Voom,’ ‘vroom!’”

Certain that a prowler was in the house, Daddy got the gun, loaded it and sat on the side of the bed... waiting for the intruder to pass the bedroom door. Just outside the door in the hallway was a large trunk on which sat our water bucket, the dipper inside. When in the night any of us kids waked up and wanted a drink, we could walk down the hall and get it. But, we walked past that door. We'll never know what my father would have done, had one of us passed it at that moment.

These were not merely momentary sleep-walking episodes. Some lasted quite awhile. Long enough once for Daddy to get up, put on his clothes, go out to the barn, harness the mules, hitch the team to the wagon and be on his way to the field when he awoke. The night held a host of dark possibilities for us. Some fraught with more than ordinary danger. The Abyss out of which all the monsters of the deep arose.

So that Daddy could no longer grab the gun every time he had a nightmare, Mother Sue hid the weapon. Nevertheless, he again jumped out of bed and slammed shut the bedroom closet door. "Get the gun, Sudie!" he called, "I've got him shut up in here!" "Charlie, you're asleep," she called, "come back to bed." "I'm not asleep," he insisted. "He's really in here!" The conversation continued, but eventually he convinced her to bring the gun. As she handed it to him he woke up.

It was day time. The adults were all gone. A bunch of us kids were playing in the back yard. I glanced at a back bedroom window and saw a face peering at us. I called out and pointed. Every kid's face turned toward that window, and every eye saw that face. Following a hasty conference, we marched into the house. I located the gun, and the bullets, loaded the gun and began searching through every closet. Had I found anyone, life for me would have taken a critical turn to the left.

Aside from this last incident the gun was associated entirely with the dark. Even this incident came metaphorically to be a dark moment. I was afraid of the dark, afraid of God, afraid of the gun. I have never owned one. In time, though, I think the metaphor of the "gun" may have melted into another germinal metaphor that I will lift up later... the seminal metaphor of the "sword." Protection. Danger. Potential disaster. Incredible pain. Haunting paradox.

Then, there was the "fire." I became terrified of fire. Not the fire in our coal-burning grates. Not the fire in our Home Comfort wood cook stove. The scars on my hands validate the story my mother told of the day I crawled up to the grate and pulled the ashes guard down on my hands. The scars on my feet validate the story my parents told of the day I walked into the fire around the wash pot out in the back yard. Aside from proof that I was a mighty slow learner is the evidence that fire did not scare me. Not at first.

At church, however, I heard of another fire, fire associated with both God and the dark. Fire where those of us who were bad would burn forever. Fire unquenchable. Fire inescapable. Fire, like Moses' bush, that burned and burned but never burned up... or out. Furthermore, paradoxically, this fire was in a place of "outer darkness," making it more terrible yet. Whenever the sky was red, fiery red, I feared the end of the world and the looming of hell fire. Particularly as night fell.

Nightmares came in droves. Frequently I dreamed of the Judgment Day. As frequently I was lost. Never saved. Not once. A few times I felt the heat of the flames before waking up screaming. One night I awoke after midnight with the whole world a fiery red. Soon dozens of people were down on the L-shaped street, two blocks long, which was Town Creek. A water brigade quickly formed from the town pump to the blazing buildings. Despite heroic efforts, nothing could save the town. It was virtually destroyed.

Fire! Servant and master. Enemy and friend. Protector and destroyer. Daily it cooked our food. In winter warmed our bodies, our homes. In the woods it kept wild animals at bay. It destroyed our town. It was life-saving. It was life-taking. It drew. It repelled. It was associated with the Holy Spirit of God. It was associated with Hell Fire and eternal damnation.

Later I will say more about the formative function of fire for me. Just now I lift up the germinal metaphors of “light” and “fire.” Later they would be joined by a third seminal metaphor, the “sword.” However, the last appeared nearly thirty years afterward. As a child the focus was on “light” and “fire.” Both associated with darkness. Both associated with God... and with Hell. Still, squeezed in there between them was the gun with its paradoxical meaning of security and slaughter. The light of salvation and Stygian darkness.

In the Darkness -- A Light

When I remember the nights as a child, I feel afresh that Awesome Unknown and see that big bolt of blackness sewn into a shroud. I remember the nightmares and my mother in an instant covering the distance between her bed and mine. The touch of her hand on my head and her voice, “It’s all right... It’s all right... I’m right here.” And it was all right...for awhile. Maybe, the rest of the night. Or the rest of the week. But, the sense of security wouldn’t stay.

Our parents’ bedroom, remember, was at one end of the hallway and the children’s at the other. It was down that hallway that my mother had to come when the night terrors came and I cried out. Close to their doorway, on that trunk in the hall, near the water bucket, was a pint-size kerosene lamp. Each evening at bedtime it was lit. All night long it burned... every night. It was there to reassure us, should we awaken in the dark. To me it became a symbol of their protective care.

Yet, I knew that, though my parents loved me, they could protect me only so far. They could not wholly protect me from the dark, and they could not protect me from God. Hell fire still loomed. Then, my heart beat lighter. Preachers came along portraying the Bible as “a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.”¹ Like John the Baptist, they pointed beyond themselves, exhorting, “Search the Scriptures, for in them... you have eternal life.”² Here was the perfect Guide to lead us through the dark jungle, past the fearsome Abyss, through the vast Unknown. If we but followed it perfectly, we were safe from all harm.

¹ *Psalm 119:105.*

² *John 5:39.* They conveniently left out the critical phrase, “you think.”

That “If” loomed large. The Bible unearthed for me a wealth of information. Yet, it never dispelled the oppressive darkness. It disclosed not only a God of seeking love, but a God of searing wrath. I understood that He loved us even when we were bad. I knew, though, that His love would not blunt His unrelenting punishment of evil. I knew myself tainted with evil... therefore condemned.

The Bible was the light that illumined my darkness well enough for me to see that my fears were confirmed. Standing in the shadows was God keeping watch upon us all, the all-seeing eye never missing the slightest infraction of His Law. The Bible revealed too much for comfort. If others could take solace in the belief that they followed the teachings of Scripture well enough to secure God’s grace, I could not. My confidence in the Bible crumbled. Not because of any fault in it, but because of the fault in me. I could not rest in my own faithfulness. The more light, the clearer was my weakness, not my strength.

Yet, not all was lost. The Church of Christ, unlike John the Baptist who cried, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”³ pointed me to the Church. Convinced me that the Bible pointed to the Church. “The Church of the Lord, which he purchased with his own blood.”⁴ “The Church which is his Body.”⁵ “The Body of which he is the Savior.”⁶ We all knew that meant “The Church of Christ.”

Here at last was security, the *sphere* of salvation, the *place* of protection. Even though imperfect and unworthy, here I was safe. Here I could eventually be saved. That is, if I belonged to “the true Church,” “the Lord’s Church,” rather than “the churches of men.” And, I did.

Certainty At Last

There was much about which I was uncertain, but not “The Church of Christ.” From earliest childhood I was well-indoctrinated. The whole Key clan had originally been Missionary Baptists. I have a faint recollection of one time being in Sunday School in the Baptist Church. However, my clearest early memory was riding in the buggy to the Church of Christ where Daddy tied Black Beauty to the thorn tree just off the roadway into the church yard.

While I was quite small about half the Key clan left old Egypt for the new Promised Land in the Church of Christ. From then on there was war. The pagan Philistines versus the true Israelites! Or, in the spirit of the day, Yankee usurpers versus true Sons of the Old South! Though we never reached either Jerusalem or Appomattox.

While our uncles, aunts and cousins never charged that we in the Church of Christ were going straight to hell, that didn’t hinder us from pointing to their assured destination and the

³ John 1:29.

⁴ Acts 20:28.

⁵ Ephesians 1:22-23.

⁶ Ephesians 5:23.

accelerating speed with which they hurtled toward it. Both sides, it became clear, relished the ongoing arguments.

We argued over baptism. “Was it essential for salvation?” Over instrumental music in worship. “Was it a high-handed, stiff-necked addition to the simple worship ordained in the New Testament?” Over the impossibility of apostasy. “Was it impossible for one who was saved to be lost, no matter if he became a murderer, adulterer, liar, thief, blasphemer and rank atheist?”

Most of all, we argued over “the right name” of the Church. Certainly, the name “Baptist Church” appeared nowhere in Scripture. An 89-pound Grandmother Key stood toe to toe with 189-pound Baptist preaching son-in-law who called her a “Campbellite.” That was a fighting term, totally rejected by the faithful. However, waving her finger in his face, she shot back, “I’d rather be a Campbellite than to have no light at all!”

We were a people determined to choose our own name, and not have a bunch of aliens paste one on us. As Moslems are offended at being called “Mohammedans” and Pentecostals resent being called “Holy Rollers,” so members of the Church of Christ are indignant when called “Campbellites.” They embrace only the name “Christian.” And, while they admit that the name “Church of God” and “Church of the Firstborn” appear in Scripture, they point to Jesus’ claim, “On this rock I will build *my* church,”⁷ and Paul’s greeting, “The *churches of Christ* salute you.”⁸ Ultimately, the name is not ours, nor anyone else’s, to choose; it is divinely given.

Even so, our own members at times had difficulty remembering. Mother Wright, our mother’s mother, who lived with us, sometimes forgot and said “The Christian Church.” Mother Sue quickly corrected such an egregious error by saying sternly, “Mama, it’s ‘The Church of Christ!’” That there should be no mistake on anybody’s part, I painted the first sign ever to go on our little white frame building.

We knew we were “the right church,” because we had “the right ‘Plan of Salvation,’”⁹ “the right ‘Organization,’”¹⁰ “the right ‘Items of Worship,’”¹¹ and “the right ‘Name.’”¹² We couldn’t put all our “rights” up on the building, but we could put up “the right name”... and we did!

It read “Church of Christ.” Not that anybody from Brooklyn or Los Angeles would be driving through Town Creek at 11 o’clock some Sunday morning eagerly searching for our sign. In our town of 500 there were only three churches.¹³ Methodist, Baptist and Church of Christ.

⁷ *Matthew* 16:18.

⁸ *Romans* 16:16.

⁹ The steps in the Plan were: faith, repentance, confession and baptism (immersion).

¹⁰ Elders and Deacons in each congregation, with the Elders in charge.

¹¹ Singing, Prayer, the Lord’s Supper, Offering and Preaching.

¹² “The Church of Christ.” There was argument over whether the preposition was part of the name.

¹³ That is, White churches, the only kind that counted so far as we were concerned.

Everybody already knew where everybody else belonged. Even who were the holdouts from all three. But, we could and did draw the line between “the true Church” and “the sects” or “the churches of men.” We couldn’t understand why townspeople were displeased and boys threw rocks at my handiwork.

We continued to hold our two-week “Protracted Meeting” in the summer. For years Brother Ben Harding¹⁴ did the preaching. I liked this gentle man: jolly, eloquent, outgoing. Back then the building could not hold the crowds. At night men and almost-grown boys stood around outside and looked in the windows. Brother Ben had a big stomach and a bigger heart. That was the problem. He was too gentle and too big hearted. He even welcomed Methodists and Baptists to our services, called their preachers “Brother” and invited them to dismiss the congregation!

That had to stop. Consequently, we replaced Brother Harding with preachers “who would tell it like it is,” with “no compromising of the Truth.” They called the Methodists and Baptists by name, too... to let them know precisely where they were headed, if they didn’t come to repentance and get in “the right Church.” They all quit coming. But, it was comforting to know that we were paying the price of holding fast to the faith.

It was great at last to be in the *place* where God’s grace was operative.

2

THE CALL I COULD NEITHER HEAR NOR ESCAPE

That Dogged Question

“Son, what do you want to be when you grow up?” was the standard question from adults, and it was a thorny one. Not that I didn’t have any idea of the answer, but that the word “want” was complicated. Much more so than the questioners suspected. How do you say what you “want,” when your wants are wide, and there is an “ought” overriding each of them?

I *wanted* to be a conductor on a passenger train. The Southern Railroad ran about a half-mile North of our home. Three Key brothers at times made our way across corn fields and through barbed wire fences to walk the rails, then watch the trains go by. Such power... and grace. The melancholic, melodic wail of the old steam whistle. The rhythmic clanking of giant wheels on shining ribbons of steel. A serpentine city hurtling past, filled with folks we knew not whom, headed for places we knew not where. All so mysterious. Another world passing before eyes that could see only the outer iron skin and longingly follow as it shrank to a dot in the distance. How thrilling to be moving with it, in it, to have charge of the people inside it. I wanted to be a conductor.

¹⁴ Son of the renowned James A. Harding.

I *wanted* to be a lawyer. A high moment for me was going with my father up to Moulton, County Seat of Lawrence County, to sit in on a trial. Twenty feet before me, with no stage lights or sound effects, no artificial heightening of suspense, there unfolded a drama of human destiny. The air was charged. The crowded courtroom. The testimony of the witnesses. The battle of the argument. The mystery of the verdict. I was riveted to my seat. What a life to be part of that drama! To be a combatant in that argument. To question those witnesses. To influence that verdict.

Maybe, it was the debating spirit within that could be unleashed only on the Methodists and Baptists. It assuredly could not be at home. I had become a pretty fair arguer, I thought. And, there was nothing I enjoyed more than backing up a Methodist or Baptist and nailing his hide to the barn door. In the court room I could pound a lot of nails. I wanted to be a lawyer.

Yet, as I remember back as far as I can, it seems that I always wanted to be a preacher. At least, at a very early age I felt I *ought* to be a preacher. When the Oldsters put the usual question, I hung my head, tucked my chin and muttered, “O, I don’t know.” I did know early, however, that whatever I *wanted* to do, there was something I felt I *had* to do. It was a conviction I couldn’t unsaddle no matter how high I jumped or how hard I kicked. It’s possible that I was ashamed to admit it because, at the same time, I felt miserably inadequate and suspected that everyone else would feel the same way.

No one’s history is simply a pile of raw historical data. We are shaped by the meaning we give to events, and I can be no different. It may be that much of that meaning is read back into the happenings after the fact. At any rate, there are to me some pivotal events that likely turned me toward the ministry. That constituted the atmosphere in which the “call” could come.

I grew up as the oldest child, though I always knew I was not. On the wall in a gold oval frame about 22” by 16” hung a picture of a lovely, smiling four-year-old blonde boy. In my father’s arms in October, 1918, he choked to death of diphtheria and pneumonia. I was six months old at the time. My parents didn’t talk a lot about Alton, but I sensed the pain in their hearts. I wanted so much to make them happy and felt that somehow I must live for both of us. That abnormal sense of responsibility may have plowed the ground.

A second event appears quite ordinary from the outside. We were at church. While we had preaching once a month, I can’t recall if a preacher was present this Sunday. I usually sat on the front row and, when tired, lay down and went to sleep. Particularly in the evening. This, however, was broad daylight on Sunday morning. We had no instrumental music in worship, but used song leaders instead. “Uncle Pink”¹⁵ was leading the singing. I glanced up at him and saw tears running down his cheeks.

“What’s the matter with uncle Pink?” I wondered. I never paid much attention to the words of the hymns, I guess. Rather, it was the tunes that led to liking or disliking the songs. Today, though, my eyes fell on the page before me, and the words came alive:

¹⁵ His name was Tandy Pickens, but everybody called him “Pink.”

O, to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be;
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Never let me wander from Thee,
never leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
seal it for Thy courts above.

I was not mature enough to grasp the gift of “grace” cerebrally, but I knew that it meant something to a beloved uncle. Somehow, beyond the bounds of rationality we knew and were caught up in the reality of the “holy” and the embrace of “love.” At least, after all these years when so much is forgotten, this moment is riveted in memory, emitting yet its golden glow. Like a parable, or the hard shell of a nut, it lasted till it could offer up the gift within. Maybe, as a child I had to know what had moved a dear heart so.

It was the first day of school. Harold entered the sixth grade. Raymond was in the eighth, Wayne in the first and I in the tenth. On the mile walk home Raymond and I noticed Harold acting strangely. Hurrying home, we reported to Mother Sue and Daddy. As they became aware of his delirium, they packed Harold, Wayne and me in the T-model Ford and headed for Colbert County Hospital in Tusculumbia eighteen miles away. There three doctors said that Harold could not live through the night.

I know that at age sixteen I must have dozed sometime during those nightmarish hours. Yet, my memory is one of staying in the car all night, with Wayne, and praying the whole night through. The agony deepened by the hour. I had lost my older brother. Now it looked as if I would lose the youngest, as well.

When daylight broke and our parents returned to the car, it was with the news not only that Harold would live, but that he was out of danger. There is no way to express the relief, the joy, the gratitude, the belief that God does care and gives attention when we pray. I suspect that this event became a firm reminder that grace calls for grateful response, “for to whom much is given, of him much shall be required.”

On the way home from the hospital we stopped at the Doctor Wright's office for him to take one more look at Harold. Afterward he turned to me, and said, “We might as well look you over while you're here.” His examination soon disclosed that both Harold and I suffered from what the doctors called “poisoned kidneys.” Then came my brush with death, for my heart became involved, as well. For the next month I was in bed.

I do not know that these are the major events that turned my face toward ministry. If they didn't, though, I do not know what did. Mother Key, telling us Bible stories and reading religious articles she authored? Mother Sue, reading us *Aunt Charlotte's Bible Stories*, kissing us “Goodnight” and telling us that she loved us? Brother Harris saying, “I would rather live and die in the deepest recesses of Africa, never having heard the name of Jesus, than live here in a land full of Bibles and go to the Judgment Bar of God unbelieving and unprepared?”

The conviction solidified. I began to dream of and pray for ways to enter David Lipscomb College in Nashville, Tennessee.¹⁶ There, I was convinced, I would learn how to be a preacher. Should the adults ask me now, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I could tell them.

That Fatal Question

If I was to be a preacher, I must be prepared. I must know how to “rightly divide the word of truth.” Therefore, I studied. Uncle Pink had a few religious books, and was happy for me to come to his house and read. My favorite was David Lipscomb’s *Questions and Answers*. There I confronted issues undreamed of. Fascinating queries and replies weighted with wisdom.

Furthermore, my uncle subscribed to the *Gospel Advocate*, premier publication of the Church of Christ, whose original editor was none other than David Lipscomb. At this time the editor was H. Leo Boles, one-time President of David Lipscomb College and successor to Lipscomb as writer of the “Questions and Answers” column.

One question I remember well was that of a lady who asked, “What is the gift of the Holy Spirit in *Acts 2:38*?” That was our favorite Bible verse and lethal weapon in battle with the Methodists and Baptists. Boles’ reply was, “The gift of a tree is its fruit, and the fruit of the Spirit is listed in *Galatians 5:22-23*: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, gentleness and self-control.” That reply I read in amazement. Even as a teen-ager, I knew immediately that it was wrong. In *Acts 2:38* “the gift of the Holy Spirit” is clearly the Holy Spirit *as a Gift*. God’s *Self*, not our *own* selves re-formed.

I was amazed at the statement. I was more amazed at my reaction. In fact, I was scared stiff. The question came uninvited... out of nowhere, “Can our leading brother be mistaken about something? about anything?” It must have been like a loyal Roman Catholic asking, “Can the Pope be wrong?” Then, the follow up, “If we can be wrong about one thing, can we be wrong about two? Three? How many times can one be wrong and still be right?”

With sledge hammer blows I pounded the question back down into the den from which all such doubts emerge and where they all belong. I tried to treat doubt in the worst possible way. Swallow it. Deny it. Refuse to think about it. Pretend it never was. Otherwise, it becomes the Achilles heel of the Church, that is, “The Church of Christ,” and I would be no longer in the *place* where God’s grace is operative.

There was but one thing to do: “Forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things that lie ahead, I press toward the goal.” Mount the cab. Fire the boiler. Sound the whistle. Clear the tracks. Throw open the throttle, and let her roll full steam ahead. Let all who can, get out of the way.

For a few more years I was able to proceed without that fatal question surfacing again. It, however, must not have been driven as far under ground as I thought, but was destined one

¹⁶ Now Lipscomb University, but at that time a Jr. College.

day to sprout and bear its bitter harvest. I could not forever affirm the infallibility of Church of Christ orthodoxy. The ground of certainty would have to shift or certainty would have to go. But, that was farther down the road. My prime objective was to get into college, David Lipscomb College of Nashville, Tennessee. That was the school for me.

3

DREAM COME TRUE

If You Can't Give Up

On a frosty January morning in 1936, in a class of thirteen, I graduated from Hazelwood High School in Town Creek, Alabama. During the heart of the Depression our school ran out of money and for six months had to close. On a small farm there was little outside to do until Spring. I spent the intervening months at oil painting, writing Western fiction and praying hard to get into Lipscomb the following Fall.

Often I slipped up into the unfinished attic to wrestle in prayer. On an ancient Oliver typewriter, with keys banked on either side in a kind of pipe organ rank, I began writing to the school, asking for admission. Initially my letters were politely answered. Eventually replies stopped. I said plainly that I had no money. My father offered a bale of cotton, if the crops came in. The school was already financially strapped and simply could not take one more non-paying student. That was it.

In desperation I wrote the president something such as this:

Dear Mr. President:

I want to come to your school, but I can't get in. I wish I could play on your basketball team, for if I could, I could get in your school. I wish I could play on your football team, for if I could, I could get in your school. I just want to preach, and I can't get in your school.

At once a letter came from President E. H. Ijams, saying, "Come up and talk with us." It was 150 miles to Nashville! We were 25 miles from the Alabama-Tennessee state line, and I had never been across it. There was no way I could go.

Miss Mattie Sue Knouff, just up the pike from us, heard of my plight and offered me a ride. Her daughter, Doreen, was in my class in Town Creek until the school had to shut down. The Knouffs then drove her to Leighton, in Colbert County, so she could graduate on schedule. That made it possible for her to enter Lipscomb in the Fall of '35. She planned to make a trip up there in the summer, and I could ride along.

I have been in the president's office since, and it is quite ordinary. On this day, however, it looked like a king's room. As I stood before President Ijams, I froze in position. So far as I recall, I never sat down. He was a diminutive man, and behind the massive oak desk almost hidden. Yet, he loomed exceedingly large. I remember only a snatch of the conversation. Three words of three questions that he asked, with my reply:

“Can you do [this]?” “No, Sir.”
“Can you do [that]?” “No, Sir.”
“Can you do [the other]?” “No, Sir.”

I could chop cotton... pick cotton... plow... pitch hay... feed the mules, cows, pigs and chickens. I could sweep, mop, dust, churn, wash and dry dishes, do everything around the house but cook. But, he didn't ask about any of these tasks. Mother Sue caught polio while the children were young and was for a long time unable to work. Our maternal grandmother, Mother Wright, did all the cooking. We children did the housework. To this day I could make as good a feather bed as anybody, but there is no pressing demand for feather-bed makers now, and there wasn't then at DLC.

By the grace of a neighbor I had been driven to Nashville. By the grace of the school president I had been allowed to plead my case personally before him. I had failed every question and flunked the most-important test of my life. If only there were a hole somewhere into which I could squeeze. President Ijams saw the panic rising in my face. He leaned forward, smiled and in the kindest voice I ever heard said, “Well, Son, maybe we could teach you something up here.”

“O, Happy Day!”

I could have shouted and hugged the president's neck, had I the nerve to move. I was going to be allowed to enter school! With no money. With nothing but a ragged promise and a boyish dream. I could work as much as time and strength allowed *at twenty-five cents an hour!* That was a full day's labor in the cotton patch when Raymond and I chopped on the same row to make a field hand. And when Raymond, Harold and I took two rows in order to make two field hands. An adult's wage once dropped to forty cents (or a bucket of sorghum), but had now risen to fifty.

What a risk this little man took, collateral be damned. Silently I vowed I would not let him down. For him I would have worked myself to death. In fact, I guess I almost did. Brother Woodruff¹⁷ thought so.

Immediately I was put to work on a crew digging by hand a hole big enough to put a basement under the High School Gymnasium. Teamed with a strapping basketball center too lazy to get in out of the sun... or rain, I felt ill-matched from the beginning. We each had a pick

¹⁷ Supervisor of the school's Student work program.

and shovel and together a wheelbarrow. I tried to work hard enough to make our output respectable. Then, I saw the supervisor motion for me to come.

“O, No!” I thought. “I’ve been here less than an hour, and already I’m being fired.” Here,” he said, handing me a jug, “These boys need some water.” He never let me get back to digging, but kept me busy running errands. Two years later he told Raymond, “That brother of yours was one of the two dumbest boys I ever saw. The first day on the job he nearly worked himself to death. I had to stop him to keep him from killing himself.”

One day I was sent out with a scythe to cut overgrown Johnson grass. I was well acquainted with the Johnson family. We had plenty of progeny in the cotton patches back home. But, we certainly never used scythes as weapons of attack. “Brother Ijams,” as we called the president, evidently saw the Johnson grass, the scythe and me locked in bitter battle. Though swinging with abandon in the most-valiant attack, I wreaked little destruction on that field. Straightening up after a flurry of blows, I saw Brother Ijams approaching.

“Here, let me have that,” he said, reaching for the implement. Taking a hone from his back pocket, he began sharpening the blade. Saying nothing, he paused, tested it with his thumb, then pronounced it serviceable. Stooping slightly, he drew the blade across the grass much as one would draw a razor across his face. Foliage fell in profusion. It was a work of art. He stood up, returned the scythe, again pulled from his pocket the hone and handed it to me. “Keep this,” he said, “and stop frequently to use it. Keep your instrument sharp. You may think you are wasting time, but you are not.” With that he turned and walked away.

“Do college presidents walk around with hones in their back pockets?” I wondered as he went. Yet, I was pretty sure I knew the secret to that wonder. The man was *watching* me. Of course, God watched us all the time, and that was a scary thought. We may have belted out the not-so-classical song “There’s An All-Seeing Eye Watching You,” while during every stanza wishing It would blink. But, here was a “watching” that was creative care, intrusive only to be gracious to the hilt.

“Keep your instrument sharp!” Like a continuous tape, the words drummed in my head, sounding out the wisdom of a great and godly man. “Why, this is my reason for being here,” I knew, “to sharpen the instrument of my mind and spirit.” For, as I would later learn, it is true, “Chance favors the prepared mind,” and, “The harder I work, the luckier I get.”

Doorkeeper

After a long absence two men met. One remarked to other, “How changed you are!” The reply came back, “I had a friend.” To say that Brother Ijams was my friend even now would seem presumptuous. Like some cocky youth crowing, “Jesus is my pal!” Friend? Yes, but... We had better be careful how we say it. On our knees, not with our thumbs under our arms.

I never had a class from Brother Ijams. Yet, I cannot think of him today without a tight throat and moist eye. I came to love him. Small of stature, he cast a giant shadow. This gentle

soul stood in stark contrast to the haughty gladiators I previously envied. There was radiance to his countenance and a suffused air of enormous strength. A champion ready to brave any danger, cross any chasm, fight any foe on (y)our behalf. To me he was care incarnate, a flesh-and-blood gift spelled “L-O-V-E.”

Lipscomb was more than I ever hoped. I felt I had died and gone to heaven. It was full of surprise. Surprise that I was there. Surprise at everything I heard and touched and saw. There I talked on the telephone for the first time. Those who saw me shouting and pointing were amused. I was amazed. Embarrassed, but amazed. There for the first time I got a quart of butter pecan ice cream and ate it at one sitting, surely the food of heaven. There were two sections of English. I supposed it was because there were too many students for one. Later I learned that I was in an advanced class, and I could only look back to Town Creek and thank Miss Beale.

There were jolts, as well. Dean Parks stood up in Chapel and read from what he claimed was the New Testament. To say I was shocked at the strange language coming out of the dean’s mouth is the classic understatement. Being fairly familiar with the King James Version and having never heard of any other (certainly, not Moffatt’s translation), I was troubled by what to me was “the language of Ashdod.” A still greater blow was yet to fall as I learned that the Bible had a human history. It did not, like the *Koran*, fall intact from heaven, but was carried in vessels of clay.

There was much unprocessed information with which I must deal, but I said to myself, “I will take care of that later. I can’t do everything at once. First of all, right now I must do my work. Do the manual labor for which I am responsible. Do the class work I am assigned.”

And, that is what I tried to do.

When Everyone Smiles

Evidently mowing lawns, planting flowers, firing furnaces, cleaning toilets and sweeping floors was accounted some value after all. Brother Woodruff put me in charge of the school’s team of prized mules, “Lipscomb” and “Callio.” Professor J. P. Sanders, Head of the Bible Department, invited me to become his paper grader for next year. A senior, Howard Horton, almost physically shoved me into the pulpit at the end of my freshman year, because I couldn’t get up nerve enough to mount it on my own.

The fact that I was allowed to preach twice a month at Una the following year confirms the notion that nobody pays the slightest attention to the sermon... or that there was a host of saintly souls in that little congregation. My first Sunday in the middle of my trial sermon, I forgot what I was saying. At dinner the host, attempting to comfort me, said, “I’m sure you can do better.” I replied, “That’s the best I can do,” and they called me, anyway!

The Student body voted me the coveted title, “Bachelor Of Ugliness.” It was touted to be a great tribute, the most-representative student and male equivalent of “Miss Lipscomb.” I never did find out the origin of the title, and I felt a lot like a fellow described by Abraham

Lincoln. After being tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail, he was reported as saying, "If it wasn't for the honor of the thing, I would just as soon a not come." I took some small comfort in noticing that everybody who looked my way smiled. Besides, there were two boys in my class that I felt sure were uglier.

Graduation was a bitter-sweet experience. Lipscomb was a hot house for a fragile plant. My heroes were now Brother Ijams and Brother Sanders. My spirit a lot more like that of Brother Harding, whom I formerly considered "soft on the sects." I still believed that the Church of Christ was right, but felt a great deal more compassion for those I considered "lost."

I left with a huge debt hanging. A debt of gratitude for being allowed on campus. A financial debt I had not been able to pay. Even so, no one said anything about either. It took four more years to clear up the second debt.

The first will never be paid.

4

A STILL BIGGER DREAM

"Westward, Ho!"

Daddy thought college was a waste of time. He never finished the fourth grade, but knew more in a minute about most things than I knew all day. He asked me three questions. I knew the answer to not one of them. His fourth question was, "What do they teach you up there?" He forced me to keep formal learning in perspective... without denying it.

In 1936 I thought two years of college was all I needed. In 1938 I saw more clearly how big is the sea and how small my cup. I needed to continue in school. Abilene Christian College¹⁸ was where I wanted to go. It was in Texas, the Old Wild West and out where the World ends. There as a young man Daddy helped lay the railroads around Stamford and Waco. In a day before television he kept us entranced with stories of what to us were brave and dangerous feats. Where once I only faintly hoped to go, I now could live. I was accepted with a promise of \$150 a semester work contract.

Hedging my bets, I applied, also, to Harding¹⁹ and Pepperdine.²⁰ Both offered work contracts of \$250 a semester. Batsell Baxter²¹ in 1937 left Lipscomb to become President of the

¹⁸ Now a university with a graduate school of Bible and Religion.

¹⁹ Harding College is now a university in Searcy, Arkansas, with a graduate school of Bible and Religion in Memphis, Tennessee.

²⁰ Pepperdine is, also, a university. Its campus, originally in Los Angeles, is up the coast at Malibu.

²¹ Former President of Abilene Christian College and Vice-President of Lipscomb.

newly-created Pepperdine College. J. P. Sanders was called as Head of its fledgling Department of Bible and asked me to come along as his paper grader.

The lure of the West was great. My roommate, Boyd Field, and I decided to go. We had enough money for bus fare from West Texas to Los Angeles. Miss Irma Lee Batey, leaving Lipscomb to join the Music Department at Sul Ross College, offered us a ride as far as Alpine. From there we caught a Greyhound, arriving in L.A. two days later, tired and bedraggled, shortly after midnight.

“Paradise Regained”

Stepping off the bus, we landed in the middle of a Legionnaires’ Convention, rampaging through the streets. The “F” car, which ran out past 79th and Vermont, was halted, as were all other streetcars and automobiles that tried to make it through blocked intersections. A bonfire burned in the middle of one intersection. Boyd and I, like Peter in Pilate’s Judgment Hall, followed on the edge of that mob the rest of the night. For the first time, I wondered if my bubble had burst.

It hadn’t. A block either way from the Boys’ Dorm were open-air markets filled with fruits I’d never heard of, much less seen. Across Vermont Avenue was a Coast Ice Cream shop where we could get a double malted for a dime. A palm-lined Promenade high-lighted the spectacular, sky-blue, modern-style campus,²² and a first-class Library was 78 seconds from our dorm room.

Walking across campus, I passed Dean Hugh Tiner, who said, “Hello, Roy.” He had given the Commencement address at Lipscomb in the Spring, and I simply spoke to him then. That is all. “How could he recognize me?” I puzzled. “Does he have a photographic memory? or study the pictures of all incoming students?” There were fewer than 400 students on campus I learned, and soon we all knew practically everybody.

Nostalgia for Lipscomb made way for loyalty to Pepperdine. Classes in general were challenging and invigorating. Teachers such as Dr. Sanders and Dr. E. V. Pullias were inspiring and their classes a delight. One professor, another Ph.D., whom charity keeps nameless, was as dull as the head of single-bladed axe. He was the lone exception.

Happily I chose double-majors in English and Bible, together with double minors in Psychology and History. Dr. Wade Ruby was an excellent English Prof., and Dr. Pullias was superb in Psychology.²³ I found Dr. W. B. West, Jr., a good Bible teacher in undergraduate courses. Class room, as well as campus, was a thrilling experience, and I found myself inducted into the Polygrammatic Academic Honor Society.

²² George Pepperdine, who with \$5.00 began the Western Auto Supply Store, with \$14,000.000 dollars as an initial down payment, created the college.

²³ Several years later USC wooed him away from Pepperdine, and he completed a long and distinguished career at that renowned institution.

For work I received fifty cents an hour, twice what I got at Lipscomb and ten times as much as I first got in those old cotton fields back home. Since I was allowed to put in as many hours as I wished, I not only graded papers and washed dishes inside, but worked on the lawns outside, a good change of pace.

On Sunday mornings I got up about 5:30 and, not taking time for breakfast, got ready for my trip to Yucaipa. The "F" car made the trip downtown a fairly easy one. Then there was the wait at the bus station for a coach headed for Redlands. At the Redlands bus station someone from the church picked me up, and we made the rest of the trip by car. At 10:00 I taught the Adult Bible Class and at 11:00 preached. After services Sunday night I made the return trip. Around midnight I crawled into bed as quickly as possible, for there was an 8:00 class to meet in the morning.

For my services I received \$5.00. As I recall, transportation both ways cost a couple of dollars. I put \$1.00 in the offering plate and kept \$2.00 to splurge. With the excess funds I bought a Remington portable typewriter on the installment plan. Payments were \$5.00 a month. At last I had a *real* typewriter, and it was a beaut. I felt myself soaring without wings.

In time, though, I came to question whether I was giving too much to the church. Shocked to acknowledge the temptation, I decided to outflank the Tempter. Each time the temptation rose, I would double the contribution! Guess what? It happened... once. One doubling of the offering and the snake never showed his forked tongue again. I suspect such a stratagem can reclaim most any other backslider.

Fresh adventures kept coming. Classmates, Ray Simpson and Jean Valentine, were champion debaters at Pasadena J.C., and they missed not having a speech squad at Pepperdine. Ray decided he would do something about the vacuum. He asked if I would join the debate squad, help find a colleague and seek recognition as a school-sponsored activity. I agreed. However, to be activated we must have a coach. Ray got Dr. Batsell Barrett Baxter, Head of the Speech Department, to act as Coach. Hoyt Houchen joined me, and a four-man speech squad was born.

Ray tutored Hoyt and me, and soon we were in our first big tournament. USC, UCLA, Whittier, Redlands, Fresno, Stockton, even Stanford and Willamette, entered these regional events. Hoyt and I got fifth place. Victory was intoxicating. But, that turned out to be about as close as we usually got to the top. Except once. With USC and UCLA missing we got to the finals. So did Ray and Jean. Rather than murder us, they chose to skip the last round, and we received a tie for first.

In that same tournament I was entered in Impromptu Speaking. Usually the topics were economic or political in nature, and, after drawing a subject, we had a couple of minutes to gather our thoughts. This time everything was different. We drew a folded slip containing the subject, opened it, read it to the group, handed the paper to the judge and began to speak.

In the semi-finals I opened my slip and read the question, "What Does Christianity Mean To You?" I was struck with a sledge. "How did a question like that get in the pot? And, why

did it come to me?” I felt doubly on trial. Other contestants knew that I was studying for Christian ministry. And, at once I realized that never before had I confronted that question. I felt unprepared to speak either as a minister or as a Christian. Yet...

In a flash I saw an outline. It read,

“Christianity is to me:

- 1) A Way of Light,
- 2) A Way of Life,
- 3) A Way of Death.

It speaks to the deepest questions of my soul: 1) Where did I come from? 2) Why am I here? 3) Where am I going? In the blackness it is a lightening flash that for an instant shows me a path no darkness can put out. It offers me a task that gives meaning to my struggle. It provides me a Companion that walks with me till sundown. Then after a hot and busy day cradles my head in peace. Somehow the illustrations came that could illumine each affirmation.

In the finals my topic was “Killing Time.” Time is life, I posited. Or death. Our sweat. Our work. Our racing brains. Our throbbing hearts. Our idle hours. Our spiteful deeds. In Life’s brief experiment we are all given equal capital and freedom to choose how we spend it, invest it or throw it away. Ultimately, time is opportunity, and the Greeks had a statue for that. A woman with a long forelock and the back of her head completely bald. For, Opportunity must be grasped as she approaches. Once past, she is forever gone. Again the illustrations came, and the five minutes flew. I ended by crying, “Killing time is not murder. It’s suicide!” When handed the first-place medal, there was no way I could doubt the presence of strength in weakness and the gift of an incalculable grace.

To Move On -- Or To Stay

The second year at Pepperdine was one of fresh challenges. I began preaching at Fillmore, up the Ridge Route and West over toward Ventura. The Sunday schedule was virtually the same, only now I could ride up with Sherman Canon, as he drove to Oxnard. I continued on the debate squad with a new colleague, Albert Lovelady, and served as Student Body President. Too timid to ask a girl for a date, I turned full attention to studies. Even so, I still didn’t have enough time to deal sufficiently with unsettled issues.

Heretofore, I compensated for being 120 pounds and 5’8” by excelling in the classroom and developing a grip that could make a 220-pound athlete kneel and cry “Uncle!” Now I was past posturing and wanted answers. “Why can’t I make Paul and James say the say thing about ‘faith’ and ‘works?’”²⁴ “Why do we have one set of favorite Scriptures and the Methodists and Baptists have another?”²⁵ And that stubborn, “How many things can we be wrong on and still be ‘right?’”

²⁴ If both writers are inspired, I reasoned, they can’t contradict each other. Still, no matter whether they agree or disagree, there is clearly a verbal contradiction in their statements.

²⁵ We rely on such passages as *1 Corinthians* 9:27; 10:12; *Galatians* 5:4; *Philippians* 2:12; *Hebrews* 6:4-8. They rely on *such Scriptures as John* 3:36; 5:24; 10:27-30; *2 Timothy* 1:12; *1 John* 3:9; 5:18.

Since I received tuition for being on the speech squad and had two years of eligibility left, I decided to lighten my academic load and return for a fifth year. So doing, I could complete my course work, continue with debate and audit additional Bible classes. I was in no hurry to leave Pepperdine. Life couldn't be better. That's what I thought, until next year I discovered it could be.

Tonight it is difficult to imagine my fate, had I finished college in 1940. 1941 was a special year. I could do about as I pleased, doing the extra reading and resting a bit from the hectic year past. Then something happened for which I was unprepared. Evelyn Ellis appeared and rearranged the synapses in my brain. She appeared on screen at the oddest times: when preparing a sermon, working on a debate brief, grading Bible papers, mowing the grass. Her face, her figure, her voice, her hair... images that haunted my daylight dreams.

But, I couldn't just walk up to her and say... whatever it is you say. As a speechmaker I was tongue-tied. Then, glory be! The Elders of Alhambra Church of Christ decided to hold a debate on "Instrumental Music In Christian Worship." Evelyn's Stepfather, the "chief" Elder, would take "the Scriptural side" opposing its use, and someone from Pepperdine would affirm the "unscriptural" usage. I was the "someone" selected. Not only that, but I was scheduled to ride over in the carpool that included Evelyn.

I had never paid much attention to the song "San Antonio Rose," but that night in the car I heard it sung by the most-beautiful voice in the world. Another debate was argued out on that trip, inside me. Should I trounce her dad? Or let him win? With my debating experience, I knew I could make him look pretty bad. If I did, would she ever look at me. I couldn't even say "again." As far as I could tell she had never seen me the first time. The decision was that I should perform my task and trust the outcome.

I can't remember how I ever summoned up the courage to ask Evelyn out, but I must have. Not that I had much hope I could woo her away from those big, handsome fellows that flocked around her. Yet, by the end of the school year we were engaged. But, marriage was a long way off. So was I the next year.

On The Edge Of Nowhere

I still wanted to preach, but my dream now included teaching in a church-related school while serving small congregations who couldn't afford a full-time minister. Consequently, when the invitation came to be Vice-Principal of Dasher Bible School, I gladly accepted. Dasher was a community five miles South of Valdosta, near the Florida line. The land was low and sandy. Swamps were overshadowed by tall Cypress trees, moss hanging from their branches like giant gray icicles on Christmas fir. Mosquitoes bred scandalously. Cock roaches colonized the finest homes. Gnats swarmed up nostrils, into eyes, ears and any other available crevasses.

The crusty old Principal, well acclimated, never bothered waving his hands about his head, as we novices did. Periodically he puckered his lips, pushed them to one side and blew a blast of air up the East nostril, then reversed the procedure and shot a stream up the West.

Pine trees once covered the land, and their remains served well. The prime punishment for a delinquent boy was a teacher's bark, "Five stumps!" For an egregious wrong, "Fifteen stumps!" Until those stumps were dug and on exhibit, the sentence held. Resin from a pine stick was so rich one could hold a lighted match close and watch the wood ignite. It was easy in a moment to have a fire roaring in the little tin pot-bellied stoves that heated our rooms.

I taught Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth-Grade English, General Science and Bible. In addition, I had charge of the Boys' Dorm and a preaching appointment in Waycross, 70 miles away by rail. Leaving Valdosta at 1:30 Saturday afternoon, I could get to Waycross, do a bit of calling, study for an adult class at 10:00, preaching at 11:00 and a radio program at 3:30. After evening service and another sermon, I left for Valdosta. Around 1:00 or 1:30 Monday morning I piled in bed until time to get up, catch a bite and make it to an 8:00 class.

The miles between Dasher and Los Angeles were many. So were the letters. Yet, with my load I had little time for loneliness or self-pity. Students responded well, and I found it easy to like them. Clusters crowded around after Bible class and Chapel talks, hungry for more. Such response goes far in soothing a sore ego. However supportive, it could not compensate for the vacuum in a love-sick soul. Graduation came quickly, and, like a flash, I was off to California.

On June 12, 1942, at Alhambra Evelyn and I were married. Though I should have hesitated longer before taking her to Dasher, I saw only blue skies and buttercups. Maybe, I could push through this door to the wider one of teaching in a Christian college.

Evelyn taught Fourth and Fifth Grades. I continued with all my assignments. We lived in the Boys' Dorm, ate in the dining hall and received \$30 a month each. We bought little or nothing. Financially, though, we made it, hoarding only enough to leave, should it become necessary.

Glutton for Punishment

I continued to enjoy teaching and preaching. However, the Principal and I were poles apart on educational goals, as well as, on the heart of the Gospel. We never clashed, but my tongue stayed sore from repeated biting.

Frequently the Administration was in session deciding on student expulsion. Once the crime was bowling on Saturday afternoon. I asked, "Do folks here regard bowling much as we did shooting pool back where I came from?" Then continued, "Perhaps, we should find out how bowling is viewed back in these kids' home town. I've just returned from the West Coast where preachers and elders bowl regularly." With such maneuvers I could save some of the kids, but grew weary playing the role of a dunce.

Two events helped answer the question, "Is this the spot where we should stay?"

The first began on Sunday afternoon just before the radio broadcast. As I did the facial and verbal exercises that help minimize linguistic blunders, I noticed a small kernel behind my

right ear. It was time to go, and I had to ignore it. After the broadcast the swelling had increased. It was now time to get ready for the evening service, and I had to ignore it. By 9:00 both jaws were swollen. It was time to catch the train back to Valdosta, and I had to ignore them. The bus to Dasher was full, and I had to stand up, jolting the entire distance.

By the time I reached campus I was truly sick, suffering alternately fever and chills. After repeatedly sweating through the beds clothes and freezing as Evelyn changed the bed, I was too weak to stand. Until the red line in the thermometer climbed above 105° I remained lucid. Events then blurred into a psychedelic maze. I do recall a teacher's comment, "It will cook his brain." I suspect it did, for part of my memory is gone. A precious part including the ability to see Evelyn's face when we were married and our children at play. It's a smothering feeling, again trapped in darkness.

In the Valdosta Hospital I shared a room with a child who underwent a mastoid operation and a man who had thoracic surgery. The boy prayed all night (beautiful, plaintive prayers) and the man chewed ice. In my muddled mind, I concluded that I would die, and recall how tributaries into the stream of consciousness flowed. "Evelyn, not married a year, will be a widow. People will ask her, 'What killed him?' and she will say, 'The mumps!' How embarrassing! I, at least, would like to die of something more dignified." I thought of the pope suffering so long with the hiccups.

Following embarrassment was fear. Then bargaining. "I'm too young to die. My dreams are unfulfilled. Lord, if You'll let me live, I will give everything I've got to Your work." At last came acceptance. After quoting *Thanatopsis* and *Crossing The Bar*; I said, aloud I'm sure, "I'll count three and go. One... two... three... ...I must have done that wrong. I'll count again." How many times I counted I do not know. At some point I concluded, "Maybe I'm not supposed to go yet" and lapsed into unconsciousness.

In the morning the boy was dead. "Why couldn't it have been that fellow who never evidenced a nodding acquaintance with God? ...Or why couldn't it have been me?" I knew, however, that life is not fair. I'd known that since as a child I saw Mother Wright walk the backyard, not shedding a tear or saying a word. Just walking. Uncle Rex, her only son, lay murdered. As a policeman, he was beaten and shot. Grandpa Wright died before Mother Sue was born. A twelve-year-old daughter, Erin, was also dead. Only one child left, partly paralyzed, and Raymond also stricken with polio. Who under heaven could claim that this suffering is no greater than anyone else's?

During the day every gland in my body, but one, swelled until I fought for air. "If I'm to die, why couldn't it have been last night? Must I, like Alton, choke to death?" By evening I could breathe better, and suspected I might survive. Ability to walk again didn't enter my mind until I discovered it missing. It's strange knowing where your feet should go, ordering them to proceed and watching them, like a stubborn child, disobey. I had to learn to walk again.

It was difficult to carry on with my heavy schedule on a reduced supply of energy. Too, the relation of "faith" to "baptism" was an issue bubbling more vigorously beneath the surface. There was no point trying in Dasher to discuss the issue with any other member of the Faculty.

They were too legalistic to understand the concern. Both Evelyn and I had been baptized quite young, without any grasp of baptism such as that presented by Paul in *Romans 6*. By this time we understood it to be a faith-identification with Christ in His atoning work, and we wanted to experience precisely what those first Christians did in just the way they did it.

Sherman Lanier, Minister of the Valdosta Church of Christ, we found compassionate and helpful. Here, at last, was a kindred spirit. Since we didn't think we had ever been "baptized into Christ," he took us privately and immersed us. I waited for the inflooding joy and power that never came. My conclusion was, "There is no way on earth for me to experience what those first disciples did. Somewhere between immersions I made that faith-identification with my Lord. I cannot take it back and do it over to satisfy either a technicality or passionate longing. I have been given what baptism is designed to bring. I must with gratitude accept it and go on with the task at hand."

A Fiery End

It was 1:30 a.m. when I was awakened by a boy running across campus screaming, "Fire! Fire! The Girls' Dorm is on fire!" As quickly as I could jerk on shirt, pants and shoes, I hurried to the resin-rich, pine structure with flames shooting from the roof. The Principal was in shock, and I found myself in command. After helping a couple of boys move out a piano, I saw that further effort to save anything but the Students was futile. "Everybody outside!" I called. "Line up and make sure that nobody is missing! Every person, make certain your roommate is here!"

"All girls are accounted for." So I was told. Then someone cried that one was missing. "I saw her outside a few minutes ago," another attested. "Maybe, in fear she ran into the woods. And, maybe..., she went back inside for something." Our only concern now was this lovely senior, honor student and Christ like young woman, who had but recently become engaged. My attention was riveted on one brightly-burning object, but I said nothing about it... until it rolled over and a ribcage rose starkly in the flame.

Both the school and community were traumatized. Every sound of the siren sent students screaming. Evelyn had difficulty staying in the Boys' Dorm at night. I wondered what coming incident could leave me a responsibility for which I was neither prepared nor called. Pepperdine was in the Fall launching a graduate program in Religion. I was eager to be part of the first class and for Evelyn to complete her undergraduate work. The choice was made. We submitted our resignations, and when the graduation ceremonies were over headed West.

5

A WONDER-FULL WILDERNESS

Glad... And Not-So-Glad Surprise

As we drove toward Pepperdine happy memories shortened the way in the old Chevrolet and heightened the expectations of return. Graduate school was almost all I hoped it could be. Here was my opportunity to dig more deeply into the question, "What is the nature and function of faith in Christian redemption?" I quickly decided, "'Constructive Christian Thought' will be my major."

W. B. West, Jr.'s courses in "Canonicity" and "The Book of Revelation" were instructive. However, it was Ralph G. Wilburn, my major professor, who spoke most forcefully to my felt need. Fresh from the University of Chicago, where Wilhelm Pauck was his major professor, he intended to see that no student of his left the campus with all the old prejudices firmly intact.

I enjoyed Wilburn's courses in "Christian Evidences" and "World Religions," but it was "Romans," "Historical Christian Thought," "Contemporary Christian Thought" and "Constructive Christian Thought" that sent my blood racing. My plan was simple: "Write all the term papers, so far as possible, on some aspect of 'Faith.'"

While studying "*Romans*," I wrote on "Paul's Conception of Faith" and "Aspects Of The Law And The Gospel In Pauline Thought." While studying "*Historical Christian Thought*," I wrote on "Augustine's Conception Of Faith" and "Luther's Conception Of Faith." While studying "*Contemporary Christian Thought*," I wrote on "Salvation In The Thought Of John Bennett, Nicholas Berdyaev and Reinhold Niebuhr" and "Schleiermacher's Conception Of Grace."

In developing my own thought I wrestled with concepts of "Authority," "God," "Jesus Christ" and "Salvation." Every move was focused on the one objective, a thesis dealing with the concept of "'Faith' In Christian Thought." No longer could I postpone the problem of reconciling Paul and James. No longer could I view faith, repentance, confession and baptism as disjointed, but essential "steps" in "The Plan of Salvation." I had to see them whole. It was what I wanted desperately to do, but it was more painful than I ever anticipated.

The Pillar of Fire, I learned, is not a stationery target. As you sleep, it moves on. As you chase it, it zigzags through the desert. Acres of real estate we'd as soon miss seeing. There's got to be a shorter path to the Promised Land. Sometimes it seems there is. Then one night the Pillar moves. You look, and, horrors! it's headed back into the desert. At least, that's the way it was for me.

Or like ancestor Jacob you're at midnight trying to get home. Certainly, like Jacob at the Jabbok, I wrestled with Paul. 3,400 years later and 10,000 miles distant, my Jabbok snaked its

way through *Romans* 4. Repeatedly I tried to pass through it, only to be caught, dragged back and pinned down. Verses 4 and 5 were incomprehensible. At least, incredible. Why should anyone be paid for work s/he *didn't* do!? Something terribly unfair is going on here!

Verses 7 and 8, the quotation from David, was too much. His talk about “one against whom the Lord will not count sin” was preposterous. Of course, God counts sin, everyone’s sin. Mine included. It would be scandalous not to. Morally reprehensible. The Apostle must mean *after* one obeys, *then* he is forgiven. But, the verses following stood there mocking me. *Not* after circumcision. *Not* after receiving the seal of the covenant. Simply for believing. That he might be the father of *all* who believe.

“It can’t be!” I cried “There is no such person. I simply can’t understand Paul.” It was then as if a voice said firmly, “You understand all right. It’s just that you don’t believe what he says. It’s in direct opposition to what you have held and taught. Whenever you wish, you can put your name right there. ‘Blessed is [Roy Key] to whom the Lord will not count his sin.’ But, you must give up, quit trusting in right beliefs and right deeds. Only in God’s grace freely offered in Jesus Christ. For life or death, you must fall in His hands.”

Crying, “I give up,” I fell into His embrace. And, like Pilgrim at the Cross, felt the burden roll away. “I can be wrong!” I alternately cried and sang... over and over. Not that I wanted to be. Only, that I knew I would be. I could be wrong and still be “right.”²⁶ Here was a revelation: at last I learned what it meant to be “justified by grace through faith.” My troubles were all behind me now.

That’s what I thought until one class period that shook the foundations. I stumbled to my room quaking and exhausted. The solid earth was no longer solid, but reeled as I went. “I can no longer claim that Church of Christ positions on instrumental music and baptism are the only ones possible. I can no longer claim the inerrancy of Scripture. Even Dr. West pointed to a few of its grammatical errors! I can no longer argue that ‘We only’ are the ‘true Church of the Lord, and what we say the Bible says is truly what it says.’”

By my bed I dropped to my knees and cried, “God, I don’t know anything any more!” It was as if the voice of a friendly prosecutor answered, “You don’t know anything?... anything at all?” After a period of silence, I know not how long, I said simply, “I know that You love me and that Jesus died for me.” Then came a flooding of grace that let me affirm, “I know that if the Bible has a bushel basket of errors on every page, it contains the Love Story that captured me. I know that if the Church has a dozen hypocrites on every pew, it gave to me the Book that brought the Love Story.”

It was as if my mother’s voice had been an echo of God’s, “It’s all right. It’s all right. I’m right here.” If I had not already known the reality of “justification through faith,” I could not have survived this ordeal. It was like Daniel’s friends in the fiery furnace. Set free without the smell of smoke on their garments. I realized that formerly I knew only what it means to be

²⁶ “Wrong” in my theology, but still “right” with God.

justified through faith *morally*. Now I grasped what it means to be justified *intellectually*. There is no way but to say in Christ, “Father, into Thy hands I commit *myself*. Not only my past failures, but the ones that dog me now and shall until the end. Not simply my sins, but my abysmal ignorance.”

The days hurried. Though the graduate program was designed for one school year, I decided that nine months was too short for the M.A. that I sought. I lightened my load by one class and spent the extra time in thesis research. I told Dr. Wilburn that my thesis would be entitled “An Exposition of Christian Faith.” He rejected the subject, saying that it was much too broad and would require too much time and energy. I protested that I had been gathering material the entire year and that all my papers contributed directly to it. Finally, he relented.

The year ended with one class yet to take and the thesis unwritten. I worked through the summer on the unfinished task. It was still unfinished. But, Evelyn and I had other commitments. We promised Boyd and Freda Field that we would join them in Juneau, Alaska, to help plant a church in Alaska’s capital city. In late September we arrived and began the long North Winter.

On The Farthest Frontier

The area around Juneau was spectacularly beautiful. The breath-taking Mendenhal Glacier just out of town, “Where ice and lupine meet.” The climate was mild and the people gregarious. Work there once more provided a good change of pace. Personal encounters enriched our lives. It was touching to go into an Indian mother’s home, where the walls, rafters, furnishings, exuded the aroma of smoked fish, and have her accept us so fully as to share a private story about her little boy.

The native culture was matriarchal, at least with regard to the tribal name. “Your father is an Eagle,” the mother explained, “but I am a Raven. So, you will be a Raven, not an Eagle.” The lad protested, “But, I don’t want to be a Raven or an Eagle. I want to belong to Donald Duck’s tribe.” She laughed. So did we. Yet, bracketing the story was the realization of how powerfully the culture colors our thought and alters the ancient order insuring stability.

Two events in Juneau appreciably altered my life. First was the visit to an Independent Church of Christ (Christian) who beat us to Juneau and was, also, planting a congregation. I went simply to extend a gesture of good will. The preaching was less than inspiring. In fact, nothing about the service was. It was the inner struggle that made the event significant.

The singing was accompanied by instrumental music, and I had never worshipped with the instrument. Intellectually I had no problem with the practice. It was a revelation to me that emotionally I had never dealt with the issue. I stood with lips locked tight till tears squeezed through eyelids as tightly shut. Caught in the coils of a sectarian constrictor, I realized that it would surely choke the life from me. Even now I do not know whether or not I ever sang. What

I do know is that I left that place having chosen the dangerous path that would inevitably end in death.²⁷

The second event was Annedale, our firstborn, making her appearance in the Territory and needing medical attention unavailable there. After a little more than a year we had to say “Good-bye” to our Alaska friends and return to the States. Experts disagreed on treatment, and we novices had to make the weighty decision. Handing our baby over to strangers who took her screaming from our arms, we began to know parental heartbreak.

At night, as the terrified child awoke, I bounded to her side, as Mother Sue had to mine. Only, Annedale was too young to understand. No matter how many times I held and patted her, or how often I called, “It’s all right; I’m right here,” she continued to scream. Through tears I couldn’t check, I kept saying, “I love you, and if I could possibly help it, I wouldn’t let anything bad happen to you.” Then realizing that to her the words were meaningless, I thought, “That’s the way it is with God when He tries to reassure me, and I can’t understand. When He can’t get through, it must break His heart”

The Last Hurrah

We returned to the Lower 48 and did receive adequate medical help. In the summer of ‘46 I completed my thesis and took my comprehensive exams, both written and oral. The oral was a defense of the thesis before four men: President Tiner,²⁸ Dean Pullias, Dr. West, and Major Professor Wilburn. I never felt more prepared.

There was, however, an unexpected twist of events that threatened the project. “Brother Key,” West asked, “what does a man have to know to be saved?” I could hardly believe I heard correctly. This is a graduate exam and I am asked a Sunday School question! Quickly I responded, “Not very much. On Pentecost the people knew that they had crucified Christ, that God raised Him from the dead and that they could have forgiveness in His Name.”

Had I stopped there, I could hardly have been attacked. But, I kept going. This man, I sensed, in his place of power was now attempting to coerce me into a bland spouting of orthodox clichés. The man who held a Th.D. from the University of Chicago! Who on returning from the campus would often smile and comment to me privately, “O, Brother Key, there’s just something about the air of a great university!” Then, as soon as some student challenged a remark as “liberal,” he would about-face, protesting, “You should hear me preach. You would think J. D. Tant²⁹ was alive from the dead.”

My debating spirit rose, and I continued, “They didn’t know anything about doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, Inspiration, Premillennialism...” I strung out the list, and he

²⁷ To many this incident will seem silly or pathetic. But, in the eyes of powerful editors and school men my action was compromise, treachery, a course that unchecked could destroy the Church of Christ.

²⁸ Hugh Tiner had succeeded Batsell Baxter as president.

²⁹ A super-orthodox revivalist and debater of renown.

sat silent till I reached “the Virgin Birth.” That pushed his button. “O,” he flashed out, “you don’t believe in the Virgin Birth!” “I didn’t say that,” I shot back. “I said the first Christians didn’t know anything about it. At least, its knowledge was not made a condition of salvation.” He wanted to argue the point. “Show it to me,” I challenged. “Just open the book and point to it. Either it wasn’t preached on Pentecost, or Luke didn’t think it significant enough to report it.”

It was one of those arguments that silences, but does not convince. West couldn’t debate with me, but he could do something else. He was among “the powers and principalities” whom I could not challenge and survive. Wilburn told me that then and there he wanted to flunk me. Tiner and Pullias refused to go along saying, “Oh, W. B. you can’t do that.” So, I passed the comp and received the degree.

The last hurdle was passed. I was now prepared to go back to Lipscomb as part of the faculty. Months previously President A. C. Pullias,³⁰ had contacted me and promised a position as “Associate Professor of Bible and Greek” on condition that I received the Masters Degree. Now I had it and was on my way back to the place that had been Paradise to a lad fresh from Alabama cotton fields.

A letter from the president’s office arrived. I anticipated the final confirmation. It contained a loyalty oath that read in part, “I will oppose Premillennialism, Modernism and the like, and will at all times reflect the ideals of the school.” I was appalled at the demand. For one reared in an anti-creedal cradle and suckled on a diet void of all “man-made rules,” I was terribly torn. There was nothing I wanted more earnestly than to get back to Lipscomb, except to be faithful to the Truth as I knew it.

I was no Premillennialist. I was no Modernist, as I understood the label. Yet, I knew that in many eyes I would be so considered. Anyone who thought another could be saved who believed in Premillennialism, worshipped with an instrument of music and had not been “immersed for remission of sins,” was in orthodox circles clearly “a Modernist.” One who could not affirm a doctrine of “innerancy” was no less than an “infidel.” All anyone had to do was mention my name to W. B. West, Jr., and have his worst fears confirmed.

Having wrestled day and night in prayer, I finally wrote something like this:

Dear President Pullias:

I will be glad to join you as a member of the Lipscomb faculty. It is, indeed, a dream come true. Whereas, I will sign the enclosed statement, I feel that I should make an accompanying comment. I am not a Premillennialist and will point out the reasons for my position in class and out. I am not a Modernist as I understand the definition of the term. And, most assuredly, I will try as hard now as I did when a student there to reflect the ideals of the school.

³⁰ Vice-president when I was a student there, brother of E. V. Pullias of Pepperdine and successor of President Ijams. He, in fact, engineered the coup that ousted Ijams.

My chief aim, though, will be to share with young men and women ‘the News’ too ‘Good’ to choke down. I want to emphasize God’s incredible mercy and our ‘blessed assurance’ in Him. I hope to continue my study and to grow, nor do I expect all my thought ten years from today to be a carbon copy of what it is right now.

I knew I took a chance. The letter would be read sympathetically. The president would think, “That’s the kind of person we want on our faculty. One who is still eager to learn, as well as to teach. One who has a positive message and is enthusiastic about it.” Either that, or he will say, ”I can’t afford to have somebody around here who insists on thinking for himself. We’ve got a tight ship to run, and I must have a loyal crew.”

When Sometimes The Sky Really Falls

After what seemed an eternity the reply came. A single sentence. “Inasmuch as you have failed to meet the requirements, the offer is hereby withdrawn.” Do you know what the end of the world is like? Standing barefoot on the shards of a shattered dream, there is no place for the sole of your bloody foot. Your head pounds, and your breast feels it will explode. You crazily speculate on how you can put everything back together, knowing full well that “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” can’t do it. If ever it is to happen, only the King can. ...But, will He?

I was devastated. In anguish I cried out, “God, I can’t even hear straight. I thought this is what You wanted me to do. Now every hope is dashed. I’m back in the dark again. *Where* is the Light?”

This was not the loss of a job. It was the loss of a career. If I was not sufficiently “sound in the faith” to teach at Lipscomb, I was disqualified everywhere. There was no way in Hades I could return to Pepperdine. And, a letter or phone call from West, or Pullias, would be enough to scotch my chances anywhere else. At age 26 I was road kill. Finished. For six weeks I went where I could and raised funds as they were available for the cause back in Juneau.

Then I had to confront the questions: “What next?” “What now?” I faced three choices: 1) I could give up in despair and leave the ministry; 2) I could swallow not only my pride, but my integrity, and regurgitate “acceptable” messages; 3) I could move farther into the desert and wait for direction. For sanity’s sake, I chose the latter. I don’t know what I am to do next year. Next month. Or, tomorrow. I know only what I must do today. A call came from a mission point on Long Island. We packed all our belongings in a Ford this time and headed for Hempstead.

Exile

On the Island we rented two upstairs rooms. In the small one we slept. In the other we hung a bamboo curtain, dividing the living room from the kitchen and dining area. The range was a hot plate. Evelyn washed dishes in the bathroom. We had a shelf in a refrigerator downstairs on the back porch. From the hospital in Oceanside we brought home our second child, Marc. Then four of us shared these quarters.

At a table in the corner I pounded out letters and manuscripts with the children crawling all over me. I am not sure how or why Evelyn put up with it. A missionary back from France, visiting in our quarters, involuntarily (I think) expressed surprise, then added, “We have it much better than you do.”

Israel was a captive in Assyria. Judah an exile in Babylon. John a political prisoner on Patmos. We, however, were willing exiles, learning that political power, however it is exerted, can almost break the will and crush the soul. It takes great gobs of grace just to hang on. To hang on long enough for some measure of confidence to come stealing. Some measure of courage to stiffen the spine. Some measure of resolution to steel the will. Some measure of strength to move the muscles to action.

My strategy for future ministry in the Church of Christ slowly took shape. I would write, and I would send the articles out broadside. In addition to working with the fledgling congregation, I would: 1) craft what I considered cutting-edge articles and see if I could get them in the most-prestigious church-related publications; 2) I would take a few courses over at Union Theological Seminary to continue my education. We were so near Manhattan that it seemed a shame not to take at least a couple of classes.

Doors swung open. To the *Gospel Advocate* I sent an article entitled “The Righteousness of God.” It was printed. Quite a stir followed, with one group of readers sending to the editor words of thanks, while others questioned its doctrinal “soundness.” The renowned G. C. Brewer was nominated to review it. When he gave a hearty commendation, it appeared that I had made the first hurdle in style and was out of the block running well.

I continued sending material to the *Gospel Advocate*, *Firm Foundation*, and journals of lesser light, but it was the *Gospel Broadcast* that invited me to be a Staff Writer. After submitting a cluster of essays on various themes,³¹ I fleshed out the earlier version of “The Righteousness of God” and made it a series of some 15 or more articles. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Yet, grumblings sounded in the distance.

At Union I was accepted conditionally. If I did good work, all Pepperdine graduate courses would be credited. No problem there. I enjoyed the theology introduction by President Henry P. Van Dusen and relished the inspired preaching of Paul Scherer. It was, however, the “Old Testament Introduction” of James Muilenberg that lifted me out of my seat. Every session was an hour of worship. The ancient text sprang out like an uncaged lion. Those primitive figures with funny clothes and strange names turned squarely toward us... wearing our faces!

More than anyone else I had known, James Muilenberg reminded me of E. H. Ijams. Their theology was vastly different, but they were inbreathed by the same Spirit. I joyfully sat at

³¹ “The Mystery of God’s Love,” “An Envoy For Christ,” “All To Him I Owe,” “Liberty For What?” “Are You Hungry?” “Light Shall Shine Out of Darkness,” “We Preach Not Ourselves,” “More Than a Memory,” “On Facing Dark Days.” It was the article on “New Testament Use of The Word ‘Church.’” that caused the biggest stir, though I had carefully submitted a reprint by M.C. Kurfees from an ancient editorial page of the *Gospel Advocate*.

the teacher's feet. When he assigned the class a paper on "The Composition of the Pentateuch," I began enthusiastically to write. Here I was, off in exile, and I could say whatever I pleased with no ecclesiastical Gestapo waiting to haul me in.

That was my first thought. My second was, "That puts you under greater responsibility. You know what the 'Fundamentalist' and 'Liberal' views are. You must be sure to deal honestly and fully with both sides. You must do twice the work of the other students." At once I went to Muilenberg and asked, "Can I use the great Princeton Fundamentalists in my bibliography?" I had in mind William Henry Green, Robert Dick Wilson and J. Gresham Machen. Then I asked in particular, "May I use James Orr's *Problem of the Old Testament*?"³²

Muilenberg smiled and replied, "Of course. We need Christians to write our texts, and Orr was a Christian. He was more conservative than I, but you must simply weigh the evidence, make your case and be able to support it." That was all I could ask. I knew now without a wisp of a wonder that Christians could be both "Conservative" and "Liberal." Ijams and Muilenberg were living examples. At such proof positive I rejoiced.

For the paper I read not only from the scholars mentioned, but from the only Church of Christ treatise I knew, *Bible Vs. Modernism: A Compendium of Sundry Critical Hypotheses and Their Refutation*.³³ To me it dodged vital questions and dealt with others at a surface level. Orr was scholarly and solid. Yet, his own arguments proved more than he allowed. He acknowledged a two-source document including both a Priestly and a more-ancient Yahwist-Elohistic source.³⁴ Dr. Green, while defending Mosaic authorship, did not rule out preexistent sources.

My conclusion was that God has worked with people wherever they are, at their own stage of intellectual and spiritual development. He has used the events of history as vehicles of revelation. To spiritually sensitive souls He has given glimpses of glory. Refusing to reduce them to *automata* so that they parrot His words and mechanically obey His commands, He confronts them and to their imperfect vision discloses His working in yesterday and dream for tomorrow.

Only that they may enter the Kingdom in the *freedom of His children* has He allowed His people to travel the long, hard way. Only as they see His pillar of fire and cloud moving along

³² Orr was, I believe, a Briton and editor of the series of *Fundamentals* that gave rise to the term "Fundamentalist."

³³ Charles H. Roberson and Allison N. Trice. Roberson's name was the one usually attributed as author. He was on the faculty of Abilene Christian College. Allison may have been, but I can not now recall. J. W. McGarvey had been a better critic of "higher criticism," but we gave him to the Disciples, because he wouldn't make instrumental music a test of fellowship.

³⁴ Though these scholars were excessively cautious, at times Pfeiffer, Eiselen, Driver, Oesterley and Robinson and others seemed needlessly radical. What we have is a historical document from the Faith-Community bearing news of God's Mighty Acts of deliverance. We can examine it like a coroner cutting up and putting together again a cadaver. We can examine it like an explorer lost in the jungles who comes upon a native carrying in his head a picture of the way home. Will he regard the person as disposable, or rejoice that he not only carries, but is himself, the treasure in an earthen vessel?

this twisted maze do they find meaning in it all. And when they do, they seek every available means to share it. One mighty means has been the pen.

The Hempstead congregation had by this time purchased property on Dutch Broadway and moved to Elmont. Prospects looked good for solid growth. With this opening challenge met, without funds to continue in Union, with the plea from Robert Box to come to Chicago and help build a new church in Harvey, we left our friends on Long Island. In 1950, with a heart full of happy memories and a small two-wheel trailer carrying our belongings, we headed for Chicago. At 45 miles an hour we made our way Westward... once again.

6

WITHIN THE HEATED FURNACE

Again The Fire

Box and I were classmates and friends both at Lipscomb and Pepperdine. He was now Minister of Cornell Avenue Church of Christ, the mother church in Chicago, and still the most prestigious. He wanted me to work with him there and help with a mission in Harvey. Following the loneliness on Long Island, such prospects were inviting.

Shortly after arriving and moving my library into the church building, it burned. In the night. Half my books were destroyed, together with files of sermons, term papers and my Master's Thesis. In dark moments I had wondered what I would do if ever such a blow should fall. I was thankful that no lives were lost, but crushed at the destruction of years of labor. The structure was under insured, and the congregation faced a financial crisis. My situation had to be reassessed.

Ultimately I said, "I seem destined to begin again... and again. I've done it before; I must do it again. If all I have to offer was on those pages now ash, I deserve to fail." I got a job as a file clerk at the Illinois Central Railway Hospital. The salary, though a pittance, helped us survive. Air at work was blue not only with cigarette smoke, but with theological language used in a non-theological context. At noon I walked across to Jackson Park to let the air blow through my lungs and brain, cleaning out whatever it could.

It was here that I learned work could be worship. Labor turned into a "Hallelujah Chorus." I knew that anybody with normal back bone and nearly normal I.Q could lug boxes of files around and place them in the right slots. Anybody who could read could check the results of blood pressure tests administered to the Engineers, Conductors, Brakemen and Firemen of the IC Railroad. When results exceeded the cutoff mark, these men were called in for further tests.

"Why am I doing this?" I asked. Conclusion: "I'm working to feed and clothe my family. I'm working at this hospital in order to serve the church at Harvey. People need to be able to

travel. They need to travel in safety. Those responsible for their safety need protection from strokes. I am working to serve God and my neighbors. Then, I will give it my best and offer it up in thankful praise.”

It was Paul’s counsel to slaves that helped most. “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”³⁵ That didn’t leave much out. “Word” and “deed” about summed up my life, certainly my work at the IC Railway Hospital. I recognize that most of my waking hours were spent not in the church building, but in another building complex. If my life was dedicated to God, it had to be done there.

If our “bodies” are the “sacrifice” offered to God, which is our “spiritual worship,”³⁶ then the major liturgy is performed in the world. It is the symbolic offering of what we do all week that we bring to gathered worship. Here hours of work, the sweat of our backs and brains, are squeezed down into bills or coins that we offer to God in glad thanksgiving. Work is twice turned into worship: 1) out on the job, 2) in the midst of the People of God gathered in celebrative praise.

It was a tough lesson to learn, but I discovered that everything is part of the Curriculum.

Three Who Wouldn’t Bow -- Then Four

It was good to join two friends, colleagues and classmates from Lipscomb and Peppering days, Robert Box and James Warren. As kindred spirits in “the windy city,” we relished our hearty discussions on doctrinal matters and the future of the Church of Christ. We banded together in sunshine and in storm. When “the powers that be” ignored us and when they showed up to mete out judgment to us.

Foy E. Wallace, Jr.,³⁷ blew into town for a week of meetings. We attended a few, but found ourselves in disagreement with nearly everything he said and much of what he did. His humiliation of a young mother with her crying baby, ordering them out of the building. His caricature of those who emphasized “love” as the spirit God both displays and desires. “Luv! Luv!” he snarled, pushing his chin upward, curling his lips downward, “I’m sick of these pantywaists that talk about ‘luv’ all the time. What the Bible teaches is ‘love of the *truth*.’”

Box expressed disapproval. Warren and I supported him. The three of us were marked as “soft on the issues.” Box used the Cornell Avenue Church newsletter to write a series of articles on the nature of the Gospel and Christian attitudes toward those with whom we disagree. In July 1952 Warren issued a booklet entitled *The Heresy Of Legalism*. A hard-hitting tract in the style of the Prophet Amos. It aroused national outrage, both from the Wallace followers and those considerably less pugilistic.

³⁵ *Colossians* 3:16.

³⁶ *Romans* 12:1-2.

³⁷ Former Editor of *the Gospel Advocate*, No. 1 debater in the Church of Christ, alternately patronizing and insulting to those about him, including those who met him on the debate platform.

Joining the three of us was one who came to be the elder statesman among us. J. P. Sanders was blind, incredibly optimistic, an eloquent preacher, profound student, able administrator and builder *par excellence*. It was a delight to be in his company. He invariably greeted one by extending his right hand, smiling and saying, "I'm glad to see you," Then, feeling a lapel (or tie), added, "That a new jacket (or tie) you're wearing today." Regular readers kept him abreast of secular and ecclesiastical affairs.

We three younger men were still doing graduate work. Box enjoyed Daniel Day Williams and Charles Hartshorne at the University of Chicago. Warren delighted in G. Ernest Wright and Frank M. Cross at McCormick Theological Seminary. I relished Floyd Filson and Joseph Haroutunian at McCormick, as well as lesser lights at Lutheran Seminary. Sanders was the lone unrepentant liberal, having done his work earlier at Vanderbilt. Theology meant little to him. Christian action was everything. Soon he not only had a new plant erected in Rockford, Illinois, but, also, a children's home in Valpariso, Indiana.

Warren's booklet found its way into student groups of the church-related colleges. At our last Regional Assembly Dr. Neal Buffaloe, a former Church of Christ minister and professor at Lipscomb, said, "You will never know how much your little booklet on *The Law of Christ* did in changing attitudes in the Church of Christ." He observed that it and Warren's *Heresy of Legalism* were dynamite among the students at these schools...and even among a few professors. "Here's something you ought to read," one whispered, glancing about to make sure nobody watched, while passing along a copy of the forbidden work.

Since Warren's work was criticized as displaying "a bad spirit," and not dealt with on the basis of the argument, I decided to write something that on that score could not be faulted. In July 1954 I issued a tract on *The Law of Christ*. Result? A fierce fire storm. While the charge of "bad spirit" was not hurled, the more serious charge of "false doctrine" was. No less a luminary than G. C. Brewer was again called to write a review. While the theology was fundamentally the same as that in the article on "The Righteousness of God," pressures now were so intense that Brewer felt it imperative to issue a negative review. He did.

The "unsound" quartet now from Chicago was written up in church publications from one coast to the other. Somehow, though, Box and Sanders, not having been widely published, were not tarred with the same brush as Warren and I. Yet, only the silent questioners henceforth had anything to do with any of us. Slowly the wounded were herded into a smaller and smaller corral. The smell of blood was in the air.

Alone -- But Not For Long

With the handwriting on the wall, Warren left for an archaeological dig in Palestine. Box entered Claremont to work on his Th.D. and later teach at Pepperdine. Sanders moved to Missoula, Montana. I stayed on to receive the influx of new ministers taking their places. Most of them came with a mandate to "clean up the mess in the Chicago area." The "mess" meant me. Most, but not all. "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

Warren was followed at Northwest by Donald Anderson, a particularly bright and open soul. Bill Baker at Brookfield was, also, a kindred spirit. So was Don Horn at West Chicago. Others whose names and faces I can no longer recall were cautious, but not hostile. It became clear to them all, however, that the Elders in those congregations had no intention of keeping in their pulpits preachers who did not hew strictly to the party line.

Anderson soon left town for Lexington Theological Seminary. On returning to Chicago and picking up a Ph.D. in Social Ethics at the University, he taught at Eureka College a few years, then left to give himself to Appalachian ministry at Berea College. After working awhile on a doctorate at Vanderbilt, Baker went to the Disciples and then on to the Episcopalians. Horn and the others dropped out of sight.

If there is a special nook in heaven for those who serve tuna fish sandwiches to their enemies, it will be reserved for Evelyn. One after another the other clerics came “just to get acquainted and clear up a few matters.” After a saccharin chit-chat the two final, but inevitable, questions were, “Do you teach that baptism is essential for salvation?” and “Do you believe instrumental music in worship is sinful?” These usually came just after 12:00 Noon. Evelyn could judge how far along the questioning was and have the tuna ready by 12:30. Somehow these fellows seemed oblivious to *I Corinthians 5:11*.

A few of the interrogators took notes “to be sure our facts are straight.” The notes were then forwarded to the editors of those papers looking for a smoking gun. It seemed not to matter that I could destroy the pat arguments presented. The search was not for a full and fair discussion, but for incriminating evidence that could be turned over to the official “keepers of orthodoxy.”

At length the ministers approached as a group. “Will you meet with us and discuss these issues?” At the risk of being considered “an idiot” by friend and foe, I said “Yes.” Though I would have done so under any circumstance, I had the intuition that they were beginning that fateful inner struggle. Ironically, it’s just what occurred. In time a half-dozen of them were eager colleagues and warm friends. One overheard the comment to another, “It’s not Key’s arguments that convince; it’s Key.” I was cursed and blessed in a single comment. With my debating past, I considered the arguments unanswerable, but should have known that to the minds-made-up group, that’s all irrelevant.

Unfortunately, a number of the younger ministers did not keep their wives abreast of their own spiritual pilgrimage, and the tragic result was that their marriages fell apart. Some were so disillusioned that turned away from organized religion altogether. A few joined the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Each was living proof of my corruptive influence.

More Wood On The Fire

Elders from area congregations “invited” me to a public gathering where I would undergo questioning. In Churches of Christ there is no authority for “heresy trials.” Yet, to refuse such an invitation is tantamount to taking the Fifth Amendment. I agreed. When the crucial question

came, “Do you teach baptism as ‘essential’ to salvation?” a hush still as death came over the crowd. “I do not,” was my reply. “Nowhere does the Scripture use that term. To insist on this creedal test is go beyond Scripture.”

That was all the inquisitors wanted or needed to hear. You could feel the electric charge and the unspoken triumphant note, “What more do we need. Have we not heard the condemnation out of his own mouth?”

The quick oral retort was, “Then, what do you do with *Mark 16:16*?” “I accept it. I teach it. I practice it.” “But,” the interrogator cried, “It affirms that baptism is *essential!*” “That’s your term,” I responded, “not Scripture. What the Bible affirms is that baptism is *effective* in its divinely-appointed ministry. What this verse clearly declares is, ‘Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved.’ You push past that to affirm, ‘Whoever has *not* been baptized *shall be damned.*’ Those are not Mark’s words, but yours. I choose not to shove God off the Judgment Throne and hand down this pronouncement. Yet, you not only do so, but insist that I act as accomplice or be disfellowshipped. I will stay with the Scripture and decline to bow to unscriptural pressure.”

I was challenged, by whom I no longer remember, to debate the topic: “The spirit of a command may be realized where the letter is violated.” Grand Avenue Church was packed for the event. The crowd included folks from the adjoining states. Pat Hardeman, an up-and-coming champion of the faith, working on his Ph.D. at the University of Illinois, was present. So was Hugo McCord, professor from Oklahoma Christian College.³⁸

During an open discussion following formal presentations, I was asked, “Can the spirit of baptism be realized where the letter is not?” Here again was that ultimate question on which I was to be impaled, but I felt that my answer must be forthright. “In *Romans 2:25-29* Paul says plainly that true circumcision (the sign of the covenant) is not an outward mark in the flesh, but is ‘circumcision of the heart.’ If he were here tonight, he would as surely say that of baptism. It is as possible for one as for the other.”

It did not matter that I appealed to Jesus’ treatment of the Sabbath, His attitude toward dietary laws and Paul’s handling of the circumcision problem, I had said that one could be saved without immersion, and that was the unpardonable sin. Both Hardeman and McCord left to publicize in the journals for which they wrote my rank apostasy. From then on Hardeman took it on himself to complete the task of full discreditation.

Seven-Fold Hotter

Somewhere during these tumultuous events the remaining ministerial friends either left or were asked to leave. Henry Walderon, who first fought me bitterly, followed Sanders at Rockford and stayed around to offer moral support in every possible way. Yet, he couldn’t last

³⁸ I cannot recall if he was president at that time.

there, and finally left to sell insurance and church furniture. Eventually he became a school counselor.³⁹

In 1955 we had moved from Harvey to the West Suburban Church in Berkeley. There those who had not lost faith in me rallied, and I was permitted to serve a few years longer. We built a new building and grew extremely close to one another.⁴⁰ Many of the members were, I feared, loyal to me rather than to the Gospel I preached. They resented the charges Hardeman made regularly through *The Preceptor* and other papers. “Modernist!” “Unbeliever!” “Without respect for the Word of God!” An anonymous charge was that I left my family and ran off to Texas with another.

Charges such as the last I ignored. My presence should itself be adequate evidence. The doctrinal charge I rejected and carried on a lengthy exchange with Hardeman in *The Preceptor* and a shorter in the *Gospel Guardian*. However, my responses were never printed until he had them long enough to issue a reply in the same edition of the paper. Pat often wrote with his shift key down. Deciding that the editors had no intention of providing a fair forum, I finally stopped sending replies.

As desperate as when I wrote President Ijams 20 years earlier, I wrote B. C. Goodpasture, editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, along with a number of Schoolmen, explaining my situation, laying bare my doctrinal positions and pleading for continued fellowship. I received not one response. The realization finally hit home: I had no home. Unless I confessed sin and repudiated my writings, I should go. Quickly. Otherwise I would only create a faction centered in our congregation.

The fire raged within. Not the urgency to speak, but to quit speaking. The compulsion to accommodate versus the compulsion to stand fast till the death. Questions tumbled over one another. “Who said this was to be easy?” “Is not the center of our faith a Cross?” “Did you enlist only for the parade?” “Have you heard the words, ‘You’re dismissed?’”

I had to say, “No.”

³⁹ Sanders stayed with the Disciples. Box left Pepperdine and the ministry to teach at San Diego State. Warren became a fund-raiser and nominal Methodist. Great talents lay rejected as rubble.

⁴⁰ Some fifteen to eighteen of us began five years ago to get together once a year for a reunion.

7

THE BOOK I BEGAN

Having no permission to leave my post, I decided to write the book, *Fire in My Bones*. Here is the way it began...

CHAPTER I MY PEOPLE

A People to Be Reckoned With

You don't know my people, not very many of you. But you will know about them before long. They are a People to be reckoned with.

Churches of Christ compose one of the fastest-growing religious bodies in the world. When I began my ministry 20 years ago we counted our membership at 250,000. We had 3 senior colleges, 2 of which were accredited, 2 unaccredited junior colleges, a few high schools here and there and 4 orphans' homes.

Today this group has about 2,000,000 members. Some estimates top that figure. It has 4 fully-accredited colleges, with another 3 approaching accreditation. 3 schools offer graduate degrees in Bible and Religion. There are 8 children's homes, 4 homes for the aged, a national weekly radio and television program and an innumerable number of publishing companies.

Churches of Christ now have over 15,000 congregations in the United States, with missionaries in many parts of the Orient, Africa, Europe, South America, Alaska, Hawaii and Mexico -- nearly 40 countries in all. A favorite cry has come to be, "The Church is on the March!" And it is.

Teachers and ministers are now trained in the nation's leading educational institutions: Some hold doctorates from Harvard, Yale, Universities of Chicago, Southern California and Texas, as well as theological seminaries such as Union, McCormick, Southern Methodist, Southern Baptist, Texas Christian University and others.

You will hear from these people -- and before long. The current rate of growth may increase in the decade ahead. If it does, this group will become one of America's largest communions.

A People With A Mission

There are definite reasons for the growth of our religious body. In a day of enervating relativities it holds up absolutes. In a time of indecision it calls for action. In an age of meaninglessness it is a people with a mission.

A great many of these folks call themselves “Churches of Christ,” but most, having lost sight of their fathers’ plea of uniting Christians from all sects on the basis of the Bible alone, think and speak of themselves as “The Church of Christ.” Often they refer to themselves as “the Lord’s Church,” in contrast to “the churches of men.”

Here is a people the larger part of which regards itself in the same light that Roman Catholics regard their church. It is *the* Church. It is Christ’s Body, of which He is Savior. It alone is faithfully following New Testament teachings. It alone is the ark of safety, and it has the tremendous responsibility of single-handedly carrying out Christ’s Commission to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” It has no intention of backing away from the task. “With God all things are possible.”

Here is a people living in the midst of earthquake times who do not propose merely to hold their own against the attacks of unchristian philosophies. They are “on the March!” Let Satan and his hosts beware. Let all who are unafraid, all who are not wedded to “the doctrines of men,” all who are willing to stand up and be counted, come along and enlist in God’s Army.

You see why a people like this must be reckoned with. They are aflame with evangelistic passion, exuding an enviable air of authority. Exhibiting supreme confidence in their doctrines, they are willing to mount the forensic platform and debate the issues with Atheist, Modernist, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal or anybody else who will manfully and publicly defend his peculiar tenets.

Ferment of Law And Love

There is, however, more to the picture. Churches of Christ not only wage war against foes without. Always there are those within who would disturb the peace of Zion. Since there is no official hierarchy, anyone who chooses can begin a crusade in the name of “New Testament Christianity.” How much damage or good he does depends on the nature of his cause and the size of his following.

The wineskins of the faith are growing brittle, but fermentation goes on, swelling and subsiding in a way that exerts extreme pressure upon them. In the past there have been ruptures over organization to do mission work, the introduction of Sunday Bible Classes, the use of individual cups in communion and many issues of as much or as little consequence.

Today the issue of “Church Cooperation” is the ferment that threatens to burst the skins and spill this heady wine. When churches contribute to the national weekly “Herald of Truth”

radio and television program to get “the true gospel” before the nation, are they being faithful to New Testament teaching? Is there scriptural authority for any organizational efforts larger than the congregation? Are their contributions to orphans’ home, old folks’ homes and Christian schools going beyond Biblical authorization? These are a few questions of paramount importance at present.

You say that you are not interested in such legalistic disputes. No, I suppose not -- unless you happen to care about those who are involved in them. Not unless somehow they affect you personally. The tedious technicalities of the courtroom do, however, root you in your chair when defendant and plaintive alike are your brothers.

The world starves for souls who care. The Church waits for hearts whose compassion is without calculation. But we cannot care for those whose attitudes and actions stir within us contempt. This is why I want you to know my people. I want you to care. I want you to know there is much more taking place in these churches than disputes over “tweedle dum” and “tweedle dee.” God is in our midst, and with a living God around there is always an explosive situation at hand.

I want you to know that there are numbers of souls in our midst who are not narrow and bigoted. They love their brethren and are willing to share their sins and be counted among them. Their path is not easy. They do not ask that it be. They ask, rather, that they be used of God. They do not like the sectarianism that we condemn but display. They know that to point people beyond sectarian exclusiveness they must speak as one of them, not as an outside critic hurling charges that personally cost them nothing.

When Talk Is Not Cheap

Sometime souls are forced to cry out against the formalism and exclusivism of the group. I have been in that number. Certainly, there were times when we condemned “self-righteousness” in a most self-righteous fashion. We are all sinners, and even our highest motives are ever marred by pride. At least some of us knew that. We had to speak anyway, knowing that the word judged us all alike. We felt a little of what Jeremiah suffered when he cried,

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!
O, the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly;
I cannot keep silent;
for I hear the sound of the trumpet,
the alarm of war.⁴¹

These souls faced opposition, bitter opposition. They knew that they would. They did not hope the price for speaking out would be cheap. They only hoped that God would give them

⁴¹ *Jeremiah 4:19.*

a love big enough to suffer without growing cynical or bitter. When the pressures became suffocating, they thought on God's chiding of Jeremiah:

If you have raced with men on foot,
and they have wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?
And if in a safe land you fall down,
how will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?⁴²

They laughed and said to one another, "Cheer up, the worst is yet to come." It was.

The battle went hard. Many fell. One or two laid down their lives. Heart attacks, you know. Others felt the struggle to be useless. The sectarian and obscurantist nature of the group they considered too formidable a barrier ever to break through. Issues of life and death hang over the land and our world. We cannot afford, they concluded, to waste time arguing over trivialities.

Others were in their hearts able to work out a compromise between the ideal and the possible. Seeking earnestly to realize the ideal *as it is possible*, they take whatever short steps they can, not pushing ahead so fast as to precipitate a crisis. They recognize themselves as men "of unclean lips," dwelling "in the midst of a people of unclean lips." They live in perpetual penitence and tension, hoping, praying, working as they can for a brighter day.

Such souls believe that if the Church on earth is ever one, it will have to include this fellowship, along with the others. Working for Christian unity within narrow confines, they still work for the oneness of God's people. Too, they believe that the great questions of Biblical authority and the Church have not yet been satisfactorily solved. They believe that "Churches of Christ" continue to point to a Biblical grounding that most liberal Christians have surrendered, but which can be lost only at our peril.

You should know that the wine in "Church of Christ" skins is not old, safe and sweet. There is a turbulent potential here. Potential for untold good. Potential for frightful harm. I pray that it will be for good, and I want you to pray with me.

I say this not because I think it would be nice for us all to pray for one another. I say it because I am desperate. I am against the wall. God has driven me to my knees as never before, and I need others with me here, clutching Christ by the hem of the garment.

Let me tell you a little of how I came to this place, because I want you to understand and to care. Then you will be able to pray intelligently and powerfully. Otherwise I do not think that you can.

⁴² *Jeremiah 12:5.*

Unfinished Plea

Here my text broke off. There were notes. There was, in fact, an almost complete outline, part of which I have followed.

FIRE IN MY BONES

I. MY PEOPLE

A People To Be Reckoned With
A People With A Mission
Ferment of Law And Love
When Talk Is Not Cheap

II. PILLAR OF FIRE BY NIGHT

Light In My Darkness
Blaze At Midnight
Finger Toward The Fire

III. INSIDE THE HEATED FURNACE

Fuel For The Flame
Melted Or Hardened?
Smell Of Smoke
Seven-Fold Hotter
Burning, But Unconsumed

IV. ASHES AND EMBERS

Dying Flame
God's Breath On Ashes
Sealed Lips And Burning Heart

V. EDGE OF THE ABYSS

Not By Sight
Dizziness And Anxiety
Expendable

VI. ON OUR KNEES

There is where I ended, on my knees with the issue unresolved, the future cloud-covered and the sky lowering.

Looking backward, I'm certain that I wanted to speak to the larger Church. I wanted those in other communions to see a different face on the Church of Christ. One they could recognize as human. One that reflected not only arrogance, but agony. One that they would not merely note, but for which they could care... and pray.

I wanted to say to the Church of Christ, “I am trying my best to be a bearer of ‘Good News,’ not ‘bad.’ It is not my intent to tear down, but to build up. I certainly am not in the business of running around kicking crutches from under cripples. I point to our *real support* in Christ our Lord, the security that no assault on earth or in hell can destroy.”

It is what we all want.
What we all need.
Without which we die.

The manuscript was left unfinished. I had miscalculated the depth of the antagonism in such adversaries as Hardeman. My intention was to keep pressing the battle, but not to the point of rupture. The deluge of criticism, however, became a flood that washed away all moorings.

Fleeing Temptation

“Go ahead and preach as you have, but don’t put anything on paper,” some counseled. “Just be quiet for the present, and maybe the tumult will die,” others offered. Knowing that I was not nearly as liberal as some who followed such advice, I began to chafe inside. “How can they live with themselves,” I wondered, “and play these games?” “Wait a minute!” came the inner warning, “you are not the Judge of these people anymore than of any others. You must not, you cannot, you shall not become resentful and bitter!”

My eyes smarted. My stomach ached. My heart raced. I was born and bred in this communion. I wanted to live and die there. It was my calling. My reason for being. Ultimately, I identified with some garbled words from Paul, “I would go to hell for my people..., but, lo, I turn to the Gentiles.”⁴³ I could not give up the ministry. I was fearful that neither I nor anyone else could shout across the gulf. Yet, I must try. Then, came the next hardest question I ever faced, “How can I tell my parents?” I was afraid it would kill them and afraid that if it did, it would kill me.

One night I went down on my knees and said, “God, I’m not getting up till You give me some kind of answer.” How long I stayed there I do not know. I do know that I never got the clear word I sought, only an assurance that “it will be all right.” It was not all I wanted, but it was all I got. In that assurance I had to act. But first, I had to write that heart-wrenching letter... shared here.

⁴³ *Romans 9:1-3; Acts 13:46.*

7

LETTER TO MOTHER AND DADDY

The Last Letter I Ever Wanted To Write

Dear Mother Sue and Daddy,

Crises come to us individually and as families. Some of them are terribly painful, but all of them are guided by God for good, if we permit. Together we have weathered many a storm, but one is coming now which is unusually fierce. I shall try to tell you how it has risen. But that is a long story, and I want to start at the beginning.

When we were children at home, times were hard; but even when the rain didn't come and the cotton was stunted and the corn burned, we were not anxious. We were sure that our parents could take care of everything. Since we believed that you loved us, we were secure in your care.

God must have given us parents that we might learn love and obedience, learn better how to think of Him and find security in Him. Afterward when life brings change, disappointment, disapproval and finally death, we may face them all in the knowledge of a Father's concern.

You made it possible for your children to find in God a Father who understands, cares, forgives, and empowers. Often, in trying to picture our security in His love, I have said, "If my Daddy or my Mother were God, I would not be afraid."

Undoubtedly, our family relation helped to reveal the personal kinship of love as the highest tie possible. It is as high as the heavens above the legal relation -- that of one citizen to another, or of the criminal before the judge. The steadfast love existing between husband and wife, or children and parents, is not in deadly peril of crumbling at each moment. It was a long, long time, though, before I came to see that this intimate, personal, family relation exists between us and God.

The road was long and torturous as it led me to the happy realization that we stand or fall before God not on the basis of code-keeping, but on the basis of loving trust. It was long and torturous because we were taught at church and through our religious papers that the Gospel of Christ is another *law* in the same sense as the Law of Moses. We were taught that we stood condemned or accepted before God on the basis of a complete keeping of that law. So, you see, though I was secure in the belief of your love, I was far from sure about my relation to God.

Many a time I dreamed of the Judgment Day, but never did I dream that I was saved. Always I was lost. Still do I remember those nightmares and how happy I was to wake up, finding that you had already covered the distance between our beds and were there in the dark reassuring me. Yet, I could not believe that if I died before morning God would take me home

with Him. Perhaps I knew that I didn't deserve His salvation. While I didn't deserve your love either, I knew it was there, anyway. That was the difference.

How could I be so sure of my relation to you and so uncertain of my relation to God? I think it must have been because you both knew your love of us better than you knew God's love for you. Our relation at home was one thing, our relation to God something entirely different. You, too, had been taught that the law is supreme and that its slightest infraction endangers the soul. Our family, and many of our brethren, were born and bred in this atmosphere of dark and suffocating fear.

While I was still at home I began to puzzle over the lack of assurance in the hearts of our people generally, as contrasted with the glad certainty in the hearts of New Testament Christians. Our brethren seemed to know *what* they believed, but they never smiled confidently and declared, "I know *whom* I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day: (2 Timothy 1:12). It was all quite strange for people who kept insisting, "We are New Testament Christians."

One day as I read an editorial from the *Gospel Advocate* on "The Gift of the Holy Spirit," I was shocked and deeply troubled, for I could see at that age that our leading brother had failed to come to grips with the Scriptures. I kept asking myself, "Do our brethren not know all the truth? Is it possible that other religious teachers and preachers could know more about some things?"

Such painful questions I tried to repress, attempting to find security in maintaining that our brethren knew *almost* all the truth, at least all that was really vital. Deep down inside, though, I feared that our hearts were less sure than our tongues.

At Lipscomb and Pepperdine I studied hard to find what it was that early Christians had and we had missed. I enrolled in some Bible courses not required and audited still others, aside from my private study. Not that I was unsure about "The Church of Christ" and what it stood for, but because I was groping for a surer personal grasp of God. I saw brethren full of anxiety, and I felt that I couldn't help them as I ought until I had won victory over that same paralyzing fear.

More and more I studied the books of Romans and Galatians, for in them I caught gleams of light in the dark. Fresh air right from the windows of heaven seemed to blow in my face. I would catch my breath, wondering if we really had a gospel as good as Paul seemed to say. It was too good to be true.

Nightmares came no more. My dreams were haunted with glory. As Paul described the "righteousness" which God gives to the man who has none of his own but does have "faith in Jesus Christ," my heart thrilled as it had never thrilled before. Here was one who had not done the necessary work required by the law (I knew this one to be myself), but he *had* believed in Christ. Here was my certainty. Though unworthy of God's gift of redeeming love, I knew that my whole trust was in Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord.

What did Paul say of this one? He quoted David's pronouncement of blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

Blessed are those whose iniquities are
forgiven, and whose sins are covered;
Blessed is the man against whom the Lord
will not reckon his sin. (*Romans 4:6-8*)

My heart almost burst with joy. My eyes and soul spilled over in gratitude. To think that I was really accepted not on the basis of my perfect obedience to law, but through faith in Jesus Christ -- the thought was incredibly glorious!

At the moment I was not concerned about arguments over "faith versus works." I needed no reminder that true faith lures one to work far beyond all legal demands. I was seeking no easy way to pardon, a way devoid of effort. Gladly I would have worked till I dropped dead, if only I could be sure of God's loving acceptance. Now I had it as His gracious Gift in Christ.

On the basis of being perfectly *right* in understanding and life I knew myself lost. Now, however, I knew of one (the believer in Christ) to whom God would not reckon his sins. Here was a standing with God that did not depend on one's perfection. I found peace in the midst of my imperfection. I knew that faith was far more than believing the facts of the Gospel. I could never have peace through that kind of faith. I knew that it was commitment in trust to Christ as Savior, and a full reliance upon Him, without stopping to hold up a single trait or deed of self.

Many, many truths had to be related to this central one that "in Christ" "through faith" we stand in right relation to God. I had to study the Scriptural relation of repentance to faith, of baptism, of grace, of works, of the Holy Spirit, of growth in Christ likeness. But in all I could see that God deals with us as persons, not puppets, as sons-in-love, not sons-in-law.

My groping for God was really His grasping of me. How clear it became. The Almighty wants a Family. He offers Himself to us as Father. The Gift is Himself -- in loving companionship. He cannot force Himself upon us. No amount of works on our part or marking through sins in some celestial ledger on His part will give to us *Himself*. Love can neither be purchased at the supermart nor created by juggling the entries in the account books of our lives. Our family was not so created, and neither is God's.

As I learned more *about* God it became crystal clear that what brought peace and the deep enriching of life was not mere information. The word "Father" was familiar enough. Only now it became more than a word. It was a window, a window in the Throne-Room of the Almighty. I could see Him who ruled the world as "my Father." It was He who had come near in Jesus holding out His hands, grasping ours in His own and refusing to let go, taking us all the way to Calvary and there in the blaze of His Cross illumining the depths of our selfish, fearful pride and the height of His selfless, transfiguring love.

The joy of knowing Him who sees us as we are and accepts us anyway is a heady wine that bursts all the wineskins of words and spills through our souls. I wish desperately that there

was some way of saying it so that you would have to understand. I not only want to know that God's Gift to us in Christ is Himself in loving friendship, but I want you to know the Gift is yours, as well as mine. May the Spirit of the living Christ breathe through these pitifully inadequate words something of His own Presence.

Please, let me labor this point, for it is a labor of love. You gave us many things at home: something to eat and wear, an opportunity to go to school, an extra something when it could be squeezed into the budget. But these were not your greatest gifts. Greatest of all was yourselves. Not just your protection or information about you, but *you* we received.

If all that I knew of you was that you were responsible for my birth, that you are older and much wiser than I, and that I must honor you, as a family we would be non-existent. What really made the home was to know you, Mother Sue and Daddy. O, this was much, much more than having enough information to write a book about you, even as you know how much greater the joy to be *with* those whom you love than to hear *from* them.

How would you feel if your children never thought that it was possible to know you personally? What if they thought faithfulness meant studying feverishly the account of your movements, memorizing your letters and making a legal code out of them by which to order their lives? What if they were scared to death that a mistake would cause you to cut them off forever? Would this make you supremely happy or break your heart?

What pains me terribly is that we generally in Churches of Christ are breaking God's heart while striving feverishly to be right, absolutely right. We should try to be right, but when we think that our relation to God is based on that rightness, we live under the constant threat of doom. We are not infallible. We blunder. If God will seize such error to damn us, then we are damned, for we are sinners.

To avoid despair, we must shout loudly (until we believe ourselves, whether or not anyone else believes us) that we are right on the things that really count. We can take the easier things: immersion, weekly communion, "Church of Christ" name, and contend that these are the things that make us true Christians. Even if we don't love God or our brothers as we ought, we have kept the greater commandments. If we insist loudly enough, we generate a type of assurance, but the very shouting and stamping of our feet reveal that we are yet anxious and insecure deep inside.

Among many of our brethren the sense of God's acceptance is based upon everybody else's rejection. Where people disagree, somebody is wrong. People who are wrong cannot be saved. Therefore, it is not merely pride and arrogance that make us shout frantically that we are right. Whatever security of soul we have is at stake. We *must* be right. We cannot afford to admit otherwise. If we are wrong, we are utterly lost.

This view makes it necessary to fight fiercely those who disagree with us. Not simply because we love them or because we love the Kingdom, but because our soul-security trembles in the balance. Only in the insistence that we are right and all other groups wrong are we able to find sufficient assurance of God's acceptance to make life bearable. We must cling to it at all costs.

Should we consider the possibility that people in the “denominations” may be saved, our very faith would be shaken. How startling a revelation is this! It shows that our faith is grounded wrong. It is not really faith in Christ as God’s redeeming sacrifice for us. It is faith in our *rightness* and everybody else’s *wrongness*. Of others like us Jesus once said, “They trusted in themselves that they were righteous and set all others at naught” (Luke 18:9).

We have come to illustrate in devastating fashion what is meant by “*self-righteousness*.” It does little good for us to be deeply offended when outsiders say so. Our denial is far from convincing. It has become impossible for us to smite our breasts and cry, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” for that confession would put us on the level of other sinners. Nothing that we have, or are, or know, would give us any advantage. We simply cannot afford such humiliation, and it proves beyond doubt that we really are “*self-righteous*.”

When one realizes that God accepts him, not because he is good or smart (better and smarter than others), but while he is a sinner, he wants to sing of the mercy of God. He wants others to know of such a Savior. He finds that he has a security in Christ that does not rest upon the damnation of those with whom he disagrees.

For nearly twenty years I have seen that “The Church of Christ” is not the whole family of God. It can only be a part. All those everywhere who have been “born over from above” are in the family. Jesus said, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). There are millions aside from us who have done just this. How on earth can we assert, “We are ‘The Church of Christ,’” excluding these whom Jesus declares “saved?”

We must deny Jesus’ words or grant that all baptized believers are in “the Church.” Some brethren will admit it, but refuse to recognize them as brethren by contending that they are “in error.” Self-righteousness prompts us to say, “We are the true Christians *not* in error.” When our own Brotherhood is split some twenty-odd ways, we are obviously “in error.” None of us has hope apart from God’s overflowing mercy. We all have the privilege of prayer and forgiveness. “In Christ” there is continual cleansing. I know not why we should declare that in Christ is continual cleansing for us alone.

The thought seems to be that as individuals we sin constantly, but *as a group* we are perfect, “without error.” We fool no one else, and we hardly fool ourselves, for we then hasten to add, “We are without doctrinal error.” When we have run out of breath asserting our doctrinal purity, our divisions stand there mocking us.

The Church of God on earth is always “in error,” morally and intellectually. We ever stand under judgment because of sin. But also through faith we stand under God’s mercy. If we decide we do not need to stand under His mercy, but can now rest on our own perfection, we are “fallen away from grace” (*Galatians* 5:4). If we knew what it meant to be saved by grace, we could catch a glimpse of God’s greater Family.

A long bitter road has led us to believe that God forgives every kind of error but “doctrinal” error. What makes us think that he forgives stinginess, lust, character assassination,

worldliness, laziness -- everything but instrumental music in worship? Such shallowness of heart and head is not born of the New Testament nor of the Restoration Fathers. It is the bitter end of a sectarian spirit that thrives on division and ministers to pride. It destroys us spiritually.

I doubt that we come to see God's larger Family by pointing out how good and right people in other churches are. Judged by Christ's perfect love and obedience they are all lost. *And so are we!* It is by seeing how we are put right, *though unrighteous*, that we come to see how other unrighteous souls are also "through faith" "reckoned righteous." At least, so it came to me.

When I realized that faith is personal, rather than creedal, I could say, "I do not know how right or wrong my brethren are on attitudes or doctrinal points, but I do know that I am trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior. My relation to Him is personal, not legal." I could see my weakness and His power, my folly and his wisdom. I was gloriously free from the law's condemnation, but Love was there binding me to Him in a glad servitude that I would not escape if I could.

Similarly, I knew that others who laid themselves at Jesus' feet for mercy, as I had done, were as truly saved as I. If He did not "reckon" my sins, He would not "reckon" theirs. Since both are imperfect, neither of us can afford to boast. This doesn't mean that we can't teach one another, point out the other's faults, if we discern them. If the same Spirit dwells in us both, then He is patiently trying to lead both to the light and mercifully covering our failures.

Because our family has been one where we have attempted to be understanding and forgiving, I am counting on you to glimpse what God is trying to do with His Family and how he feels about His children. He is not trying to send them all to hell, any more than you are watching jealously to find some reason to sever all relations with your children. Surely, we break His heart when some of His children will not even recognize others in the same Family.

Here is the bend in the road for me -- I cannot go on acting as if we are the only Christians, refusing fellowship with others because my "Church of Christ" brethren will not allow it. I cannot continue the kind of church life that rends the Father's Family and breaks His heart. I must protest. Whether it does little good, much good, or no good, I must be faithful to the right as God gives me to see the right.

I wish that I could widen my fellowship without being cut off by those in Churches of Christ. No one can possibly know how much I care for these people, how much I have suffered with them and by them, or how much more I would try to take, if it would help. But as Paul once had to turn the greater part of his ministry away from those he loved most dearly, I must turn, too. I do it not without months and years of wrestling with my own soul and with God.

Several months back I wrote concerning my health and the killing pressure under which I have worked for years. I do not wish to flee any divinely-appointed task, but I don't believe that God wants me to sacrifice either my life or my sanity in what seems a fruitless endeavor. Believing also that He does not want me to give up the ministry completely, I must do the best that I know to do, trusting in His guidance.

How much I hope that you can understand. How much I would like to make you proud of me. But I surely will only make you ashamed, unless you can understand what I am saying.

There is no easy way for God to take us, break up the old cemented patterns of thought and lead us into new paths, even when they lead to freedom and peace. I am sure, Mother Sue and Daddy, that when you left the Baptist Church before most of your children were born, you did not find it easy to do. You had family and friends to consider.. You did it because you had to do it, because you believed that God wished it and Scripture led to it. Now we must be as faithful as you were. It is excruciatingly hard for us, but we wish that it might be easier for you.

The awareness of your pain is a knife-thrust in my own heart. It seems a tragedy to come to the place where one must bow his head in his arms and weep because he cannot spare a cross to those whom he loves. But I cannot lay a heavier one upon my Lord. In all His compassion, He still turns on us with blazing eye if we let those whom we love better than life itself come before Him.

I have tried harder than ever before to come back across the miles and the years to let you walk with me down to the bend of the road where I now stand. If you can look up and see with me, I shall fall on my knees in gratitude to God. If you cannot, I must hold you a moment and walk on, praying God to keep His promise of strength to us all, trusting some day He will remove your cross and mine and make the dark things plain.

Above the storm is God's bow of promise, His covenant of grace with us. He promises to receive us and to hold us "in Christ," all of us who will really accept Him. We must trust Him to do just that. He has also promised to hear our prayers when we come to Him in faith. Though I have prayed for a long time about this decision, one night I went down on my knees and didn't come up till I had it out. I had to come to the place where I could say, "They will be done," and mean it. I ask you to do that now. I am claiming God's promise in this matter. He will not fail.

With all my love and devotion,

Roy

Cry From the Pit

"Will they understand?" I asked repeatedly until the letter arrived from Mother Sue. It was pages of pleading to come to my senses and other pages filled with the usual arguments we aimed at the "sects." Daddy never wrote. Neither of them commented on my letter again. Mother Sue told one of the boys, "It would have been easier to bury Roy." I'm sure they chose to think I had lost my mind. In that case God could show mercy.

For a time I moved in a stupor. At two of the tasks I wanted most to accomplish I failed.⁴⁴ I wanted to make my parents happy. I wanted to show my church our Lord's "Good News." Neither happened.

⁴⁴ The third task was to be a good husband and father. At times I thought my other failures made me less than I hoped to be at home.

“If only I had been a better Christian.” “If only I could have held on longer.” “If only I had tried a different approach.” Self-flagellation increased until I heard the echo of earlier words from a family dentist, “That is a matter it is fruitless to debate.”

Five years earlier I had been away at Church Camp when a jaw tooth started giving me fits. Rather than leave my duties to find some strange dentist, I toughed it out, placing aspirin on the tooth at night to get some sleep. Arriving home, I went at once to our doctor, who said, “It must come out.” “But, I need that one in particular,” I protested. Continuing, I speculated, “If I had come earlier, we might have saved it.” It was then he replied, “That is a matter it is fruitless to debate.”

“I am who I am at this moment, at this stage of my spiritual pilgrimage,” I admitted. “It is useless to keep beating God’s child over the head for something he was not, for failures he regretted more than anyone else could imagine. If you know anything about ‘grace,’ the ‘grace’ you say you want to share, then believe it. Accept it. Get up and move joyfully in the strength of it.” I did.

One source of strength in the midst of struggle was the love of my brothers and sister. Though my move to the Disciples caused them heartache, they never turned their backs on me, even when it cost them dearly. I owe them much that I cannot pay. A great deal of Harold’s trouble later from the super-orthodox was, I fear, because he had an infamous brother he would not renounce.

[At this point in the first draft of this manuscript, the page on the computer went blank. The entire work was wiped out. There was no backup. Nothing. At once I took the computer to the shop to see if the lost work could be restored. It could not. “Why did this occur?” I asked. “Well,” replied the guru, “These things just sometimes happen.” They sure do. And, each time we are face to face with a very old and familiar question. “What shall we make of it?”]

8

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF NOONDAY

Beginning Again... Again

Colleagues leaving the Church of Christ were now in the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregational and Baptist churches, as well as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I knew at once that I belonged with the Disciples. However, all my graduate studies were in non-Disciple schools. I needed to build a bridge across that chasm.

Wilburn had already gone from Phillips Seminary in Enid, Oklahoma, to Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky. He could offer invaluable advice. We jumped in the car and drove to Lexington only to find that he was in California. Officials were kind and promised to help find a student pastorate. With Charles and Dana, born in Harvey, making us a

family of six, and with Annedale already in high school, I decided the risk was too great. We went home.

“Maybe,” I thought, “my dream of teaching may yet be realized. I can go over to the University of Chicago, pick up the doctorate, and apply at the various Disciple colleges and seminaries.” Jay Calhoun was at the moment working on his Ph.D. at the University. I went over to talk to him. When I mentioned getting back in school, he interjected, “Don’t come here. If Jesus Christ came to the University of Chicago, He would have to start all over again.”

Calhoun encouraged me to come on to the Disciples, saying, “For the five years I was in the Office of Ministry in Indianapolis ten Church of Christ ministers a year came over. We have been greatly enriched by these fifty. If the figures are typical, a great percentage of our ministers are from your background. It would be helpful, though, if you had some work in a Disciples school? Whom do you know in Iowa?”

“Not a soul,” I told him. “I’ll call John McCaw,” he said and dialed the Dean of Drake Divinity School. McCaw was in and after listening a few moments, said “Send him out. We’ll take care of him.” It was Labor-Day weekend 1960. In a borrowed car my family made its way to Des Moines. We visited with both Dean McCaw and Loren Lair, Executive Minister of the Upper Midwest. Both were encouraging and attempted to be helpful. I was given names of two churches to contact, and we located both.

Again we drove home with no hard commitments, but school was beginning, and decision time was on us. Evelyn said, “You go on and enroll in school. The kids and I will stay where we are. If you come back, you’ll be the one who has to repent.” I made my way back to Drake and began seminary work... again.

Nobody knew me from Adam’s off-ox, so I realized that I must make my mark in the classroom. Since I already had more credits than necessary, I took only the core courses on which I would be examined, making sure that I made all “A’s.” The Lohrville Church of Christ (Christian) called me as pastor. I went back to Illinois for the family, and we left the jam-packed scene of Chicago for an Iowa farm community of 800.

The first night five-year-old Dana, standing at the front door with Evelyn, listening to the intense silence punctuated only by the sounds of the night creatures, took her mother’s hand and whispered, “What’s the matter? Is everybody sick?” Culture shock was evident, and the children missed “home.” Yet, they made friends, loved the outdoors and two years later when the time came to move, they did not want to leave.

My second year at Drake was a productive one. My salary of \$90 a week was not enough to live on. However, the Dean of Simpson College, a Methodist School in Indianola, contacted the Divinity School in search of a part-time teacher. I was recommended. In the Fall of ‘61 I began teaching three sections of “Introduction To The Bible” at Simpson. Student response reminded me of Dasher days. Eagerly the young scholars asked about Creationism and Evolution, Miracle and Natural Law, Bible and Modern Science, the relevance of ancient records to contemporary problems and a host of related issues.

Many who were ready to discard the Bible, who took the course only because it was required, found the ancient text spring to life and capture them. Others who locked their faith in one logic-tight compartment and their intellect in another were freed to let them sit down together. Many who thought that one historical or scientific misstatement in Scripture meant the whole book should be consigned to the garbage can happily discovered that it need not be so.

There was one other serendipitous outcome -- preparations for my classes at Simpson were at the same time preparations for my comprehensives in Biblical courses at the seminary.

Once More At the Crossroads

Professors at Drake encouraged me to go over to the University of Iowa, take the doctorate there and begin teaching. At last, it seemed, my dream could come true. Then a strange struggle took place inside my soul. Some inner voice raised the question, "Is this the best stewardship of your gifts for your remaining years?" By now I had so much time, energy and heart invested in pastoral ministry that I could not answer "Yes."

The struggle was intense, and I was fiercely torn. What if I made the wrong choice? It was not until 1963 that I experienced what it is to be "justified by faith" *vocationally*. Truly, some of us are slow learners. It seems that all my adult life I have been intrigued with the doctrine of "justification by faith." Yet, my experience of it has come in three separate stages, affecting three life dimensions: 1) moral, 2) intellectual, 3) vocational. At last I could accept the reality that however wise my choice, God would bless it and work something lasting out of it.

I enjoyed school so much that I knew I must resist the temptation to turn into a professional student or professor, some "above-the-fray" spectator, "always learning and never coming to a knowledge of the truth."⁴⁵ The balcony was comfortable, but I must remember that on the playing field the game is decided. Of course, the playing field can begin in the classroom, but the best stewardship of my gifts at this late date pointed to the local church. Once more, as when a child, I resisted what I *wanted* to do to accept the work I felt I *ought* to do.

One Move More

On graduation I was invited to join the staff at University Christian Church, just across the street from Drake's Administration Building. The Senior minister was to leave the following Easter, and all staff positions would be open for renegotiation. Deciding that on my resume the title "Minister of Membership and Evangelism" at the top church in the Region would look pretty good, I accepted the call.

After six months at University Church the First Christian Church of Ames invited me to come as their Senior Minister. When I told them that I could not think of leaving University Church so soon, they asked, "When *can* you come?" I said, "Warner Muir will be leaving next

⁴⁵ Acts 17:21; 2 Timothy 3:7.

Easter. It's customary for the rest of the staff to resign at that time and let the church enlist a fresh crew. I couldn't leave before then." "We'll wait," they said. "You must not," I told them, "it will definitely hurt the church."

Since they ignored my counsel in Des Moines, I couldn't be sure they would give it weight in Ames. Nevertheless, they waited, and we went. On July 3, 1963, we began a twenty-year ministry in Ames, lasting until retirement.

Fresh Challenges

Welcome to the Disciples was so warm, free and full that it was hard to take it in. At University Church we saw in Frank Clark's⁴⁶ Sunday School class Christians arguing... and enjoying it! Nobody was gathering sticks for a burning at the stake! If sadly we were excluded from the church of our birth, gladly we were included in the church of our adoption.

However, if we expected First Christian of Ames to be University Church of Des Moines, we were in for a shocker. Both were university towns, but Ames was in every way considerably more conservative. Congregational leadership was in a number of ways as legalistic as that in the better Churches of Christ. Only the Elders couldn't quote as much Scripture. Worship services were nearly dignified to death. The church, I learned, had a history of making their pastors' lives tough. Had I known, I would never have gone. But, the Lord outfoxes us all.

I was well prepared to deal with the fundamentalist mind set. I was not as prepared for a whole new set of power plays. This time, thank God, I learned more quickly than usual. When one who had terrorized my predecessors confronted me in a Cabinet meeting, I was surprised, but not quite ready to be lion's meat. "Why do you always oppose us?" he asked. "I certainly did not know that I did, and I have no intention of being obstructionist," I replied. His response was a bombshell, "Don't you know this could mean your job?"

After but a few months in town to have the A-bomb locked in on my chair and the time clock ticking was something I never dreamed possible. In a flash I thought, "He just played his ace. After this he has not another threat left." Calmly I responded, "Of course, I know that. I would be foolish not to. But, I've got Somebody Else I must answer to." The room was still. Slowly he responded, "I guess I did not express myself well." I replied, "We all have that difficulty at times."

I can't remember the issue that night. It was not significant, and my word of caution was eagerly elevated to one of opposition. Later I realized that this was simply a turf test. The old dog was taking the measure of the new pup in town. However, he never tried that tactic twice.

Much more serious was the issue of "Open Membership." The congregation required immersion for membership, though the position in the Disciples at both the national and regional levels was one of accepting Christians, regardless of the mode of their baptism. I saw that the

⁴⁶ Creator of the syndicated feature *The Country Parson*.

congregation was divided over the matter, but I chose not to make it “my” battle. Yet, the issue came to a head in an unexpected manner.

A Methodist lad began attending our youth program. One day he told me, “I want to be a member of this church.” I said, “I need to talk to your minister about this and let him know that we are not into ‘sheep stealing.’ Furthermore, this congregation accepts as members only those who have been immersed. Would that be a problem for you?” “No,” he answered. Then I asked, “Would it be meaningful for you?” “Not particularly,” was his reply. I was stumped. I knew I wasn’t about to go through a charade just to satisfy a technicality. So I went to the Elders.

When I told them of the boy’s desire, one Elder asked, “Is he willing to be immersed?” “Yes,” I said. “Then we have no problem,” was his response. “We have a problem,” I told him, “I’m not willing to immerse him. Baptism means more to me than a perfunctory act of ‘joining’ a fraternity, no more serious than ‘joining’ the Elks Club.” Another Elder walked up, put his face next to mine and said, “We were closed membership when you came, and we’ll be closed membership when you go. And you can’t change us.”

This was the most powerful man in the church. The best Bible student. A respected Professor of Sociology and Economics at the University. Leader of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship on campus. My response was, “I have not tried to change you, but if you put it that way, I think I can.” With that the lines were drawn and the battle begun. Yet, it was not I who led the charge. The Membership Department did that.

For months we had studies. I did little but write two or three articles for our newsletter⁴⁷ and answer questions when asked. I was jolted, therefore, when the department scheduled a debate on the subject. Mutterings of “splitting the church” sounded from every corner. The day arrived for the debate and fewer than 40 people showed up. Then one of the affirmative speakers turned out to be none other than Dr. Wallace Ogg, the Elder who a few months earlier was in my face. He stood before the group and said, “Folks, you know how I have been all these years. I just want to tell you I was wrong.”

When the Board voted on the question there were only two negative votes, and not a soul left the church.

There were other storms to weather. The Civil Rights campaign and Viet Nam War were fiercest. When the *Black Manifesto* was issued, we decided that if our worship was disturbed, we would simply say to the intruders, “We are a church that shares in the Lord’s

⁴⁷ My thrust was that membership rolls are merely working tools, not copies of “the Lamb’s Book of Life.” It is inconsistent to welcome people to the Lord’s Table where membership is truly “sharing” at the Family Feast and to bar them from legalities such as voting on church business. “Membership” is *God’s* creation, not ours. The “rolls” are *our* creation, not God’s. All that closed membership does is to slap a brother or sister in the face and place an asterisk before his or her name in the directory. If the Church is ours, we can concoct any rules we choose. If it is God’s, we had better stick with His.

Supper each Sunday. If you remain quiet, we will immediately move into that service, dismiss and then go into the parlor where you can express fully your grievances.” We never had to face that situation.

When Ian McCrea, former colleague at University Church in Des Moines and then on National Staff in Indianapolis, asked if I would go to Selma for the March, I replied, “Yes. But, I was reared in Alabama and know the mood. I will go in fear and trembling.” He never called me, but I did my best both to proclaim and demonstrate the Spirit of Christ in what was even in Iowa a tumultuous time. A few of the members grew hostile. A Professor of Education who had thought social issues were divorced from Christian faith, remarked, “I have till now heard preachers declare what in their opinion is right and wrong. I appreciate the fact that your messages are grounded in Scripture.”

If possible, the Viet Nam struggle generated even more emotion. When a group of Students called a “Moratorium” and marched on City Hall, they asked for a minister to lead prayer before they left campus. No one could be found. Not even the Campus Ministers. I decided I could pray anywhere, as long as I didn’t bless whatever any and everybody saw fit to do. I prayed for peace. I prayed for our enemies. I prayed for the Students. I prayed for those who would oppose them. But, I prayed.

The TV cameras were on hand, and the evening news carried the event. One merchant, Warren Israel, who was dead set against my position reported that another member came in the store and started criticizing “*your* minister.” Warren simply said, “*Our* minister.” I found that when you have been with people in the hospital and at the cemetery, they will put up with a lot, even when they strongly disagree with you. Had I not tried to be a pastor and friend, I would never have survived those turbulent times.

Incredible Contrast

As crises passed and love flowered the congregation became in large part a “family.” Personal ties deepened, and faith grew.⁴⁸ Wallace Ogg, for example, became one of our dearest friends and most-trusted advisor. Board meetings, rather than brawls, became seasons of celebration, sharing of dreams and plans for the journey. The funereal cloud lifted from our worship, and we found joy. Annually we had a service in which all wore work clothes, tools of the trade were taken forward as part of the offering, and we lifted up the theme of “turning work into worship.”

Before long I was on the Regional Board and on the National Evangelism Committee of the Home and States Mission Planning Council. I served as Provisional Chair of the board that brought the United Campus Christian Ministry to Iowa State University. Evelyn served on both the Division of Overseas Ministry Board and the General Board for the denomination. As Chair of the Strategy and Ministry Committee of the Iowa United Campus Christian Ministry, I could

⁴⁸ The first year after retirement to Arkansas 50 members of the congregation came to visit. About 35 the following year. We still have a half-dozen or so per year come check on us.

and did impact the program state-wide. In addition, I was selected to chair the Evangelism Committee of the Iowa Council of Churches. Though every bit as busy as when we were in Dasher, Georgia, the stress was tons lighter and the rewards remarkably richer.

Every seven years I had the congregation appoint a Search Committee, do a self-study, identify goals and sketch a profile of the minister they needed for such work. After the study was done we discussed whether or not I was the person for the task. The exercise was good for us all.

From 1978-81 I worked in McCormick's Doctor of Ministry program on "Congregational Revitalization." Though older than the professors this time around, I still found the work exhilarating and helpful.

Our women helped launch a "Wednesday Morning Club," bringing to the church ADC mothers and their preschool children. Evelyn worked with Social Services and University personnel to provide opportunities for learning social, economic, and child-rearing skills. Results were gratifying. Not only so, but our own lives were radically altered. From this program came our last child, Michelle. May 28, 1969, the adoption was final, and we now were blessed with five lovely, talented children.

The congregation broadened its ministry, creating a Disciples Covenant House for students from Iowa State. Evelyn and I worked with internationals from all around the globe and are still in contact with some of them. It was fun to see the looks on people's faces as we took an assorted lot to see such a film as "Gandhi." We viewed the movie and then went home to discuss its significance for us and for the wider community. Here was Evelyn 5'2," followed by a 6'2" Liberian, a 5'10" Nigerian, two 5'4" Micronesians, and a company of Pakistanis, Koreans and Anglos, all calling her "Mom..." and me "Dad."

The Students, home-grown and foreign, brought freshness and vitality, a verve to the congregation, dynamic leadership and a shattering of our parochial, nationalist outlook. Today as I sit in worship services that mimic nationalistic pep rallies, I see the faces of these dear Christians around the globe and wonder how spiritually uplifting our chest thumping can be for them. Particularly, in light of "the Kingdom without cast," the Community of Christ's Concern that knows no race nor class nor national boundary.

Among the many moments of "glad surprise" on the wider scene were two especially-rewarding events. I was selected as President of the National Evangelistic Association (1973-1975), as well as, invited to help create the Disciples' *Order of Andrew* (1978-1979) and write the theology text for it.⁴⁹

As our congregation gained stature in the city, I was called to serve on all kinds of committees: Drug Awareness, Senior Citizens' Center, President of the Golden Age Cooperative Board and asked by the City Council to be the first Chair of the Ames Human Relations

⁴⁹ *Gracious Contagion*, (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1979).

Commission. For eight years I was the Salvation Army's representative dealing with transients. In my final year I was President of *Ames Ecumenical Housing, Inc.* that has now brought to the city two retirement homes for the elderly and handicapped. After my departure the first was named "Keystone" and the street leading to it "Roy Key Avenue."

On returning for a dedication service and coming unexpectedly on the signs, both street sign and that on the home, I felt a lot like Tom Sawyer up in the loft of the church, eavesdropping on his own funeral.

Often I wished that I could have helped with a few such ministries in the Church of Christ, but we had first to discuss "the weightier matters," such as "the essentially of baptism" by immersion, institutionalism and instrumental music in worship. Power struggles are not unknown to every slice and sliver of the Church. Controversy is not unknown. But, at least in the wider Church we could argue over something significant.

At times I ask myself, "Did it make any difference that I was at Dasher, Juneau, Hempstead, Harvey, West Suburban, Lohrville, Des Moines or Ames?" My conclusion is, "It made a difference to.....," and then I see faces and name names. "But, it made no difference institutionally but to one congregation, First Church of Ames." There was real change, personal and institutional, and it was a joy to be in on something like that. Perhaps, it says something for long pastorates and a common desire to encounter the real Change Agent.

Reaching Back Across The Gulf

I did not forget. I have not forgotten. The fire burned hot, and the sword struck deep. At every opportunity I reached out hands across the chasm. I joined a small group meeting in Des Moines to deal with the dividing issues. Members from the A Cappella group, the Independent Christian wing and this lone Disciple met monthly for three years.

One disappointment was to find that most Disciples had long ago written off any possible dialogue with Church of Christ folk. Our Des Moines group illustrated the reason. All but one participant from the non-instrument background made clear that their presence did not indicate fellowship. They were there to show the rest of us the truth. Independents had much the same spirit. They reached out to me because I championed their cause when we discussed "the Music Question."

One gathering that I enjoyed and deemed helpful in bridging the gulf was the *Hartford Forum*, held annually in Hartford, Illinois, just across the river from St. Louis. Carl Ketcherside launched it, including participants from what were wryly called "the organic and inorganic brethren." One Cuppers. Anti-Sunday School folk. Anti-Women Teacher zealots. Mutual Edification people. Independents. Mainline Church of Christ's. Plus, Evelyn and me. We could always count on Ketcherside, Leroy Garrett and Harold to bring irenic, but challenging messages.

The wondrous quality of the forum was that all these people reached out to one another as members of the same Family. They were convinced, as Ketcherside put it, "Wherever God has a

son, I have a brother. Wherever God has a daughter, I have a sister.” We were “all in the Family” and trying to learn how to act like it. We found such siblings in Jim and Norma Smith of Des Moines. Though in the mainline C of C, their hearts stretched across all sectarian barriers. We remain friends to this hour.

Leroy Garrett, philosopher, scholar, writer and humble Christian, while remaining in the A Cappello group, has been kind to open to me on occasion the pages of his *Restoration Review*. Perhaps, more than anyone else in the non-instrumental Church of Christ aside from Carl Ketcherside, he has worked tirelessly and effectively in breaking through sectarian barriers. With his Ph.D. from Harvard, he has been the far greater academician.

Robert Meyers in 1964 called on a group of clergy and laity to offer a critique of the Church of Christ. Many declined the invitation, some saying that those who most needed to read it would never see it, and those who did would miss the heart of the message. However sixteen “Yes” responses came,⁵⁰ and two years later the book was published under the title, *VOICES OF CONCERN: Critical Studies in Church of Christism*. I was among those asked to write. In no way could I better explain my absence from the Church of Christ than to surrender the love letter I sent my parents. It was more than difficult to lay my soul naked for any and all who wished to gaze, but I felt that I must. To Meyers I forwarded a copy, with this accompanying statement:

I am glad to say a word about my decision in 1960 to enter the fellowship of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Since it was made out of great agony of spirit and through long months of struggle in prayer, there are no simple statements that can convey the meaning of that experience. Therefore, rather than write an essay now about what took place four years ago, I have chosen to bare my most intimate thoughts and share with you a letter which I wrote to my parents. It is with reservations that I permit publication of so personal a correspondence. Though many will read with compassion and understanding, I fear that some will stare with scorn. But I know of nothing I could say now that would speak to the real reasons for my decision more clearly than this letter home. I wrote it broken in spirit, with the realization that had I been a better Christian, I might have been able to pay a starker penalty. Some pages I wrote barely able to see the paper before me and, at times, literally on my knees. Because my heart aches for the estrangements among us; because I know that God is at work through the cross to bind up our wounds and make us whole; and because I want to make every effort I can to help heal our rift, rather than widen it, I consent to the publication of this letter, with the prayer that our Lord’s petition for oneness may more fully be answered.

The book received wide coverage and achieved broad circulation. Though now out of print, requests still come for it, and occasionally I meet someone (often a Disciples minister) who expresses appreciation and offers a bit of testimony about its personal impact. I commented

⁵⁰ Some writers were now in other communions, but a goodly number remained in the Church of Christ.

earlier on the power of the pen and am humbled by news of how God uses so fragile an instrument.⁵¹

In the late '60's, I believe, a unity conference was held at Bethany College, organized by President Perry Gresham and Leroy Garrett.⁵² Representatives from C of C colleges, including Lipscomb and Abilene, came. Others from Independent schools such as Lincoln and St. Louis were present. As one with background in both the C of C and Disciples, I was asked to deal with the question, "Why Are We Divided?" It was impossible to determine how much bridge building occurred. A few folks, I judged, inched another whisker ahead.

Occasionally C of C ministers called, sometimes from Chicago, sometimes from farther away, asking, "Can I come to Ames and talk with you?" Apologetically they added, "Of course, nobody from here must know." Eager to hear not merely my views, but how it felt to go through the process of wholesale disfellowship, they made the trip. What could they expect, if they failed to hew the party line? How could they remain in the church and work for a happier day? At other times it was a phone call from Texas or Alabama, and I hate to imagine the figure on the next telephone statement.

Only a couple of months ago I was asked to write a tract on "sects" in the early Church, giving special attention to "the Jerusalem Council" of *Acts* 15 as it grappled with the two-party division of "Hellenists" and "Judaizers" in the early Church. Such an issue means little to those outside the C of C with its denial of its own sectarian status, and even the possibility of such division in "the true Church." There it still remains a burning issue .

As health permitted I have shared in a fledgling group working for renewal and unity, born in Joplin, Missouri. *Refreshing Waters Renewal* is eight years old. Its focus is on the Gospel, and its strategy involves sharing across party lines. The theology of most participants is

⁵¹ Over 10 years after we left New York, at an International Assembly of Christian Churches I was sought out by the fellow who followed me in ministry at Hempstead. "I wanted to find you and tell you that in the attic of the house I ran across scattered pages of articles you wrote. None complete. Yet, they reached me, and I was radically changed. Thank you."

I learned that Mr. Sherman Knouff was dying of cancer and decided to write to him. The letter went something like this: "Dear Mr. Sherman, I want you to know that I am thankful for you and remembering you in prayer. I remember your class in which you encouraged us to be careful how we live, because we are all somebody's 'hero.' I knew it must be true, because I had a 'hero' then. It was Mr. Sherman Knouff." Miss Mattie Sue said that he kept that letter under his pillow and had her read it to him repeatedly. That response overwhelmed me. "Why didn't I write sooner? Why haven't I written others, such as Miss Beale and Brother Ijams?" I didn't know how to contact Miss Beale, but I did write a letter like this: "Dear Brother Ijams, After being nearly 30 years late, I want to thank you for taking a chance on me. More than any one else, it is you to whom I owe all that I am and can ever be." Mrs. Ijams wrote back that he was on his death bed when the letter came, but she read it to him and thanked me for sending it.

It may be no coincidence that our New Testament is made up largely of letters.

⁵² Garrett was on the Bethany Faculty teaching Philosophy at the time. He and Gresham hosted the Annual Unity Forum from 1966-75. Farrell Walters in Church Relations, along with Charles Gresham and Tom Langley, assisted. Walters was a student of mine back in Dasher 15 years earlier, and later one of the young Turks who wanted to run me out of Chicago. Ironically, he preceded me to the Disciples.

fundamentalist in nature, but I have been warmly received. Yet, no other Disciples are inclined to attend.

Another publication that publishes most anything I offer is *Ensign*, published in Huntsville, Alabama. Some six years ago in Joplin I met its editor, R. L. Kilpatrick. He asked if I was “the Roy Key who wrote the article on ‘The Righteousness of God’ which ran in the *Gospel Advocate* back in the late ‘40s.” When I confessed, he opened his hand and heart and is one of the A Cappella editors who refuses to recognize the usual party lines. His little magazine continues to work for the brighter tomorrow.

Among both Instrumental (Independent) and Non-instrumental groups, most of those who see the glory of grace, who abhor the poison of sectarianism, who cast themselves in faith on the atoning work of Jesus Christ, there remains what is to me a legalistic view of the Atonement. “Justification” is not a judicial metaphor for sheer “forgiveness,” but is a literal legal pronouncement of the Judge. Christ’s blood is the full payment that frees us from death. The demands of death having been met and the books balanced, God is now free to pardon.

I recognize that the Anselmian view of the Atonement still dominates Fundamentalist circles, and these dear friends have picked it up there. I hope to write one more book, this one on “Justification,” showing that this single metaphor, so crucial in my life and so precious still, is not to be viewed legalistically, but personally. If anywhere at all, surely at the Cross God deals with us not fundamentally as prisoners before the bar, but as sons and daughters who have broken His heart and whom He yearns once more to embrace.

Signs now abound that a significant section of the Church of Christ, tired of battles as devastating as that of “The Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat,” are turning to a positive message accompanied by constructive Christian action. Were I beginning ministry today, I doubt that I would be driven from their ranks. I regret that many of them, however, are ensnared politically by “the Religious Right,” and the charity they show for doctrinal differences does not penetrate the realm of social diversity.

As Disciples engage in unity conferences with those to their left, so the more open of the Churches of Christ reserve conversations for those on the Disciples’ right. Maybe, some day they will spy one another and discover that neither side is shod with horn and hoof.

At The End of The Day

Now the day wanes. The steps are slower. So is the brain. The back more stooped. The hair thinner. The wrinkles deeper. The heart weaker. But the fire burns bright. The flame leaps high. The sword strikes deep. The pain lessens, but never leaves. Hope for the bright new day is dimmer, but it still slices through the darkness. Soon or late those of the church of my childhood will, with full heart and dampened cheek, softly sing,

O to grace, how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be;
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Never let me wander from Thee,
never leave the God I love.
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
seal it for Thy courts above.

Then, looking around, catching sight of the larger Church, they shall joyously join hands and cry,

Blest be the tie that binds...

The communions of my birth and my adoption will embrace. A small embrace within the larger one. It may not be until the grown-up Family is Home for Thanksgiving, and in Father's presence the pettiness is gone. I'm trusting, though, it will not wait till then.

There's a world out there waiting for signs of life as it can be. Waiting for a Community of Love that *is* what it *says*. When we shall finally see that we're "all in the Family" and begin to act like it... and God's tomorrow is today.

Shalom!

But, not too much.

Remember Unamuno's prayer:

"God deny you peace, and give you glory."

And should your lot be such that you cannot escape the sword, I have but this word: bare your breast for its deep thrust, praying with Paul, "That I may know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings."⁵³ For, in one way or another we shall be "conformed to his death."

Yet, never for its own sake alone.

"On the third day"

comes triumph.

Creation is free,

complete,

transparent to its Lord,

and we enter fully upon the Great Creative Adventure.

Engraved on the bookplate of Francis Bacon was the picture of a small ship sailing between the giant pillars of Hercules into an uncharted sea. Inscribed on the ship's bow was its proud, defiant name, "*More Beyond*." Ah, yes, and what will it be!?

Alleluiah!

⁵³ *Philippians* 3:10.

THANKS

Thanks to God for bothering to notice me and make it possible for me to serve over in my little corner.

Thanks to Evelyn for doing the same. Why she put up with so much for so long I will never understand, but for it I will ever be grateful. She was always encouraging even when others regularly showed up with finely-crafted hammer and a fistful of nails. Not until we were with the Disciples did she know that she had a rich store of talents that otherwise could never have seen the light of day.

Thanks to our children, who not only witnessed wounds, but suffered a few. I'm grateful there are no visible scars.

Thanks to those in the Church of my childhood who keep stretching out hands and opening wide their hearts.

Thanks to the Church of our adoption who welcomed these aliens and let us know that we had a home. Who trusted us enough to let us serve and who embrace us still.

Thanks to those who have taught me across the miles and years. I hope some day I can let them know how much they helped and how much I care. Still, none must be blamed for mistakes I've made.

Thanks to Raymond, Harold and Wayne, whose memories are considerably better than my own, for reading these lines and keeping me from making a host of historical and grammatical blunders... and to Evelyn, who from the beginning insisted, "Let me read it, so I can help you keep it simple."

Thanks
for the
"Good News" that assures me
that I am accepted in spite of
weakness,
stupidity,
arrogance,
cowardice,
self-pity,
laziness,
carelessness

and all that host of sins that make Satan rub his hands expectantly. Thanks that the list is nailed up on a Cross that shall surely become the scepter of One whose law is love and whose reign is joy. When Creation shall be captive to His spell and His radiance shine from start to star... and at its cosmic limits “*more beyond!*”

OTHER WRITINGS

The Law of Christ
Beyond Second-Hand Christianity
Apocalypse -- Then And Now
Gracious Contagion
B.B. Shots In An A-Bomb World
What In the World Do You Want, When Everything Under Heaven Is Yours?
What In Creation Is God Doing?
Bread For The Journey
For My Grandchildren
To Evelyn
Disciples Dilemma
When We Are Real Or “How Can We Know The Way?”
Aggravating Essays On Controversial Issues

Contributions To Other Books

Voices Of Concern

Letter To Mother and Daddy

A Time To Listen -- A Time To Act

Unit III: Authentic Church Membership

The Holy Spirit In Our Lives Today

The Spirit And The Prayer Life

Biblical Basis For Evangelism

The Biblical Base For Evangelism