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Stories about my First Church

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FOREWORD BY JOHN MAXWELL

STORIES ABOUT
**MY FIRST
CHURCH**



Who Stole the Books?

Let's Point the Church in Our Day

There's No Toilet Paper

The Man Who Saw Jesus

AND OTHER STORIES ABOUT GOD'S GRACE AND
GUIDANCE IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG PASTOR

Elmer L. Towns

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PRINCIPLES I LEARNED PASTORING
A SMALL CHURCH

BY

ELMER L. TOWNS

DEDICATION

To the exceptional people of the Westminster Presbyterian Church who followed my leadership misapplying the verse, "A child shall lead them." Just as most grown men never forget their first date . . . first kiss . . . and first love, these people will always have a special place in my heart.

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INTRODUCTION

WHY A 19 YEAR OLD PASTOR?

When I tell my college students in the 90s that I pastored a church at age nineteen, they look at one another and think, "A dinosaur!" These college young men look skeptically at one another because they know they couldn't do it; nor could their friends do it. But I did it.

How could Dr. Towns be so young and pastor a church?" a college sophomore recently asked my wife.

"My husband has no fear of failure," my wife told him, "he will try anything that he believes God wants him to do."

"He knows many things well," then she went on to explain, "but he doesn't know what he doesn't know. He could pastor at age 19 because he has such great confidence in his knowledge, but he doesn't know what is on the other side of the wall, i.e. he has no idea of what exists in an unknown world."

I jumped into pastoring Westminster Presbyterian Church, Savannah, Georgia, and didn't have a clue of how to perform a wedding, a funeral or to make a hospital call. I had no clue of leadership principles or how to employ management techniques, nor did I know how to minister in a hospital room of a man who was expected to die before dawn.

Because I didn't know what I didn't know, I blundered through my mistakes, walked through embarrassment, smiled when I didn't know what to do, and kept quiet when I didn't know what to say.

Being a nineteen year old pastor is like trying to start the engines of a jet airliner when you don't know where right switches are located. Then planning a year's church program is like taxiing the jet onto the runway, still you don't know what you're doing.

I planned Vacation Bible Schools, revivals, Christmas pageants, picnics and I even painted the "whole church building in a whole day." I was flying the jet plane without a clue of how to find my way to an airport or successfully land it. The fact that I pastored a church for a year and a half, caused it to grow, and won many people to Christ who are still in the faith and are my friends forty years later; is a demonstration of the grace of God.

I dedicate this book to all the people of Westminster Presbyterian Church in West Savannah who allowed me to improve my preaching skills on them as they obeyed the Word spoken to them. They followed my immature leadership as together we tried to saturate a community for Christ. They loved me and told me I was the greatest preacher, when I was barely average. I told them they were the greatest congregation, when they were barely average. We believed each other's exaggerations, and grew better in the warm sun of each other's admiration.

I must recognize my wife Ruth whom I was dating through my student pastoring days. As a matter of fact we spent many Friday nights typing and mimeographing the church bulletin for the following Sunday.

My thanks also to Linda Elliott for typing the manuscript.

May the lessons help young pastors everywhere laugh at themselves and learn to do it better. May the Lord overlook the weaknesses of this book and use it for His glory.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

ELMER L. TOWNS
Summer, 1996

CHAPTER ONE

WE HAVE THE KEY

When I entered Columbia Bible College at age seventeen, I had a burning desire to serve Jesus Christ, so the first Saturday night at college I went to the Greyhound Bus Station to pass out tracts to unsaved people. I preached my first sermon on the street corner at Main and Ervay Street in Columbia, South Carolina, and always had two or three Christian service assignments because I wanted to serve Jesus Christ.

When I first got to Columbia Bible College, I saw several upper classmen with weekend churches. Most of these men older students who were veterans from World War II, many of them serving in small Southern Baptist Churches. "God, give me a church where I can preach," became a constant prayer of mine.

I remember telling the Lord, "I am too young to be a preacher, but Lord; you can do anything . . ." With all the fervency in my heart I prayed for a pastorate. Not so much because I wanted to minister to people, or make hospital visits, or do any of the other pastoring work; I just wanted to preach. I had a great burden to stand before a congregation and preach the Word of God."

So, when I got my first church, it is not unusual that they called me, "Preacher." I was not called Reverend, because I was not ordained. I was not called by any of the other ecclesiastical names such as minister, pastor, bishop, or any other nomenclature. To the people at Westminster Presbyterian Church I was simply called, "Preacher." And that was appropriate, because that was my passion, that's what I did most, and that's how I led the church . . . I led them through my preaching.

On a Saturday night in November 1952 I was leading singing at a Youth For Christ rally in Savannah, Georgia. I had come to Savannah for the weekend, specifically to thank my Sunday School class for a financial gift they sent to help pay my room and board at Bible college. When I walked into

Youth For Christ, the director, Ralph Godwin, saw me and asked me to lead singing. Since I had been the summertime song leader, I was delighted to help out again that evening.

On the platform I was a bundle of energy. I was an arousing song leader, waving my arms like a windmill, cupping my hands to shout encouragement, and patting my foot to speed up the tempo when the singing dragged. Some even called me, "forceful." This particular Saturday night Youth For Christ rally was no different, and everyone sang enthusiastically.

One of the by-products of being song leader, is getting to sit on the platform. Sitting on the platform always reinforced the ego of a young preacher who wanted to make a statement, but I was no different from everyone else who wanted to make a statement with his life. So I sat on the platform throughout the whole program, and afterwards, I was standing near the pulpit when Mrs. Silla Hair looked up and caught my attention. Because the platform was much higher than the floor where she was standing, I squatted down to be on eye level with her.

"Will you preach at my church tomorrow?" she asked straight forward.

Because I understood church protocol, I wondered if she had the authority to ask me to preach at her church. There was no question in my mind about who she was, she always brought her car filled with young people from Westminster Presbyterian Church to Youth for Christ. I was distantly aware who she was.

"Don't you have to get permission first?" was my respectful request.

"We don't have a pastor anymore," Mrs. Hair answered my probe, then added, "Independent Presbyterian Church closed us down." We all knew that Independent Presbyterian Church had paid the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian church. They sponsored Westminster Presbyterian Church for many years because the neighborhood was in decline, and attendance had gone down. As a matter of fact, the original people in the neighborhood had held middle class white collar jobs, but blue collar

people were moving into the neighborhood. When the large two-story homes in the neighborhood were vacated by death and/or moving, the grand old Victorian homes were divided up into small apartments. A poorer clientele moved into the small apartments, with a different lifestyle than those who moved out.

Westminster Presbyterian Church had traditional Presbyterian liturgy, i.e. an invocation, the singing of high church hymns followed by the "Amen." They repeated the Apostle's Creed, Lord's Prayer, and read responsively from both the Old Testament and New Testament. The sermon had been based on theology, reason and tradition. Westminster had probably declined because very few of the lower class people moving into the community responded to the liturgy. They wanted enthusiastic, informal revivalistic preaching. They liked gospel singing, not quiet meditative hymns, and they wanted an evangelistic service more like camp meeting, not Presbyterian liturgy.

As I was kneeling in front of Mrs. Hair, I repeated her words, "They closed Westminster Presbyterian Church down . . .," not understanding why anyone would close a church.

"But we have a key," Mrs. Hair explained, holding up a solitary key on a short chain. "We opened the building for Sunday School."

Mrs. Hair was a short petite-framed woman in her mid-thirties with a "can do approach to life. She and four other ladies went house-to-house gathering about twenty-five to thirty-five children for Sunday School. Energetic Silla Hair never took no for an answer. "Come preach to the ladies and children," she repeated. However, preaching to ladies and children was not an enticing idea, so I gave her an excuse,

"I have to attend my Sunday School class tomorrow morning," I told her, "they made a payment on my room and board at Bible college, so I need to tell them how much I appreciate their gift."

Mrs. Hair stood there nodding her head affirmatively as though she understood what I was saying. But I didn't know how persistent she could be, so I immediately forgot about the conversation. I met my friends and went home that night.

The next morning I attended Sunday School at my home church, Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church. I expressed appreciation to the class, standing at the teacher's desk. I explained to them how God had faithfully provided for my needs, and they were a part of God's provision. Then I sat down.

The door back of the classroom opened. Mrs. Silla Hair stuck her head through the door, and beckoned to me with her finger to come into the hall. I was dumbfounded. She had been out in the hall listening. As soon as I finished speaking, she stuck her head through the door. This time she didn't ask me if I would come to preach, she just assumed that I would want to preach.

"We have just enough time to drive across town before 11:00 AM for preaching," her exciting voice communicated haste.

Mrs. Hair had a five year old blue Plymouth, 1947 4-door sedan. It took around 30 minutes to get from the east side of Savannah to the west side. Driving along, I began planning what I was going to preach; I didn't have a sermon with me. When you are starting out, you don't have a sermon barrel of stored up old messages.

That week at Columbia Bible College a chapel speaker who was anointed with the power of God explained that he had not prepared a message, but was simply sharing what God had given him that morning in his private devotions. So I decided to do the same thing. The first sermon I preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church was from I Timothy 2:1, "That, supplications, prayers, intercessors, and giving of thanks, be made for all men". My first sermon at the church was probably the poorest because it rambled. There was no compelling focus. It was a running commentary. I read one phrase and explained what it meant. Then I read another and continued the process. The morning

service was not long. I led singing, primarily choruses for small children and a few gospel songs for the ladies. Mrs. Hair passed the offering plate for the collection, and the sermon was short. We were out by 11:45.

I explained to Mrs. Hair I had to get back to my mother's home, gather my clean wash that Mother had done for me; and hitchhike back to Columbia Bible College, a distance of about 150 miles. That would take all afternoon into the evening. And if I didn't hitch enough rides, I'd end up on the Greyhound Bus to Columbia.

"If you'll stay to preach the evening service," Mrs. Hair proposed, "we'll pay your train fare back to Columbia." She had already checked, the Southern Railway had a train that left at 7:00 PM arriving in Columbia at 11:00 PM. Like all other Bible colleges, Columbia Bible College had a curfew, and if I were not in by 10:30 PM, I would be written up.

"I'll write you a note," Mrs. Hair said, thinking that would satisfy me. However, it irritated me to think that I was a preacher who needed a note for being late, whether the note was from my Mother, or one of the ladies in the church. I almost turned her down, and I could have missed a great experience of pastoring because of pride.

"I'll do it," nodding my head in appreciation.

The train cost around \$5.00 one way and the ladies gave me \$10.00 for the day. A \$5.00 offering for preaching two sermons was the first financial gift I had received for preaching. I would have preached for free. Five dollars was like a thousand when Cokes were a nickel, bus fare was eight cents, and I was paid twenty cents an hour to wash dishes in the college dining room.

Still, the ladies had not asked me to come back the next week, nor to be their pastor on a regular basis. I agreed to preach a Sunday night service, but the church didn't have one and no one in the neighborhood knew I would be preaching that evening. So all of us decided to go door-to-door,

and invite everyone to the evening service (there were only forty to fifty houses in the neighborhood). While I was going door to door inviting people to a Sunday evening service, Mrs. Hair and the ladies were inviting everyone to come meet the new pastor. The only problem, I hadn't been asked to be the pastor.

Mrs. Miller, one of the five ladies who helped with the children, told me to come by her house around 5:30 for supper. Mrs. Miller, a forty-something procrastinating housekeeper constantly put off everything. As a result when I walked into her house, I could smell the decay of dust, cooking odor and heavy stale cigarette smoke throughout the house. It was a large single floor two-bedroom home built personally by Mr. Miller, but he had never finished the house. When I walked in the front door, I could see every room and closet in the house, because only the 2x4 studs were in place. There were no wallboards, plaster or dividers. The only room that was enclosed was the bathroom. Everywhere were piles of junk . . . piles of newspapers . . . piles of dirty clothes . . . stacks of dirty dishes . . . and the dining room table was stacked with jars of jelly, ketchup, mustard, and all of the condiments that most people keep in the refrigerator; plus bags of sugar, salt and boxes of cereal. While the table was not clean, at least it was convenient to anyone sitting at the table. No one had to go to the kitchen to get what they needed, it was right in front of them.

Mr. Miller was asleep on the couch, mouth wide open snoring, and the stench from him; plus the beer bottles and the body odor told me he was sleeping off a hangover.

"I want you to tell my oldest daughter how to get saved," Mrs. Miller directed as I sat at the dining room table. The oldest daughter had attended Westminster Sunday School when she was a child, but had not gone back since her mother and the other ladies opened up the church building.

"Ye must be born again," I said, opening my Bible to John 3, the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. In the next ten or fifteen minutes, I slowly explained to her what it meant to be born-

again, that it wasn't church membership, baptism, or even belief in your head that Jesus had died on the cross.

"You must receive Jesus Christ into your heart to be born-again." I shared the gospel across the cluttered dining table. That night I began to experience what many other ministers had felt . . . I felt the pressure of expectation. A mother wanted her wayward daughter to be converted and she expected me to do it in one conversation. With a drunken man sleeping behind me and a worldly daughter stone-walling me, . . . I did not witness with a lot of confidence.

I talked at length how Jesus Christ could save her, give her new desires, and transform her life. All my attention was on the rebellious daughter. I focused in on her, trying to get her to understand what it meant to be born again. I zeroed in on her emotions, trying to get her to feel what it felt like to be lost. When I pressed for a decision she said,

"Not now, maybe later."

When I left the Miller's house crossing an open field towards Westminster Presbyterian Church, I still didn't know what I would preach on that evening. Then it came to me,

"Preach to everyone what you just preached to the hardened daughter."

"Ye must be born again."

That was the message they needed, so my Sunday evening sermon was set.

I felt my sermon to the Miller daughter was a failure. I really hoped God would work in her heart, and that she would get saved. But she put me off. So I thought the sermon was a failure. Little did I know that the man sleeping on the couch behind me, who had been drunk, was awakened by my voice. Later Miller would tell me,

"I was too embarrassed to get up and say anything," he just pretended to be asleep.

But the Holy Spirit meant the message, "Ye must be born again" for Mr. Miller. He listened to

every word. Immediately after I left through the back door, he jumped into action. He quickly took a bath, put on a suit and white shirt, something he hadn't done for months, and told his wife to get ready.

"We're going to church."

That evening Miller slipped in the back door of the church, not sitting with his wife. She sat where she usually sat, on the second pew with her friends. I preached the same sermon he heard at home, "Ye must be born again." As I preached, I had no faith that God would turn around a drunk, that Mr. Miller could be born again. However, I gave a gospel invitation at the end of the sermon for people to come forward as the congregation sang a song. Immediately, when the congregation began singing, Miller left the last pew to walk strongly down the aisle. Without hesitation, looking neither to his wife on the right, he headed straight to me,

"I want to be born again just like you told my daughter."

I motioned for him to kneel at the altar. He was the first of many to kneel at the altar. He began to cry as we knelt. The Presbyterian Church that had witnessed the formal liturgy of quiet meditation was transformed that evening into an old fashioned revivalistic preaching center. Miller had come forward to receive Jesus Christ, so I led him to pray at that altar.

Since he worked as yard pilot for the Central Georgia Railway, he took me in his 1951 Ford down to the train station, where I caught the Southern railway train for Columbia, South Carolina. However, before getting in Miller's car, Silla Hair asked,

"Will you come back and preach next week?" Then she added, "We want you to be our preacher."

That was it, that was my call to be pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. Now obviously, one woman cannot issue a call for a whole church. But remember, Westminster Presbyterian Church was not a constituted church. It was just a building. Silla Hair and four other

ladies were God's remnant, they were teaching the Word of God to children every Sunday and they needed a shepherd. The shepherd they got knew less about shepherding than they did. The shepherd they got basically was just a "preacher" so that's what they called me, "Preacher."

When I first started preaching at Westminster Presbyterian Church, it was not recognized by the Savannah Presbytery as a constituted church, it was not even a constituted mission work or Sunday School chapel. To them, it was just an empty building out in West Savannah. The Savannah Presbytery did recognize me, I had been taken "Under care of Presbytery," which to other denominations is the equivalent of a license for ministry. The license of ministry does not mean that you are halfway ordained, it means you are approved for theological study because you meet the primary qualifications for ministry. After formal training, then the candidate is ordained, which means fully approved for ministry.

A couple of months after I started preaching at West Savannah, a long black Buick pulled up in front of the church one Saturday afternoon, and two ordained Presbyterian ministers stepped out. They entered the pastor's study, which I simply called "the office." I was excited about their coming to the church because I wanted to show off what was happening, that is, I was happy until I found out they were the inquisition. They wanted to know,

"Why I had opened up this church without authority?"

When I sensed their hostility and antagonism, I was scared.

"Why did you do this?"

I didn't know what they were going to do, whether they would shut down the building, shut down preaching, drop me from care of presbytery or what they would do. I was in trouble with them, and I knew it. So I did what I always have done when I have gotten in trouble. I just told them what was happening.

I rehearsed how Mrs. Silla Hair had come to Youth For Christ, inviting me to preach, and then Mr. Miller getting converted that evening. I began talking about the men in the community who were getting saved. I talked about Allen Dearing, and two or three other drunks . . . they had all walked the aisle and been saved.

"How many will attend the worship service tomorrow?" one of the ministers asked.

"Only about seventy . . .," I answered.

"That's as many as I'll have," his cool hostility turned warm, and the frowns turned to smiles.

The older pastor glowed, saying,

"I remember when I had your enthusiasm . . . it was my first church in seminary . . . and I remember getting people saved."

The two pastors got back in their Buick, went back to the Savannah Presbytery and recommended that Westminster Presbyterian Church be reconstituted. They reminded me that I couldn't bury, marry, baptize or serve communion, because I was not yet ordained. However, they exhorted me to assist in those services and learn ministry by assisting a pastor. They assigned Reverend Carroll Stegall as my senior supervisor; he pastored my home church Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church. I was instructed to call him for baptisms, communion, funerals and weddings. Interesting enough in my first year at Westminster Presbyterian Church, we baptized by sprinkling more adults into our church, than all of the other churches in the Savannah Presbytery. This is not a put down of them, only an indication that God was beginning to do a work in West Savannah, and others began to recognize it.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Undeniable Call of God to Ministry. The call of God is a deep burden that you must preach the gospel and an exciting compulsion that makes you want to preach the gospel. And the call

of God involves fruit, for when a "called minister" preaches, God will work through him for the conversion of sinners and growth of His believers. My ministry at Westminster Presbyterian Church reconfirmed to me the call of God into full time Christian service.

2. The Principles of the Larger Church. While I believe in the sanctity of the duly constituted local church, based on New Testament criteria, I also recognized the "larger" church which involves missions such as the five ladies were operating at Westminster Presbyterian Church. Their endeavors were blessed of God and the Presbytery recognized the work of God so that they reconstituted it into a local church.

3. The Principle of Fruit for Faithful Service. Five ladies invited me to come and minister in the community known as West Savannah. For their faithfulness, the husbands of these ladies either came to know Jesus Christ (two of them terrible drunks) or they repented of backsliding to become active in local church work.

4. The Principle of the Bucket From the Well. The old adage is surely true, "What's in the well, comes up in the bucket." When I didn't know what to preach and had not prepared, I simply shared the message from the scriptures that God had put upon my heart. God used the simple messages I preached. People got saved and Mr. Miller was transformed into a dedicated worker for God.

CHAPTER TWO

LET'S PAINT THE WHOLE CHURCH IN A WHOLE DAY

The Westminster Presbyterian Church was a beautiful old colonial building, with tall steeple and bell tower, located in a neighborhood that had once been the home of wealthy middle class Savannahians. It was approximately two miles from downtown, therefore a short carriage ride in the days of horse and buggy, or later they rode the trolley car that ran down the Old Augusta Road. The neighborhood was filled with a number of Victorian large two-story homes built about the turn of the century, i.e. 1900. Each frame house was painted white, and graced with large spacious porches on both the first and second levels, designed for evening sitting after a long hot day.

The people of West Savannah built a colonial sanctuary that extended their life-style into the house of God, and reflected their love of God. The large frame church building had four tall pillars reaching two-stories from the front porch to hold up the roof, over which a towering steeple pointed toward heaven. The large old bell had been taken out of a steam locomotive, and was a gift of the Central of Georgia Railway to the church. Many in the neighborhood were engineers or conductors working for one of the several railway lines that passed immediately to the south of the neighborhood, i.e. Central of Georgia, Savannah and Atlanta Railway, Seaboard Coastline, Atlanta Coastline Railway and Southern Railway.

Originally, Westminster Presbyterian Church was a large auditorium that seated approximately 400, with seven vaulted windows on either side, each arch told people this was a sacred building. Some of the windows were stained glass, others were just smoked depression glass with small sections divided by leaded strips.

But with time, the large auditorium was divided into five Sunday School rooms,

bathrooms, a pastor's study and the smaller sanctuary that seated 175.

"The building is one big paint blister," I observed when I became pastor. Since it had been years since the building had been painted, the white paint was cracked . . . puckered . . . and chalky. I could see raw wood between the gaping cracks in the paint, the weather beaten siding was beginning to rot. I saw crumbling window frames, broken molding, and loose deck board on the front porch.

"Your church doesn't need revival," a resident told me when I was trying to present Christ to him, "your church needs a coat of paint . . ."

I was embarrassed.

Whether the man was right or not, he influenced my thinking. As I looked at the sagging framing and decaying building, I decided if we painted it, visitors would come. Whether I was right or not, I really felt that painting the building would attract residents to the church. Naively, I thought they would come to a clean repainted building. Later, I learned people don't visit because of facilities, but because of excitement and the power of the gospel. What I didn't realize, is that community involvement in painting the old building would attract many of them to Christ. When the members took pride in their church building, their renewed loyalty produced excitement. Then the community visited to see what was happening.

As a young preacher, I was deeply into object lessons. So, the following Sunday without any planning, any committees, or much forethought, I announced to the small congregation, "See this piece of blue chalk . . . ?"

I held the blue chalk up to tell them that blue chalk could make a difference in the church.

"God could bring revival to the church through this blue chalk."

I explained that this week . . . this Saturday morning I was going to start at the front porch

and walk around the building, drawing a blue line every ten feet." I dramatically pretended to draw a blue line from high in the sky down to the floor. Then with all the authority of an Army sergeant telling young recruits what to do, I announced,

"I am going to write your name on your ten feet."

I explained their names would be written in blue chalk on the bottom of their section. Everyone would have to start painting under the eaves and paint their way down to the lowest board, finally painting over their names.

"We can paint the whole church in a whole day," I challenged.

Like a sky filled with lightening during a summer storm, the small audience bristled with electricity. For the next two or three minutes I continued to explain the project, but no one listened to me. People began whispering to one another. At the time, I was not sure they were rebelling or not supporting my idea. Mr. Seckinger put his hands up, which was the custom in this small church at announcement time,

"I got a two-story extension ladder, we're going to need a lot more than one ladder," the old man explained. He told the audience that we'd need a lot of extension ladders if everyone was going to paint at the same time. I had not thought about the ladders. Then going on he mentioned, "I am too old to get up on a ladder, but I'll get my son to do my section."

"We gotta have a lot of tall ladders, " another of the men said, "I'll start rounding them up from the neighborhood."

"We need to get the ladies organized for a picnic dinner," the Mrs. Smith in charge of Ladies Auxiliary spoke out. (There were three Mrs. Smiths in the church).

"Whose going to get the paint?" Mr. Strickland said. He was a plumbing contractor and understood what it meant to get supplies for workers. I hadn't thought about the paint.

"I'll get the paint . . . and the brushes . . . and the thinner . . . there will be a lot of things to get ready before Saturday," the corporation contractor announced. I hadn't thought about any of the supplies.

For the next couple of minutes no one listened to me, everyone was jabbering among themselves. The idea was captivating. They had all grasped the idea of painting, "the whole church in a whole day." They quickly made the idea their idea. The buzz of whispered conversation was not disrespectful, nor was it rebellious. It was like pouring milk into rice krispies and listening to snap, crackle and pop. Everyone had an idea, and each was telling someone else what they thought. I learned that morning that ideas are a powerful tool for leaders to move a congregation. As a matter of fact, the idea of painting "the whole church in a whole day" was much greater than the sermon I preached that day. I don't remember what I preached, and I doubt anyone paid much attention. At the end of the sermon, I stood at the back door to "shake them out," everyone told me what they were going to do about painting the church. Some ladies talked about bringing lunch, others talked about what needed to be done, while other told me exactly what they wanted to paint.

That next week at Columbia Bible College, I didn't think much about the project, only remembering to pray, "God, help us to paint the whole church in a day, so people will want to attend church." Then I added, "And please may no one get hurt falling off a ladder."

Usually, Friday nights were date nights for me and Ruth, but that week I arranged to travel home on Friday afternoon, I wanted to be there early on Saturday morning. I had told everyone that we would begin at 7:00 AM in the morning, before the heat of the noon. It was just too hot to ask lay people to stand in blistering sun during the noonday to paint a gleaming white building.

I rode up to the church on my bicycle at about ten minutes to seven; the place was a beehive of activity. Already, the church was surrounded by cars, pickup trucks; there was even a paint contractor's truck backed up on the sidewalk to the front porch. Even though not a member of the church, a contractor who attended a Baptist church said, "It's too dangerous for someone to try to paint the ceiling of the porch, it's two-stories tall." He constructed his scaffolding, and did the dangerous work in two hours.

When I arrived, there were at least a dozen long ladders leaning up against the cracking paint of the building. On the front porch were dozens of gallons of white Old Dutchboy cans of paint; Mr. Strickland had gotten a donation from a local distributor. Out on the lawn, there were blankets spread everywhere with babies, diaper bags, and teen age girls intermittently playing, and changing diapers.

I sent a couple of the junior boys scurrying through the church and around the building to gather everyone to the front porch for prayer. People were there I had never seen in my life, and would probably never see again; they had shown up to help us paint the church. They were captivated by the idea, "Painting the whole church in a whole day." There were many forces at work that day that I didn't understand: community pride, helping friends who were members of the church, several fathers who showed up to help paint just because their children attended our Sunday School.

"Let's get with it," one middle-aged father yelled, "I still want to get some fishing in today."

"We need to pray first," I announced from the front porch to the crowd standing on the grass, and then lifting my hand as in pastoral benediction, I prayed, "Lord, this is your house, bless the efforts we do for this house, that they may be for thee . . ." I not only prayed to God for his

blessing, I was "semi-preaching" in my prayers to make sure everyone understood why we were painting the building. "Help that no one would fall from a ladder, mixes the paint wrongly, or spills paint on anyone else . . ." I was serious in my prayer, but I remembered several snickers through the crowd when I prayed that people might not get spattered with paint. Of course I prayed, "Help every unsaved person here today to find Jesus as Savior, and may this building be a lighthouse for hundreds of children to come and find Him as their Savior."

"AMEN."

"Start the marking," someone yelled immediately, "we're burning sunlight," a southern expression that means we shouldn't waste time.

I began at the front door of the door, and worked down the front porch to my right. After stepping off ten paces, I wrote the name Miller in caps, and indicated that the Miller Family would take this first section, including the stained glass window. After ten more steps I wrote the name Hair, for Silla Hair who had been instrumental into getting me to the church. As I continued my steps around the church, several people volunteered for different sections of the building, some wanting to paint around the window of their class room, others wanted to paint around a particular stained glass window. Almost immediately after I drew the blue line, a ladder was thrown up against the building, and you could hear the squeaks as someone climbed to the top. Then systematically the noise began,

"Scrrr . . . scrrr."

The scraping began and the powdered paint puffed out into the morning breeze like dust rising off a dry country road. Those below were peppered with falling paint particles as the scraping began,

"Scrrr . . . scrrr . . .scrrr . . ."

When I came to the section back of the pulpit, I said I wanted to paint it because the pulpit was mine. Mr. Strickland disagreed,

"No . . . we need you to walk around and inspire everybody," he explained. Then he suggested,

"Get a paint brush, bucket and paint a little in everybody's section . . . that'll make everybody happy . . . and nobody will give up."

I thought it was a good idea, so I assigned the back of the pulpit to someone and kept going until we had completely circled the church. As though God in His sovereignty looked down from heaven to bless the endeavor, there were the exact number of families present that was equal to the exact numbers of sections I had stepped off around the church.

Like a swarm of scurrying ants over an ant hill, immediately after someone steps on the ant hill, the people of West Savannah scurried over the Westminster Presbyterian Church with enthusiasm, and pride; likes of which I have not seen in any church in my life.

There was yelling . . . talking . . . laughing . . . and teasing from one group of workers to another. After about forty-five minutes, someone broke into song . . . an old fashioned gospel hymn. To this day I don't remember what they sang, but it was uplifting to hear people who were surrounding the church building with paint, to surround the building with their voices. They sang the old songs that church people and non-church people knew, with everyone joining in.

I went from section to section painting a little bit on every section. Wanting to make some kind of contribution, I chose to paint the bottom two boards on the church, all the way around the church. In doing so, I was the one who covered up all the names.

Mr. Strickland had two men ripping out rotting boards, replacing them with new lumber. The sound of a power saw could be heard a block in each direction, telling the whole

neighborhood there was life and pride down at the Westminster Presbyterian Church.

At about nine thirty the Baptist paint contractor finished the ceiling to the front porch, then folded up his scaffold, packed it on top of the truck, and left.

Standing inside the front hallway with Mr. Strickland, the musty smell of the corridor was a stark contrast to the crisp clean smell of paint outside the building.

"We need to freshen up the inside, just like the outside," Strickland said to me.

"It really stinks in here, it smells like old people, or it smells nasty like poor people's houses who never clean," he went on to make his point.

This was an answer to prayer. I was embarrassed by the stale smell in the church building and had even prayed for God to take it away. While I had asked God to take away the smell, that was a prayer that God did not answer the way I wanted. The amazing way God would answer this prayer taught me something about God. When we ask God to do something, He sometimes puts the ball back into our court and shows us how to get the job done.

"It's this rug that stinks up the whole church house," Strickland said to me. And then the two of us on our hands and knees with noses down to the rug, crawled along smelling the old rotten, worn rug. It was probably forty years old.

"Let's see what's under it," Strickland said to me. He went over to the corner of the hallway, took a hammer and ripped the rug up at the corner. "There's a hard wood floor underneath . . . a beautiful maple hardwood," he discovered. The yellowing tarnished hardwood flooring badly needed painting. Sand in the rug had worked its way between the floor and the mat, grinding the paint off the hardwood floor. But even though it needed paint, it didn't look as bad as the worn out rug, and it sure wouldn't smell.

"Do you think you and I could rip this carpet out of here before any of the elders saw us?"

Strickland asked me. He was going to do something that I later would learn as a principle in leadership, "It is easier to get forgiveness than permission."

"Sure."

"Let's do it."

Down the hall we ripped at the rug. I pulled the rug, Strickland was on his hands and knees, prying out the carpet tacks.

"Don't take it outside," he warned me, "somebody will see it." Then he went on to explain, "We don't want the women to know what we're doing yet."

There were twelve long pews on each side of the auditorium. It was easy to unscrew the floor bolts, and slip the pew across the aisle between the pews on the other side for temporary storage until we could get the carpet up on one side. Within thirty minutes the carpet in half the auditorium was up and pulled to the center. Within another thirty minutes the rest of the auditorium carpet had been pulled to the center and rolled into the center aisle. We didn't take up the carpet on the platform because it was inlaid under the crown molding. Anyway, it would have taken too long to remove the carpet, and replace the molding.

When we had all the carpet unloosed and ready to move, we called several of the men to help us. Out the double doors we pulled, grunted and shoved the massive carpet out onto the street, not knowing what the ladies would say.

Obviously, the ladies had to go inside and inspect the floor. They all agreed that we needed to get rid of the carpet. I'll had to admit the auditorium preached better without that absorbent wool rug to soak up every word. And it sang better than ever before. The next day our voices bounced off the floor and reverberated off the walls and ceiling.

By 12:00 AM Saturday morning, most of the painting was done. Those who finished

early, helped those who didn't have as many family members. Because we had started at the top and painted down; an early morning picture of the church building looked like it was under siege, with dozens of people on ladders trying to conquer the church building at the same time. But by noon, the white building glistened in the noonday sun. When you got close to the boards, you could see that the church needed a second coat of paint. But the original coat had been so weather-beaten and faded, in comparison to the glistening white new coat of paint; that no one seemed to care. And no one offered to come back next week to paint a second coat.

"Put it on thick," Strickland kept saying as he walked around the church supervising what people were doing. He had sent some people back up the ladder to paint a thicker coat before the first coat was dry; just because he could see the grain of wood through the paint.

A church congregation has no greater satisfaction than to sit on the front lawn, eat fried chicken, potato salad and home made buttermilk biscuits, then gaze admiringly at a freshly painted building that each one just helped create. I sat among the people, knees crossed, chewing on about my fifth leg of chicken. I felt like a conquering general who had just won a great battle or a student coming out of an exam where he just made an "A". To feel the friendship of dozens of church members, plus their friends and neighbors, all sitting around talking; is one of the greatest experiences that any pastor can have. It was *koinonia* . . . what the Bible describes as "fellowship one with another."

By the time we painted, "the whole church in a whole day," I had turned from age nineteen to twenty; and even that tender age was too young to pastor a church. But what my age could not do for me, or mitigate against me; was overcome that day when we painted the "whole church in a whole day."

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Power of Credible Vision: I did not understand leadership principles or how to assign tasks to people, I just led them. When I challenged them to paint "the whole church in a whole day," I learned the power that a leader can have in motivating people to serve the Lord. All I had to do was to give them a task, . . . a believable task, . . . an achievable task, . . . and a task that they wanted to do. This task was simply a vision that we can paint "the whole church in a whole day."
2. The Principle of On-Site Credibility: The people "bought into" my challenge to, "paint the whole church in a whole day," because I was part of the vision. I walked around the church to paint a part of every person's section and stayed with them from beginning to end. That day I learned it is not how much I do, it is how much work I can get others to do.
3. The Principle of Vision Before Details: What I didn't understand at the time about leadership, I know now. We lead through vision. When I took the leadership, I gave the people a vision of painting the whole church first, before I plunged into the details of paint, ladders, brushes, and the hundreds of other details it would take to "paint the whole church in a whole day." However, when the vision was adequately sold to the people, and they bought into the vision; there was enough power in that vision to attract people along side to get the job done. They took care of all of the details. I have learned that as a leader if I could get the people excited about a task, they'll make it work.
4. The Principle of Questionable Decisions: Mr. Strickland and I ripped out carpet that had been on the floor for probably forty years. Whether we should is not the question, we did it and were willing to take the consequences. Too often leaders won't take responsibility for their ideas. They run to get permission from others because they avoid accountability;

but Mr. Strickland and I saw a problem, saw what was the right things to do, and we did it.

CHAPTER THREE

DROPPED ROCKS ON THE CASKET

"I've never preached a funeral . . .!!!" I told my Mother when I walked in the door of 107 Wagner Street, Savannah, Georgia. I was still nineteen years old and never had a course in Pastoral Theology. I didn't even know there was such a book as the *Star Ministerial Manual* that laid out exactly what a pastor should say and pray at a funeral. As far as I knew, I was just to stand before the people to preach and pray what God put upon my heart.

I had arrived home around 1:00 Saturday afternoon. Early that morning I had left Columbia, South Carolina, at 6:00 AM on the Southern Railway train. In Savannah I transferred to a city bus . . . transferring twice . . . each time barely making my connection.

"That was the quickest connection I ever got across Savannah," I thought as I walked into my Mother's house. I did not realize that God in His sovereignty had worked out the quick connection so I could preach the sermon of an eighty-two member of my church who had died two days earlier. They told my Mother to get me to the church as quickly as possible.

"They're waiting at the church for you," my Mother told me as I came into the house. To my shocked response, she told me, "Hurry . . . as fast as you've ever gone."

I quickly put on a white shirt, tie and black suit. When you're nineteen years old, you have to impress people with the way you dress; it surely doesn't come from your innermost maturity. I rolled up my pant leg, stuck my Bible under my belt buckle, jumped on my racing bike and scooted down Wheaton Street, heading seven miles across town to Westminster Presbyterian Church.

I was speeding and I knew I could make the run across town in thirty-five minutes. I prayed for the Lord to help me hit every light green, and He answered my prayer.

"What am I going to say?" I thought all the way to the church. I pedaled as fast as I could, not

wanting to be late . . . yet I didn't want to get there at all. I was on the spot . . . I had to preach a sermon . . . and I didn't have a clue of what to do.

People expect a lot out of a nineteen year old preacher, simply because he had preached sermons where people got saved.

Little did I know what would happen at that funeral. I would suffer one of my most humiliating moments as a pastor, but then in defeat and humiliation; God would use me more in my brokenness than for any other single experience at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

As I ran in the back door of the church, I was met by Reverend Carroll Stegall, Senior Pastor of Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church. The Savannah Presbytery had assigned him to supervise me. No one could miss him, he was a large man who always wore a bow tie and light suit. His salt and pepper or graying hair revealed his advancing age. He had retired as a foreign missionary from the Belgian Congo, and came home to pastor the church in which I grew up. Looking at me through the small, rimless, wire-spectacles, the kind Harry Truman wore, he said with a knowing smile, "I heard you had your first funeral and I thought you wouldn't know what to do . . . so I've come to help you."

"Ain't God good . . .," I thought in crude English, but expressed a hallelujah to God for answers to prayer. I didn't know what to do.

"Let's go over the order of service," he said, motioning us to go to my study, "you can talk to the family after we get the program arranged."

By now it was a few minutes before 2:00 PM and I suddenly felt secure. With the help of Reverend Carroll Stegall, this funeral would be done the proper way.

"Where is your ministerial manual?" Stegall asked me.

"What's that?" was my abrupt answer.

He only laughed . . . and shook his head with a smile.

"Just do what I tell you to do," and with that instruction I walked out to lead my first funeral.

The eighty-two year old man was the father of Silla Hair, one of the women instrumental in getting me to pastor Westminster Presbyterian Church. I had been in her home the previous Sunday evening after the evening service, and in chatting with her father, I asked the same question that I had asked of everyone else,

"Have you been born again?"

"I sure have," the feeble man sneered without a hesitation. He nodded his head, approving of my question and said,

"I have the seal of God's Spirit in my heart."

He told he was of German descent and had come from the Moravian community approximately thirty-five miles in the direction we call, "up in the country." It was up the Savannah River where the Moravians first settled when they came to Georgia with John Wesley. He told me how that as a boy he had met Jesus Christ and had been born again. I believed the man, and after I left the home; I had not thought about Mrs. Hair's aging father again until I was told he had passed away.

The funeral went well. I stood and read the scriptures when Reverend Stegall called on me, and then later I stood and led in prayer when he called on me.

"We'll walk in front of the casket out the door," he whispered to me. "You follow my lead, the funeral director will roll the casket out behind us."

The internment of the body to the grave took place in the old Moravian Cemetery approximately thirty-five miles away. Reverend Stegall did not have time to make the long trip into the country and to return that afternoon. So he gave me careful instructions on what to do. As he instructed me, my stomach began to tighten again. He was not going with me.

"When you first get there, stand at the rear of the hearse," Stegall told me that I should wait

there until the family arrived. Then he explained that when the pall bearers took the casket out of the hearse, I should lead them to the open grave and stand at the head, i.e. where the head of the body would be placed.

This seemed simple to me. Then Stegall told me I was to wait until the family was seated then gather all of the friends to stand around.

He told me to read John 14:1-3, offer a prayer and commit his body to the grave; and then offer condolences to each member of the family seated on the first row. After that I was to go stand out of the way and the funeral director would take over.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Sounds easy to me, " I said.

And with that I rode in the front seat of the hearse for thirty-five miles up to the Moravian Cemetery.

Everything went well, I waited at the rear of the hearse; the pall bearers picked up the casket, and I led them to our assigned place. After the family was seated, I did as I was instructed. I read scripture, but rather than reading it, I quoted it from memory. Then my problem began. In some movies I had seen a pastor pick up dirt and spread it onto the casket saying, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

So before I prayed, I picked up some red Georgia clay. The only trouble was that it was not porous sand that could fall between your fingers. I picked up a large clod of hardened red Georgia clay. It had been dug out of the deep wet earth, but now in the blazing sun had turned brick hard. I held my hand out over the gaping hole and said,

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," and squeezed the hardened clay, but it didn't turn to sand in my

hand.

I flustered and my ears turned red.

Twisting the clay in my hand to get a better grip, I even tried to break it in half with my thumb; I squeezed again . . . as hard as I could. Everyone saw what I was doing. My embarrassment deepened. I silently prayed,

"Dear Lord, help me break this clod . . . I am embarrassed." Then clearing my throat I began again.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." And then mustering up the last ounce of energy in my body, I squeezed as hard as possible and shook my fist to break the clod, but to no avail. There were three clods in the hand, I tried to rub them together to break them but that didn't help. Then, like a boy learns to break two pecans together in one hand, I tried to break the clod one against the other. But nothing happened. In desperation, not knowing what to do, I held my hand over the gaping hole and dropped the hardened clods of clay onto the casket.

"Thwang," the first clod hit the top of the metal top of the casket, its sheet metal lid echoing like small stones thrown onto a tin roof.

"Thwang . . .!" As the second hit the casket top, I closed my eyes in embarrassment.

"Thwang . . ." the third echoed a finality.

I felt every eye of family and friends staring at me. I was hotter with embarrassment than the heat of the Georgia sun the hung like a red wafer in the sky.

"Let us pray," I announced, "Lord, help us . . ." I don't know if my request was more for my embarrassment, or for the grieving family over the loss of an eighty-two year old father and grandfather. I stumbled through the prayer.

Then I went and shook hands with each family member, and offered my condolence. I told

each one that we would see him again in the resurrection. As soon as possible I escaped the crowd to stand by the hearse. I wanted the protection of the front seat so no one could see me . . . or better, . . . laugh at me. It was one of those moments when I wanted to be by myself. I didn't want to talk to the funeral director who walked over to me when he had finished helping the family into the limousine. He held out the daisy in his hand, and waited for me to receive it.

As I reached out an open hand, he dropped the daisy into my outstretched open palm and said, "Squeeze this flower."

I tightened my fist around the daisy, but did not squeeze it as tight as he suggested.

"Go ahead . . . squeeze it . . . it'll crush in your hand . . . it is not hard Georgia clay . . ."

"Next time use a flower, not red Georgian clay . . ."

I squeezed the daisy and let the petals fall to the ground. That small act was therapy. It was a relief to see the white petals fall to the weeds of the cemetery grounds. He explained that he saw what had happened. He told me not to be embarrassed, that all the family and friends were pulling for me. Then he said a very encouraging word,

"They like you . . . you'll be all right."

I said nothing as the hearse drove thirty-five miles back to the church. When they dropped me off at the church on the corner of Fourth and Alexander Street, one of the pall bearers invited me,

"Come on down to Silla Hair's house and get something to eat . . ."

In the South, friends and families bring in food for the loved ones at a funeral. The kitchen is stacked with food, much like a church covered dish dinner. Everything is there, from fried chicken, to snap beans, to biscuits, corn bread and yeast dinner rolls. The kitchen table was as packed as any church supplier I've ever seen. We filled our plates and I went back into the dining room where twenty-four chairs circled the edge of the room. The dining room table had been taken out, it was the

room where the body had been kept in the coffin for viewing before the funeral. Now the room was empty except for a circle of people, who all sat around eating, not knowing what to say to one another.

When the meal was finished, there was a moment of silence. No one knew what to say. Silla Hair, daughter of the deceased, turned to me and beckoned, "Preacher . . . what do you have to say to us . . .?"

Honestly I didn't know what to say. I had never been in this situation before. But I always knew how to present Jesus Christ, and to ask if people had been born again. I turned in my Bible to John 3, reading the story of Nicodemus who had come to Jesus by night. Jesus told him, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . ." Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus that being born again was not of flesh, nor of water, but a person had to be born again by the Holy Spirit.

Late that afternoon as the sun was setting and an early evening was coming, I took approximately twenty minutes to preach a sermon to that family sitting in a circle around the dining room. I preached, "Ye must be born again . . ."

It was the same sermon I had preached at the Miller's house in West Savannah when he got saved. But here was another opportunity, people I would not see again who came from many areas, were gathered in a moment of grief. I preached the new birth. When I finished my sermon, I started around the room asking each one individually the same question."

Have you been born again?"

Almost all of them told me, "Yes." Or they simply shook their heads in approval. I think they answered as they thought they should. I didn't think all of them were born again, but I didn't confront them. I simply let each person respond as he or she wanted.

During the next year, many of those sitting in that room would come to the church, listen to me preach and at the gospel invitation, would walk forward to receive Jesus Christ as Savior. And in

almost every instance, they began thinking about getting saved after the funeral in Silla Hair's dining room. They reminded me that I put them on the spot and asked the question, "Have you been born again?"

They reminded me that that question penetrated deeply, perhaps because they were thinking about death; the question was more meaningful than any other time in their life.

Silla Hair had been married three times. Because of the funeral and my sermon in her dining room, two of her husbands were saved, Allen and Ernest.

Today, I look back at the funeral and chuckle at my naiveté and brashness. I wanted to do the right thing in the right way. I wanted to make a good impression yet, people in the community chuckled for several years remarking that I was the pastor who, "dropped rocks on the casket . . ."

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Principle of Anointed Brokenness. Sometimes God cannot use us because of our pride or arrogance, we simply will not let go of our ego and allow God to work through us. So God must break us, sometimes embarrassing us with the things we hold dearest, such as preaching a funeral, or preparing to make a prayer.
- 2., The Principle of Planted Seed. That day I planted the seed of the gospel in the hearts of many people, but of course they had heard the message before. The difference was at their moment of brokenness, i.e. the death of a loved one; they were more receptive to the message of salvation than at any other time in their life. I did something that they never experienced before, I put them on the spot. I asked them if "they had been born again?"
3. The Principle of Receptivity. Many times I have preached the gospel to people who are not ready for it, but sometimes questions such as, "Have you been born again?" prepares the heart for a time when they will later receive Christ as Savior. So God taught me to look for moments of

receptivity in the hearts of the people and use His Word to make people responsive to the message.

4. The Principle of the "Seasons of the Soul". Timing controls everything in life, even when people come to know Jesus Christ as Savior. There is a time to be born, a time to be saved and a time to die. Little did I know that I walked into the dining room of a family, it was their "season of the soul" where they were open to being converted. I preached the gospel and they responded, not immediately but later in time.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHO STOLE THE BRIDE?

Every preacher wants his first wedding to be proper, mine ended in a fiasco . . . of gigantic proportions. When I say gigantic proportions, I could be talking about the bride, or I could be talking about the incidents of the evening, or I could be talking about what I thought would be repercussions throughout the whole community.

Edith had grown up in the community, and throughout her childhood had attended both Bible School and Sunday School, however not on a regular basis since her teen years. I wish I could say that Ernest also grew up in the community of the church, but he didn't.

Edith met Ernest in a bar, and when I found out about it, it left me speechless. I was going through the usual pre-marriage counseling with Edith and Ernest when I casually asked,

"Where did you two meet?"

"The Evergreen Bar," Ernest answered with straight forward honesty. Because he had not been around my kind of preacher, he didn't know how I stood on drinking, nor my view of separation from sin. Then to compound the problem, Ernest went on to add,

"The Evergreen Bar is not hard to find," his drawl slowly dropped his words in front of me, "it's the one by the Evergreen Motel . . . you know that's the cheap motel with those little cabins out back."

I flustered. My pure mind immediately rushed to evil. I thought she went to this bar to pick up a man, she met Ernest, and they went straight to one of the little cabins to commit adultery.

I wanted to stop the counseling session right there. I wanted to say that I would not be a part of an unholy alliance, or any other sins of the flesh. But the wisest thing I ever did, is not to blurt out what was on my mind. The wisest thing I did was to let people talk. So I let them tell the whole story.

May I quickly say that my view of marriage as a young preacher was not as broad as it should have been. I thought that marriage should have been only for the sanctified, and that God ultimately blessed those marriages where man and woman met each other in virgin purity, and the first night was the first time. My holy view of marriage, was only surpassed by my holy desire to return this sacred institution to its original loftiness. I did not understand that marriage was an institution; the inevitable union of man and woman ordained by God, blessed by the church and legally constituted by the state. God had blessed the first marriage, and since all institutions are in fact instituted by God, marriage whether between believers or unbelievers, should have the blessing of God. Edith and Ernest were doing the right thing.

Ernest continued to talk about the Evergreen Motel . . . that he saw Edith in a booth with her two friends, and he went over and asked her to dance . . . and she accepted.

Again, I interrupt the narrative to remind you that as a young minister I preached against dancing. I told people it was another tool of Satan to corrupt the youth. But Ernest didn't know my perspective at the time. He had not heard my preaching. With naiveté of a six year old driving a car, Ernest continued to lay out the whole events on how he met Edith. Obviously, he didn't see the disapproval in my face, event after event after event.

I decided not to confront the events or the Evergreen Motel. I decided just to lay out the principles of God's Word, and let the Holy Spirit apply them to Ernest's life. I'm sure that the Holy Spirit spoke to Ernest's heart, but I am not sure he understood anything I said. I went through the whole marriage outline that had been provided me in the ministerial manual, indicating the role of a husband in a Christian home, and the role of the wife in that home.

Two or three things had to take place before the marriage could happen. First, I was not an ordained Presbyterian minister, only licensed by the Savannah Presbytery. Therefore, I was not legally

qualified to tie the knot. So the appointed counselor by the Presbytery, Reverend Carroll Stegall was contacted and he agreed to do the official part of the ceremony. In talking with him over the phone, he asked, "When is the rehearsal?"

"What's a rehearsal?" I asked.

Reverend Stegall stuttered over the next sentence, then chuckled. When his end of the phone went quiet, then I knew there was some trouble.

Reverend Stegall slowly explained to me why there was a rehearsal before weddings, just so everyone knew what to do.

"This family doesn't want a rehearsal," I explained to my senior counselor.

"She comes from a poor family, and the flowers will come out of her garden."

Then I explained that the bride would not have a wedding dress, but the couple was getting married in "Sunday go to meeting clothes." They had explained there just wasn't money enough for all the fixin's and trimmin's.

"We'll meet thirty minutes before the wedding, and I will go over the service with you," Reverend Stegall told me.

The wedding was arranged for a Saturday night, I arrived in Savannah, Georgia, Saturday morning from Columbia Bible College. That day I did my usual visitation in the homes and hospitals. When I arrived at the church, I saw that Edith's family was getting things prepared.

There were two or three bushes planted in buckets, arranged where the pulpit usually was located. The pulpit was moved to the side of the platform. The communion table was also moved to the side, there were dozens of potted plants in clay pots where the communion table had been. While not as beautiful as a florist might arrange, in its simplicity, it was an appropriate altar for a marriage.

The bride's mother was in the Sunday School assembly area, preparing for the reception, i.e. a

large punch bowl, a cake she had baked, and several plates of cookies. While it was very simple, it was very adequate for the evening.

When Reverend Stegall arrived, we went through the ministerial manual, I marked off those sections in the service for which I was responsible. When it came to the technical pronouncement, Reverend Stegall had to say, "By the authority of the Westminster Presbyterian Church, and the state of Georgia, I pronounce you husband and wife."

I read scripture and closed in prayer.

Immediately after the service, Reverend Stegall and I took the couple into my office. There we signed the marriage license and gave the document to the groom.

"Who do I pay?" Ernest looked at me with an inquiring question.

It was a question I had never faced in my life. I had absolutely no idea that people paid the preacher at a wedding. I just assumed it was a part of pastoral duties. Turning to Reverend Stegall I said,

"Reverend Stegall . . . I . . . Er-r-r . . ." I stumbled all over my words not knowing what to say, still embarrassed by the idea of getting money for preaching. Since I had turned to Reverend Stegall, Ernest handed him a five dollar bill. Stegall nodded graciously, and put it in his pocket. A little later, Stegall gave me the five dollars and told me to apply it to my school bill. Then he explained usually an honorarium was given at a wedding and sometimes funerals. With that formality out of the way, Stegall left for home, while Ernest, Edith and I went back in for refreshments. Within a few minutes Ernest came to me,

"We want you to go back with us to the office again . . ." Ernest told me in all seriousness. The wrinkled brow and nervous hesitation in his voice told me that there was something wrong. When we returned to the office, he coolly announced to me,

"My friends are going to steal Edith, you gotta help us escape . . ."

Three of Ernest's drinking buddies were in the Sunday School assembly area enjoying the refreshments. They had positioned themselves where they could keep an eye on my office. I had seen them in the Sunday School area, so I said to Ernest,

"If you go back out into the hall, they'll see you."

"Help me get Edith out of the window."

Now that was a formidable task. Edith must have weighed 250 pounds plus, and at this time she was still in high heels, hose, and her "Sunday go to meeting dress." Little skinny me, and tall lanky Ernest were supposed to help Edith out of a church window to the ground. I tried to get the stained glass window up, but the old wood, and the many coats of paint, had blocked the possibilities. On hot days, I was able to lift the window about two feet, that was enough for me to get through. But I knew that Edith could never get through that two foot opening.

I grabbed a letter opener and tried to scrape the dead paint from the cracks between the stained glass window and the window frame. I stood on the long pew that was in my office and scratched feverishly from the bottom to the top, then across the top hoping to free the window.

Ernest and I pushed with all of our might, and got the window up another twelve inches. Now there was a thirty-six inch hole in the window, just enough for Edith to get through.

She stuck her head out the window first, and put her knees up on the window sill. But I saw an immediate problem,

"She'll fall on her head," I alarmedly announced to Ernest. "She can't go out head first, let's back her out."

So we turned her around, and stuck her rear end out the window, with knees on the window sill.

"Hang on to her arms," I quietly commanded to Ernest. "We'll have to lower her to the ground."

"Don't drop her."

It must have been painful. Buttons were popping from off the front of her dress, and white chalky paint was smeared down the front of her dress. Ernest and I were hanging on with all of our might as we slowly lowered her to the ground. Under his breath I could hear him chuckle,

"She's a heavy one."

"You ought to know," I whispered back. "You married her . . . you picked her out."

When Edith was almost to the ground, two of Ernest's buddies burst out the outside door of the church, ran over and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her from our grasp.

Like a sack of grits falling off the back of a wagon, it was not a graceful drop to the ground. Her legs gave away and she went straight down to a sitting position, dragging the two buddies onto the ground with her.

"Ernest, help me . . .," Edith screamed. Then she lapsed into the lewdest profanity my tender ears had ever heard. Obviously, she didn't learn those words in Vacation Bible School or Sunday School.

A 1947 DeSoto 4-door sedan wheeled around the corner, spinning sand and blowing the horn. The back door to the DeSoto flew open. Those who remember the 1947 DeSoto realize that the back door opened forward. The two men dragged Edith screaming profanities over to the car. The driver was out by this time, pushing her in while the other two laughing buddies were pulling.

"Go get her . . ." I yelled to Ernest to save his true love.

"I can't jump out that window," he drawled in slow Georgia red-neck fashion, "I'll break my leg."

Ernest turned to the office door, there was only one door into my office. The door knob wouldn't turn, someone on the outside was holding the door knob so he couldn't open it. There was no lock on my office door, but some of the teenaged boys knowing what was going on, were jokingly helping out. They held the pastor's office door shut so Ernest and I couldn't get out.

Again the 1947 DeSoto began spinning sand as the motor roared for the escape. The driver honked the horn, and the cohorts were leaning out the window laughing, waving and yelling as they drove down Alexander Street away from Westminster Presbyterian Church. When the teenaged boys knew that the getaway car was out of reach, they released the office door. Ernest and I emerged to laughs and ridicules of the other wedding guests.

How does one describe laughter? Sometimes people laugh out of pity, or they laugh because it is unexpected, or they even laugh with ridicule. The room was filled with mixed laughter. It was a big joke to the teenaged boys, obviously the teenaged girls were yelling in disapproval.

I was embarrassed. Even though I had not been a part of the kidnapping, I was in the room when it took place. I was trying to help Edith and Ernest's escape, and I had seen the whole scenario unfold before my pure eyes. I like to control everything and wanted a dignified church, with respectable people. but I got a neighborhood full of common folks, who enjoyed one another, and there were enough young men in the neighborhood who enjoyed kidnapping the bride.

There was nothing I could do, so I learned very early that when you can't do anything . . . don't try to do anything.

I don't know what happened for the next ten or fifteen minutes, my memory is blurred. But by the time the evening was over, the greenery and potted plants were out of the auditorium, and the Sunday School area was cleaned up. I went out the front door and there was Ernest sitting dejectedly on the church steps. His heads was in his hands and he looked uncomfortable in suit and white shirt,

which he rarely wore. He was a pathetic sight sitting on the church steps of which he rarely attended.

"I am sorry . . .," I said in my ministerial condolence.

"That's all right . . ." Ernest explained to me. "We always steal the bride, she'll be all right . . ."

Ernest went on to explain that he had stolen one of the guys' brides, and his buddy was just paying him back for his dastardly deed. What was fun for him on a similar night months before, was now fun for the forlorn groom who was now paying Ernest back.

"Whatcha gonna do?" I stood in the warm Savannah evening, waiting for a cool breeze to come about.

"Well, I'll just sit here, they'll bring her back . . ." Ernest went on to explain that she would be all right with his friends. Obviously, I was concerned about sexual impropriety, again my pure mind runs in those thoughts. I don't know how I asked the question to Ernest if she would be all right in the presence of her friends, he assured me they would just get her drunk, and keep her out for two or three hours.

"She'll be back . . ."

As I walked around the corner of the church, I looked back and there was Ernest sitting in the light of those street lights that had been recently installed. Around back was my bicycle, and after I rolled up my pant leg and stuck my Bible in my belt, I rode off in the opposite direction, not wanting to see Ernest again because I didn't know what to say. It was a sad sight to see a new groom, his wife kidnapped sitting on the church steps. Since I didn't like sadness, I didn't want to see it again.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Listening Principle: There are many things in life we don't know, no matter how brilliant or experienced we are, none of us know everything. It is best to listen, for we can learn many things when other people talk. When we ask questions too soon, or show our ignorance too

soon, we lose respect of other people.

2. The Principle of Serenity Found in Absurdity: To me the whole evening was absurd, and yet to my parishioners, it was a way of life. Young men played their games and tried to steal the new bride all in jest, because it had been done to them. And as I look back, there was a deep respect for the institution of marriage. None of the young people in the church would have run away to get married or had the wedding in their home. They wanted to be married in the church and wanted the blessing of God on their marriage.
3. The Principle of Strength of Tutors: When beginning a task that is too big for you, seek a tutor who can guide you through the impossibilities and help you solve the unknowable problems. As long as there will be young ministers, there will be the elderly pastors who will teach them what to do.

CHAPTER FIVE

THERE'S NO TOILET PAPER

One of the most difficult tasks for a young pastor is to delegate. For one reason, he's too young. He has always been taught to do things for the older people, let them go first, and be self-reliant. For another thing, when you first pastor, you think you should know everything, do everything, be everywhere, and go get anything that anybody wants. As a result young pastors run ambulance services for the poor to the hospital, they end up baby-sitting with the senile, some will even let you go get groceries for them from the store. But I never thought getting toilet paper for a little boy would be a theological issue . . . a crucial issue . . . a little boy saving issue.

Let me explain why getting toilet paper for a little boy became so traumatic. My Sunday mornings at Westminster Presbyterian Church were hectic at best, even the couple of minutes I had between Sunday School and the worship service to review my message were sometimes interrupted; as it was on this particular morning. When I was dashing to my office a mother asked me for toilet paper.

But first, let's go back to review one of my typical Sunday mornings. I usually arrived around 8:00 AM, prayed and studied my message while no one was at the church. Promptly at 9:00 AM I went to the front hall, opened the narrow door to the left, climbed even more narrow steps to an obscure landing (not quite a second story), and began ringing the bell to call people to Sunday School.

Ding-a-ling . . . ding . . . ding-a-ling . . . ding . . . ding-a-ling

. . .

Each Sunday morning I altered the cadence to a different rhythm and meter, for no other reason than to just be different.

If it was summer I made sure the windows were all open and the fans were turned on, we didn't have air-conditioning only an oscillating fan on the platform that faced the audience until I began to preach, then the fan was turned on me, perhaps to cool down the sermon. In the winter time, I had to make sure that the floor furnace was lit and the church was warm. Since the church was old, there was no heat in the Sunday School rooms, so the oscillating fan was put in the hallway to blow heat down into the teaching section.

People began arriving around at 9:45 AM. I was a Sunday School superintendent who conducted opening exercise . . . I doubt if I opened much, or if I exercised much. Nevertheless, I led in the singing of three hymns, rousingly and emphatically.

"Let's sing as loud as we can . . ."

After the hymn, I led in prayer.

Then I made the announcements, and called for all people with birthdays to come forward to drop their pennies in the birthday cake that was really a bank. It was a plastic cake, with plastic candles and a slot in the top. Each person would come to drop in the slot the amount of pennies equal to their birthday, then I would lead everyone in singing, "Happy Birthday To You."

Each class taught the International Uniform Lesson, so a single sheet with the Scripture lesson printed on one side was distributed to all. I led in responsive reading, I read the first verse, the congregation repeated in unison until we completed the passage.

Then I usually dismissed in prayer, each person going to his or her classroom.

Next I taught the Junior boys in my classroom that overlooked the front porch.

When I was leaving my Junior boys' class to make a mad dash down the hall to my office, that's where it all happened. I closed the Junior class in prayer, and right in the hallway between the Junior classroom and my study the confrontation took place. It could not have taken place at

any other location in the church, because between my office and the Junior classroom was the men's restroom. It was old. The commode was old, the kind with the water tank up on the wall, and to flush the toilet you pulled the little chain that rushed the water through the pipe into the commode. Because the restroom was long and narrow, someone had purchased a long flat basin, and I always remember that it was too high for little boys to reach.

A lady came out of the men's restroom . . . that's right a lady came out of the restroom. She was a mother and held open the door,

"It's all right," she assured me with her matronly voice, pointing inside to her little boy sitting on the throne." Then dramatically she dropped her voice and whispered,

"There's no toilet paper in the men's room."

Panic hit me. Rather than being able to face the problem, muster all of the data, survey the possible solutions and come up with a workable answer, panic clogged all of the arteries. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to do. But I knew the someone had to do something, and since I was the pastor; I had to do something.

My first reaction was to tell her to get a newspaper, wad it up to make it soft, and use it. But that was an admission of defeat, it made our church look like the country out-house back on the farm. I couldn't bring myself to tell her that.

Then the brilliant thought hit me . . . the women's restroom. With a broad smile from here to eternity, I said,

"Look in the ladies bathroom, there will be some in there."

She began shaking her head negatively before I got the words out of my mouth and looking at me in a disgusting way as though I should understand what was happening. Her dismay suggested that I didn't know what was going on, or didn't care. She announced,

"I've already been there, that's why we're in the little boys' room
..."

She stood . . . waiting.

I stood . . . not knowing what to do.

The longer she waited, the more nervous I got.

I began to think about toilet paper, and realized the corner store was a block and a half away. I was young and fast, and if I broke into a dead run I could reach the store, get the toilet paper, and return just about the time that I should walk on the platform for the morning service. My feet told me,

"Go . . . go . . . go . . ."

For some reason caution held me back. I resisted the impulse of breaking into a dead run. One of the reasons was my perceived image of importance in the community. What would everyone think of the pastor in a dark suit running down the street at break-neck speed to the local store? I could hear the discussion the following morning at Mrs. Smith's house. I could hear her telling a neighbor, "You should have seen the pastor sprinting down the street in break-neck speed to the store to get toilet paper for a little boy . . ."

They would laugh . . .

I was embarrassed just thinking about the possibility.

I wish this story had a happy ending, or a funny ending or any ending at all. The problem is now past sixty years old, I can't remember what I did when I was nineteen.

My emotions exploded with an imperative to find her some toilet paper, yet there was a clogged drain to my memory tubes. I don't know what I did. I could have said,

"Some lady must have a Kleenex packet in her purse, let's check that out." But I didn't

think of that because I was emotionally embarrassed.

Or I could have thought,

"Let me get one of the ushers or elders to help you out, I have to prepare for the sermon . . ." but I didn't do that, I didn't try to get help.

Or I could have said,

"Mrs. Yarborough lives right next door to the church, I am sure she would loan us a roll of toilet paper . . ." But I didn't think of getting help from Mrs. Yarborough.

Why was the toilet paper issue so crucial in my thinking? And why cannot I remember its solution? In the first place, the emergency was a teaching moment for a young pastor. I had not learned how to delegation tasks to others; nor had I learned the role of sharing ministry with the men or women in the church.

Then I had an improper view of what the pastor was supposed to do, certainly an adequate view. If I was psychologically immature, and I certainly was; the toilet paper issue became a crisis to help me grow up and let others help me in ministry.

There was another factor involved. It was plain old pride and ego that was crouching in the hallway to pounce on me that Sunday morning. I was too proud to get help, so I didn't want to ask someone for help. I was too proud to suggest that she use just any old paper. I was too proud to ask her to use a Kleenex packet from anyone else. And certainly, I was too proud to dash head-long through the neighborhood to the local store. The fact that I even thought of these possibilities, and their problems; tell you how much pride was involved in the issue.

Whatever happened after the toilet paper incidence? I don't know. I seem to get along all right, I did look over my notes; and I went to the pulpit and preached that morning. Did God do a greater work that morning because He had humbled me? I doubt it. Did the lady's question

about the toilet paper distract me so that I did a poor job on my sermon? I doubt it.

I seemed to get along all right, and the church service flowed smoothly, and the people left that morning without any sign of distress, and the lady did continue to come back to the church. I suppose her son got cleaned up one way or another.

When I think about the toilet paper incident, I think about all the things in life that pastors are asked to do. Pastors should do what they can do, what it is in keeping with their task and what fulfills the goal of the church. They should do what they can do to help people, to relieve suffering, and to fulfill the example of Jesus.

But pastors need to learn those four magical words, "I can't help you." But I am sure someone else can help you. And, "I'll try to get help for you." Pastors should remember that they are human, very human, and that they are vulnerable, very vulnerable to pride and a "Messianic complex" that they think they can do everything. Next time you're faced with an impossible question from an exasperated person, remember the toilet paper incident in the life of Elmer Towns . . . and smile.

I do.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Principle of Separating Self From the Office. Too often pastors get their self-esteem and their self-perception all mixed up with the office God has given them. They need to disassociate their personal feelings from their professional task and be able to say, "I can't help you."

And "Let me find someone to help you."

2. The Servanthood Principle. The pastors are going to be asked to perform many tasks that they feel are beneath them. Even though I was frustrated with being asked about the toilet paper, there is a second side to that humorous event. Of all the people in the church, she came to me

first, and me only. Whether I could have done something, or should have done something; it was commendable that she told me that they had no toilet paper. As a matter of fact, her request might have revealed the attitude of the church toward me, they trusted me. That trust was the basis for some of the success at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

3. The Dignity Principle. While we detach ourselves from our office, we should do nothing to bring discredit that office. The word pastor comes from *poimen* which is shepherd, and a pastor is a shepherd of people. Christ is the shepherd of the church and each human pastor serves under Jesus Christ; and in his human limitation should do nothing to bring disdain to the office. When I think of all the things I wanted to do on that Sunday morning, and might have done; I am glad for each of those I did not do. I did retain the dignity of the Man of God, and could stand before an open coffin and preach the gospel, as well as stand before young couples and perform a marriage. They could look up to the office, and in some ways; the man who filled the office.

CHAPTER SIX

I HAVEN'T HAD HEALING 201 YET!

It was Saturday night and I had just gone to sleep. My sermon was prepared for the next day, the bulletin was done and as far as I knew, everything was ready for God to touch the people of West Savannah the next day. There was no anxiety in my sleep, but the tension I would face in the next two hours would change my life and teach me something how God heals people in this present age.

The phone rang.

Little did I know that the phone call would confront me with a major theological issue that I had no training to handle . . . healing. Before the night was over, I would be asked to heal someone . . . something I had never done. I'd be asked to lay hands on the sick . . . something I had never seen done.

"I hadn't taken Healing 201," I later thought.

I was only a Junior in Bible college.

The demanding phone rang incessantly, awakening everyone in the darkened house.

Immediately I was out of the bed and stumbled toward the dining room. There was panic in my mind. No one phoned the Towns' residence this late at night . . . except in an emergency.

"Who died . . ." I thought.

"Maybe someone had an accident . . ." My mind raced to the Emergency Room at the hospital. It was Saturday night and a lot of people in my parish got drunk on Saturday night. And drunken people cause a lot of problems.

"What's wrong," I heard my mother yell through the darkness as I picked up the phone.

"This is Mrs. Van Brackle," I heard the scratchy voice of an elderly woman whispering

through the receiver. Without exchanging pleasantries, she told me a detailed story what happened that afternoon.

There was a famous faith healer who had set up his tent in Charleston, South Carolina, 120 miles away. Mrs. Van Brackle told me if she could get to his tent, the faith healer would cure her cataracts. At age 82 Mrs. Van Brackle was almost blind. She got her two grandsons to drive her to Charleston. The boys . . . older than me at the time . . . were not church attenders. They didn't drive her 120 miles because they thought she would be healed. They were skeptical of the whole thing. But . . . they did it anyway. They just did it for their grandmother.

Mrs. Van Brackle arrived at the tent two hours early, filled out the card and was interviewed by an associate evangelist. Then the elderly woman who could barely see was placed in the healing line. She stood patiently, waiting for the meeting to start . . . then waited through the sermon . . . then waited her opportunity to go up on the platform.

"Reach both hands to heaven," the faith healer exhorted.

She reached for heaven.

"Heal!" he loudly commanded, thumping her on the forehead.

"Can you see?" he inquired.

"No."

He repeated the process a second time and with imploring expectancy, again asked,

"Can you see?"

Then the Faith Healer began the process a third time.

"Reach higher . . ."

Mrs. Van Brackle was reaching as high as possible . . . praying with all her heart . . . so intently she was afraid her heart would stop beating.

"No," she sincerely told the faith healer, slowly shaking her head from side to side, "I can't see at all."

"It's your lack of faith . . .," he barked. "Woman, it's your lack of faith."

When the faith healer told Mrs. Van Brackle that her lack of faith was the problem . . . he devastated her. She crumpled under his touch, and the associate evangelist helped her to the platform's edge. The two grandsons took her to the car, they didn't stay for the rest of the tent revival.

All the way home she told her grandsons, "I'll call my preacher . . . he'll help me."

It was past 10:00 o'clock at night when she got home back to West Savannah. She didn't consider how late it was. She told me the whole story over the phone . . . detail by detail . . . head blow by head blow.

"I gotta talk to you tonight," she pleaded. As a young preacher, I felt I had to immediately respond every time my people called. Today, I might not go see her. Back then I reacted that night and I'm glad I did because I grew in grace more than I helped her.

When you are a 20-year old pastor, you feel a need to impress people. Your age is a hinderance to rational thinking. So I turned on a night light and slipped on a white starched shirt and quickly tied a windsor knot in my tie. I finished dressing and slipped out the back door to my racing bike.

I rode my English racing bike all over Savannah as I pastored Westminster Presbyterian Church. I locked it to the gas meter at Candler Hospital or just left it at the front door of my parishioners.

I rolled up my pant leg to keep the cuff out of the greasy chain. I then stuck my Bible under my belt next to my stomach. It was seven miles across town to Mrs. Van Brackle's house,

and pushing hard, I knew I could be there in 35 minutes.

All the way to Mrs. Van Brackle's house, I fretted over what she said on the phone. Since the famous faith healer couldn't heal her, how could I? But beyond that, I was not sure I believed in faith healers or faith healing. I knew that God answered prayer and when a person prayed sincerely . . . God would heal.

"Do I correct her doctrine . . . or do I show sympathy?"

Mrs. Van Brackle lived in a house, called a shot gun house by the people in Savannah, Georgia. It had the title "shot gun" because there was a hall from the front door straight to the back door and a shot gun can be fired through the house without hitting anything.

I entered the house and walked down the hall passed the kitchen on the left. The two grandsons both had an open bottle of beer and had been sitting around the kitchen table talking about me. They were half drunk on beer by this time. One asked,

"Think you can heal her?"

I smiled and sheepishly grinned. I was more intimidated than anything else. I didn't try to witness to them, or tell them they shouldn't get drunk. I didn't know what to say. I just grinned and we passed a few pleasantries.

I was intimidated.

It was fear of false expectations. I didn't know what they expected of me. I didn't know what I could do . . . or not do. I just grinned . . . and they grinned back.

I walked past the kitchen, heading to the last bedroom on the left. It was a small room that looked more like a shed, because the rafters were exposed. The room had been the back porch that was now enclosed.

"Good evening, Mrs. Van Brackle," I greeted her as I entered the room. I didn't want an

audience, but the two half drunk boys followed me into the room. I didn't know what I would do . . . or what I would say . . . but I sure didn't want any spectators if I messed up.

Mrs. Van Brackle lifted herself up on one arm. Her stringy grey hair was disheveled, her eyes were hollow. Whether it was the strain of the day, or the late evening . . . or there was pain in her eyes . . . she seemed tired.

There was a musty smell in the room. Not the smell of old people, or the smell of dirt. It was a musty smell of wet wash in the basket before being hung out to dry. It had rained that day and the room felt wet, the walls felt wet. It made the room feel damp and musty.

I expected her to ask me to heal her . . . or at best to ask me to pray for her.

She didn't request either. In a whispering voice she said,

"The man told me I didn't have any faith," she spoke lifting her body higher off the bed.

Then repeating herself, she emphasizing each word.

"The . . . man . . . said . . . I . . . didn't . . . have . . . faith."

She paused.

Although I was young and not very wise on many issues, I knew enough when to keep quiet. I looked at her intently and she looked back. I didn't look at the two half-drunk boys, I didn't know how to react to them. But even though I wouldn't look at them, I could feel their eyes penetrating the back of my head.

The room turned strangely silent. She stared and said nothing and I looked back and said nothing. I could hear hard nasal breathing from one of the boys. Rain dripped from the roof's edge into a puddle on the ground. Then Mrs. Van Brackle's peppy voice broke the silence with a question. Not to ask me to heal her, but,

"How can I have faith?"

The simplicity of the question shocked me. My mind went blank. I was preparing an answer on healing or the ethics of faith healers. Her question caught me by surprise and my computer shut down. The screen went black.

The nasal breathing behind me was heightened. I knew they wanted an answer. They had given up their Saturday to take their grandmother to get healed, and nothing happened.

They wanted an answer. I was intimidated . . . I was frightened.

So I did what most people do when they are scared. I prayed.

"God, give me an answer."

It was a quickly breathed silent prayer. I didn't want to let Mrs. Van Brackle down. I wanted God to speak to the boys.

Then as quickly as I prayed, God brought a scripture to my mind that I had memorized. I told her,

"Mrs. Van Brackle, if you want more faith," I explained carefully, "you need more Bible."

I then quoted Romans 10:17, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." I told her this verse meant, "When we get more Bible in our life, we get more faith in our life."

I explained to Mrs. Van Brackle an illustration I had heard in class at Columbia Bible College. I held up five fingers of one hand and told her it took five fingers of one hand to tightly hold a sword, i.e. the sword which is the Word of God. Then holding my Bible before her with five fingers, I told her it takes five fingers to properly hold the Bible.

Holding my Bible with my little pinky finger, I showed her how the Bible would drop out of my hand. I explained the little finger was to hear the Bible.

Then holding my Bible with my ring finger, I explained that finger was to read the Bible.

"Two fingers are better than one."

I explained the tall finger was to study the Bible, and then the "pointer" finger was to memorize the Bible. The thumb stood for meditating on the Bible. I held my Bible with all five fingers that late Saturday evening, explaining that she would grow her faith by all five things: hearing, reading, studying, memorizing and meditating on God's Word.

"The more the Bible gets in you . . . and controls you . . . and becomes your passion, the more faith you will have."

We talked awhile.

Then I turned to the two boys and shared the plan of salvation with them, but didn't press them to receive Christ that evening. Then turning to Mrs. Van Brackle, I told her,

"Before leaving, I want to pray for you . . ." Mine was a simple request that any pastor may make of parishioners. But her response shocked me.

"Will you lay hands on my eyes and ask God to heal me?"

Again I panicked. I thought I had walked through a mine field unhurt. But this request was something else. I had never seen a preacher lay hands on someone for healing. I was not sure it was supposed to be done. I knew pentecostals did it, but I had never seen Presbyterians do it. My initial reaction was I didn't want to do it. It flashed through my mind.

"People will think you have turned into a fanatic . . . or worse . . . a faith healer." I wanted people to think I was respectable.

She closed her eyes and waited. I hesitated.

I quietly thought, "What will the elders of the church say when they hear about this . . . I've never heard of a Presbyterian laying hands on people."

I made my decision within five to ten seconds, but I was thinking a thousand miles an hour.

"Jesus did it," I rationalized, "but I'm not Jesus."

Then I realized I didn't have a reason not to do it. A settled peace fell on me, as purposely as you drop lemon in your tea. I didn't have a reason not to do it, so I reached out . . . awkwardly . . . with some hesitancy . . . and lay my hands on her eyes.

"Lord, You are the Great Physician . . . You can heal . . . if it be Your will, . . . heal her . . ." It was a typical Presbyterian prayer for sick people. I didn't shout, . . . I didn't command, nor did I beg. But, in my heart I knew I was talking to God and asking Him to heal Mrs. Van Brackle.

I rode my bike home and forgot about the incident. The following day I didn't mention praying for Mrs. Van Brackle in church. Nor did I mention it in my college classes the next week. I didn't ask prayer for her, nor did I pray for her again.

The next Saturday afternoon a small barefooted boy came to the church and told me Mrs. Van Brackle wanted to see me. I walked the one block from the church to her shot gun house. I felt it was more dignified to walk in the neighborhood, than to ride my bicycle. When I knocked on the door no one came, so I yelled down the hall. She was in the back room. When I walked in the room, she motioned for me to sit down next to the bed.

"Hand me the Bible," requesting the Bible and turning to Psalms, she began to read.

"Bless the Lord, Oh my soul, and all that is in me, bless His holy name."

"What do you think of that?" she asked.

"It's fine," I innocently responded. I didn't realize what she was doing, nor did I realize the enormity of the situation. I had forgotten about the previous Saturday evening when I prayed for her.

"I can see," she laughed out loud. "I can read the Bible." Her now seeing eyes twinkled.

"Your prayers healed me."

I was embarrassed at the conversation and was uneasy. I didn't like the thought of anyone having power to pray for healing. I knew God healed, but I honestly knew there was nothing in my heart that did it. My prayers were not exceptional. My faith was not exceptional. I was not exceptional.

"I'm uneasy with that kind of talk," I told Mrs. Van Brackle. I even tried to tell her it might have been the faith healer--with delayed reaction. But she would have none of that conclusion.

"My preacher healed me . . .," she later told her grandsons.

I didn't tell anyone about my prayers for 30 years. I was afraid they would think I was bragging, or that I might have power and someone would ask me to pray for their cataracts; and the next time nothing would happen. I didn't tell anyone because I knew it was not my prayers and I knew I didn't have what the Bible calls, "The prayer of faith shall save the sick" (James 5:16).

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Ready Answer Principle. When I first entered Bible college I began memorizing scripture for my personal growth and to answer my questions about my faith. I figured if I had an answer for my questions from God's Word, I would have answers for others. The bible exhorts us to be ready with, "An answer for them that ask a reason for the hope that is within you." I was able to answer Mrs. Van Brackle because I had memorized scripture.
2. The "Unexpected Phone Call" Principle. We never know when the phone call will come that threatens us or will dramatically change our life. The phone call late one Saturday evening interrupted my schedule, but proved to be an experience whereby God exploded my faith and began to teach me about healing.

3. The Principle of Following One's Heart. What should you do when you honestly don't know what to do? Not everyone can follow his/her heart because some are committed to evil, have hardened their heart, or at best; have no biblical witness in their heart that tells them what God would have them do. But if you have memorized the scriptures, have yielded yourself to God and have prayed daily for God's guidance; then when you face difficulties where you don't know what to do . . . follow your heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

YOU CAN SEE MR. SMITH NOW!

Death is one of the scariest experiences for a young preacher. I had handled a funeral, but I had no idea of what to do in a hospital room of someone on the verge of death, especially an unsaved person, even an atheist. I was sent to the St. Joseph's Hospital to witness to the only atheist in our neighborhood. Silla Hair expected me to get him converted. I blundered into a situation and God helped me.

Mrs. Smith was one of the three ladies in the church with the last name Smith. However, she was the only Mrs. Smith among the five ladies who led the mission Sunday School that got me to be their preacher. Also, she was the most quiet and retiring of the ladies in the church.

With salt and pepper gray hair, and an ever present white apron around her pudgy middle; Mrs. Smith had one of the cleanest houses in the neighborhood. It would have been a warm comfy house, except for the fact there were dozens of potted plants on her front porch, and too many dozens of potted plants in her living room. The house smelled like a florist shop and felt like a nursery. Of all the ladies in the church, she never invited me over for a meal. I just made pastoral visits into the living room.

Mr. Smith was never home when I visited.

Since she was the quietest of all the ladies, she once meekly requested, "Please pray for my husband, he doesn't believe in God."

"Hm-m-m- . . .," I thought to myself, "how do I present the gospel to an atheist?"

Mr. Smith worked nights, and slept days. I seldom saw him, but knew that he always wore a white shirt with sleeves rolled up past the elbow; and a straw hat. He was not fat, nor was he skinny; he had a Winston Churchill protruding middle.

Because his job kept him unavailable, and I didn't know how to share the gospel with an atheist, I never got an opportunity to witness to him. Even though the opportunities were not there, Mrs. Smith would always quietly say,

"You need to pray for Mr. Smith," she thoughtfully requested. You know he doesn't believe in God."

Usually, I took the young people to Youth For Christ on Saturday night, it was a good means of encouraging them spiritually. Because I was nineteen years old, a lot of young eligible high school girls attended our youth meeting, a lot more girls than boys. Their mothers constantly had me over for meals, and were always volunteering to chaperon the young people to their outings. So I never had difficulties getting someone to drive the young people to Youth For Christ.

On this particular night, I had led singing for Youth For Christ, and by my own egotistical estimation, "I had done a pretty good job." After the Youth For Christ was over, we were all standing around fellowshiping when Mrs. Silla Hair walked in the back door. Immediately, I knew something was wrong. She was not the chaperon of the evening, but she had a special message for me,

"Mr. Smith is in the Emergency Room at the hospital," Silla Hair told me. "He had a heart attack . . . he's not expected to live . . . Mrs. Smith and the family are there now."

I told Mrs. Hair I would get there as soon as possible.

"You can lead him to Christ," Mrs. Hair expressed great faith, much greater than mine.

When your pastoral compassion is centered on forty-five to fifty homes, you can be very specific in your deep feeling of anguish. Later, when I worked in a church of thousands, and someone from the church had a physical emergency, there was not a captivating "grip" on me when the same thing happened. I have not been "gripped" since the news about Mr. Smith captivated me that night. I felt compelled to go to the hospital, whether my feeling was guilt over not witnessing to him, or

compassion because he was in the neighborhood, or obligation because of my pastoral position . . . I don't know what the reason. But I knew I had to do something, and I didn't know what to do.

After the young people were dropped off in West Savannah, I rode my English racing bike over to the hospital, and according to my usual practice, I hid it around the back, locking it to a gas meter. Then strolling around to the front of the hospital with my Bible in hand, I tried to look as dignified as all of the other visiting clergy to St. Joseph's Hospital.

It was a large dark brick multi-story hospital in downtown Savannah . . . old . . . forbearing . . . very Catholic. Right in the foyer was a large pasty pink statue of the Virgin Mary, to remind us of the Roman Catholic oversight of the hospital. The floors were dark green linoleum over wood, and as I walked through the hall the noise from my leather shoes ricocheted off the walls.

"Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . ."

The Smith Family could hear me coming down the corridor, for I was the only activity in St. Joseph's Cardiac Arrest Center that evening. When I got to the Family Waiting Room, I saw Mrs. Smith and approximately twelve people that I didn't know. These were her grown children and in-laws. At age nineteen, I was the youngest looking in the room and probably the most immature. Also, I was the only one who looked uncomfortably out of place. I had on a white shirt and tie, my dark suit and carried a very big Bible. Today, you would say I looked like a Mormon missionary because of my racing bicycle, white shirt and tie, plus Bible.

I boldly entered the dimly lit waiting room, walked around and shook hands with each man, introducing myself as Mrs. Smith's pastor. It was approaching midnight and they had been there since supper time. They were tired, irritable, and many of them didn't want to "coddle" the young preacher whom they felt had little to offer to them.

"What can he say?" I heard one of them whisper to Mrs. Smith as I went over to talk with her,

not knowing what to say.

"He's not going to make it through the night," she said seriously, "the doctor doesn't give him much chance of making it."

The news of his imminent death compounded my problem. I didn't have the slightest idea of how to prepare a person to die, nor did I have a clue on how to prepare a wife and children for the death of her husband and their father. As a matter of fact, I didn't know how to prepare myself. My feelings for the people in West Savannah were personal. So much so, that I felt deeply for every problem, death and failure. Every time one of the teens was arrested, or got in trouble at school, I took it personally. Because I was the pastor, I felt failure when anyone in the church failed. When I couldn't lead someone to Jesus Christ, I felt I had let the whole church down. I felt they blamed me for my lack of spirituality. For some reason I felt that if Mr. Smith died, it would be my fault. Today, I realize that a pastor must detach himself from the problems of his people, so he can minister grace and help to the very people who need help. By emotionally identifying with people, the pastor tends to become neurotic and in his "co-dependency" relationship, he abdicates himself for any help he may give. But I didn't understand that as a young pastor, I just threw my heart into the family waiting room, walked in as one of them, and tried to help.

"But who was going to help me?"

There was a deeper problem. I glanced around the waiting room from one unshaven face glazed with anxiety into the eyes of the next. I wondered how many of them were atheists. Mrs. Smith was a delightful lady, but not the dominant force in her home. I didn't know about the strength of her husband's atheism, or how deeply each in the room was infected.

"Would you like me to lead you in prayer?" my nervous voice squeaked to the people in the waiting room. There were a few seconds of tension as one middle aged sibling exchanged glances with

another; finally one son said, "Mother would like that."

"Before I pray, I would like to read scripture to all of you," I announced. I quickly breathed a prayer that no nurse would interrupt me and that everyone would understand what I was reading. Then turning to John 3, I slowly read the passage of Jesus telling Nicodemus, "You must be born again," as I had explained the plan of salvation in home after home. I explained very carefully what it meant to be born again. They all lived in the "Christianized" culture of the South, and knew hymns, religious terminology, and they understood the Christmas message that Jesus was born of a virgin; and the Easter message that He had died for the sins of the world. But I had a deeper question for each of them,

"Are you born again?"

Even though I was young and intimidated by their perceived atheism, that evening in the hospital room I boldly proclaimed the necessity for everyone's new birth. I explained that church membership was not enough, that belief in God was not enough, or that faithful religious attendance was not enough. I pressed home the claims,

"You must be born again."

Then I prayed. When you don't perceive yourself as a spiritual intercessor who can rattle the windows of heaven, how do you pray? I only knew one way to pray, that was simply to open my heart to God. My prayer was unsophisticated . . . undignified . . . and the words were ill-framed, but nevertheless, I prayed from the bottom of my heart, because I felt responsible for his healing, and should he die; I felt I would be responsible for his death.

"God . . . heal Mr. Smith and raised him back up," I prayed boldly in front of everyone. It was not a prayer to show off my theology, but an honest desire for him to live. The rest of my prayer was couched in typical ministerial language, "If it be thy will . . . thou art thy Great Physician . . . we

commit him into thy hands."

I left the Family Waiting Room, walking to the nurse's station. I introduced myself to the head nurse, telling her I wanted to see Mr. Smith. "I'm his pastor," using my authority.

The nurse with her starched white cap, dipped her head and looked over the top of her glasses with a squinted eye, simply said, "Hum-m-m-m-m-m

..." Her tone of "Hum-m-m-m-m-m-m . . ." told me that she didn't think much of my ministerial persona.

"He's not expected to live, and he's unconscious," she spit the words out in crisp fashion. "He wouldn't know you even if we let you in," she explained. "We're not even letting his wife in to see him."

For the next three hours I waited in the waiting room with the family. No one talked much, most of the men smoked. I was uncomfortable, not knowing what to say. I was not good at small talk with men where we had nothing in common. So I just sat there, not knowing why I was there.

"I ought to go home and get some sleep so I would be fresh for my sermon tomorrow," I thought.

But I was compelled to stay as though I were in school and the teacher said, "It's not time for recess." So, I just sat there and went over my sermon in my head. I knew that the Smith Family wondered why I didn't go home, and I wondered the same thing.

At approximately 3:00 AM the head nurse who had looked over her glasses saying "Hum-m-m-m-m-m . . .," to me, announced to me that she was going home. She introduced her replacement, a much younger nurse who could smile. I stepped out of the waiting room to the Nurse's Station to explain to the much younger, smiling nurse that I was the pastor, and that I wanted to see Mr. Smith. I explained Mr. Smith was not saved, and that I didn't want him to slip out into eternity without knowing

God.

"I go to a Baptist church . . .," the young smiling nurse smiled to me. She indicated an understanding of my spiritual problem.

"I'll see what I can do."

I slipped back into the waiting room, with a tremendous hope. Whereas the previous three hours had been filled with anxiety and frustration, now for the first time that evening I had hope. This young Baptist nurse understood why I was there, and would shortly let me in to see Mr. Smith, even though his wife wasn't permitted in. And my faith was rewarded, because shortly the smiling nurse stuck her head into the waiting room,

"You can see Mr. Smith now." Then to some surprised in-laws, and a few non-approving in-laws, she announced,

"Even though he's not conscience, you can pray over him."

I thought, "That's a strange expression to pray over some one." I entered the Emergency Room where Mr. Smith was laying.

In the 50's a heart attack victim was kept in an oxygen tent, and air was pumped into a clear plastic tent that covered the whole bed, not directly into the nostrils as used in later day technology. The dimly lit table lamp was the only light in the room, and the dark shadows in the corner added a mystical affect to the setting. The slow hiss of oxygen into the tent compounded the threatening tone. The large red "NO SMOKING" sign was not needed. The smiling Baptist nurse had seen Catholic priests administer last rites on many occasions, so I guess she wanted me to give the Protestant last rites. She went and stood at the foot of the bed to bow her head slightly, waiting for me to do my ministerial thing. But I didn't have a clue of what Protestant last rites were, and I had never heard of Roman Catholic last rites. Not knowing what to do, I did what I had always done in a hospital room.

I said,

"Mr. Smith can you hear me?"

His eyes were closed and he was deathly still. Then he slightly moved an arm, and to the shock of the nurse, nodded his head yes. I explained to him that I had prayed for him, his wife and his children out in the waiting room.

"Do you understand what I have done?"

He nodded his head yes.

Then opening my Bible again to John 3, I told him what Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." And just as I had done hundreds of times in hospitals and homes in West Savannah, I explained what it meant for a person to be born again. At the end of each explanation I would ask,

"Do you understand me?"

Each time he would nod his head yes.

"Do you want to be born again, Mr. Smith?"

He nodded his head yes.

"Will you pray these words in your heart?"

He nodded his head yes.

"Dear God, I believe in you, I believe that Jesus was the Son of God, and I believe He died on the cross to save me from my sin."

After I had repeated that prayer, I asked Mr. Smith if he prayed those words in his heart.

He nodded his head yes.

"Dear Lord, forgive me from my sin . . . forgive me for my smoking and drinking . . . forgive me for my cursing . . . forgive me for not going to church . . .," then again to make sure, I asked if he had prayed those words in his heart.

He nodded his head yes.

"I pray this in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ."

Again, he nodded his head yes.

I briefly explained to him how the dying thief on the cross went to heaven even though he believed right before death. Faith was all that was necessary to be saved. Jesus said to the thief,

"Today thou shalt be with Me in Paradise." I explained to Mr. Smith that he was dying, and they had not given him any chance to make it through the night. I told him that if he had honestly asked Christ to come into his heart, that instantly upon death, he would go to heaven. "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

Then I thought, I should pray for his physical healing. So I asked, "Do you want me to pray for God to heal you?"

He nodded his head yes.

I don't remember the content of this prayer. I do remember stretching out my hand, laying it on the plastic oxygen tent. I asked God to heal him of the heart attack, raise him up out of that bed, bring him home, and put him into the church.

When I went back into the Family Waiting Room, I told them I had prayed for him, and that he had heard me. I told them he had nodded his head yes, that he could hear what I prayed. Because of the animosity I felt from the children, I didn't tell them that Mr. Smith had prayed to receive Jesus Christ. Neither did I tell Mrs. Smith. I felt I could tell her privately at another time. As I left the hospital that night, riding my bicycle home, I was preparing for his funeral. I was trying to decide if I would tell the people before an open grace that Mr. Smith had prayed to receive Jesus Christ right before his death. I was not sure that I should make that announcement publicly, the people might think I was just "grand-standing." I did not have any way to verify what Mr. Smith had done. I was not

sure that the neighborhood would believe that claim without proof.

The next morning as I was preparing for my sermon, word was brought to me that Mr. Smith had not died during the evening. I was requested to have special prayer for him in the worship service. We did! But I did not mention to anyone that he had prayed to receive Christ as Savior.

The following week when I returned to West Savannah Bible college for my weekend ministry, I asked about Mr. Smith. I wanted to know about the funeral or if I would get to it,

"He's much better," someone mentioned to me, "he'll be coming home sometime this week."

My ego really played tricks on me. I wanted to announce to the church that I had prayed for his healing, and that God had healed him. But I couldn't do that. I would be taking the glory that belongs to God. However, on the other side if people knew what happened, they would come to the church to get saved. I struggled over my feelings for a week, not knowing what to say.

Three weeks after the heart attack, I visited Mr. Smith in his home. There was a bottle of oxygen in his room and a plastic cup over his nose and mouth. He was sitting in flannel pajamas in the living room, reading a magazine when I came in. Mrs. Smith came out of the kitchen to sit with us. She was wiping her hands on the ever present white starched apron as she sat next to him. I opened my Bible, and again read to them John 3 where Jesus told Nicodemus,

"You must be born again."

I described to both Mr. and Mrs. Smith where he prayed to receive Christ.

"Did you really mean it that night?" I asked him in front of his wife. He nodded his head yes.

Mrs. Smith was not demonstrative, she didn't smile, cry, or respond. She nodded her head in agreement.

Within a couple of months Mr. Smith returned to church and sat with his wife. After the night

in the hospital and his conversion, I never remember him missing a church service. While he never went back to work because of his physical condition, he was constantly around the church helping with small tasks. He became one of our most dependable ushers, and I could spot him walking to church two blocks away. I knew it was him because of the straw hat and the sleeves on his white shirt were rolled up past his elbows. He never went back to smoking, drinking, and the next time we had baptism, he was sprinkled by Reverend Carroll Stegall.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. Principle that a sincere decision gives power. Because of my experience with Mr. Smith, I have always felt that any person can make an instantaneous decision at a crisis point in their experience and their life would be irrevocably changed. Whenever I have heard people say that Christianity is just a philosophy or a psychological reinforcement, I think back to Mr. Smith in the oxygen tent nodding that he had just prayed to receive Jesus Christ. He turned from the sins of which he repented in the oxygen tent. He demonstrated to me the efficaciousness of his conversion experience. I wonder today if I would ask a person in that condition to repent of outward sins (smoking, drinking, etc.) that he might never have the opportunity to commit again. While I don't know what I would do in the future, I know he responded positively to the outlandish request I made of Mr. Smith when I thought he was dying.

2. The "John Calvin" Principle. John Calvin was the founder of "Calvinism" which I interpret as God in His sovereignty working all details, even to minor details, by His power and controlling design. Over the years I have said that when little things have worked together for the obvious glory of God, "John Calvin struck again." For in the salvation of Mr. Smith, there was a Baptist nurse who let me into a room to pray over a body that she thought was unresponsive, and yet in the sovereign purpose of God, Mr. Smith awoke enough to hear me pray. Mr. Smith responded to Jesus Christ in a death bed

conversion and from that strength he revived physically, and lived for Christ spiritually.

3. The Principle of Professionalism As a Response. Many times I didn't respond as a pastor, but as a friend with deep feeling for people. While my friendly response was not always professional, perhaps the depth of my feelings triggered a "faith response" that touched God to intervene in the crisis of those to whom I ministered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MR. SWEENEY'S SON DIDN'T GO TO HELL

Because I was such a young Presbyterian pastor, I didn't know anything about the "unpardonable sin," who might commit it, or how to deal with it. When I was a college sophomore begging God to give me a church where I could preach on weekends, all I wanted was a platform for my sermons. Little did I know that people are attached to sermons, and a congregation was going to teach me more theology, Bible interpretation, and solutions to biblical problems that I could ever get in any classroom. I was going to learn about the unpardonable sin.

Remember, I pastored a church because I love to preach, and I was bold in the pulpit. But in pastoral visiting and handling personnel problems, I was reluctant because I was so young and inexperienced.

I was visiting in a home, I don't remember whose home this was, in the living room talking to the people about Heaven and Hell when someone mentioned,

"It is too bad about Mr. Sweeney's son going to Hell . . ."

"Pow . . ." They hit me right between the eyes with the blunt statement that Mr. Sweeney's son had gone to Hell. I didn't know how to deal with such a statement. I had no idea what he had done, and I didn't know what to say. I thought,

"How can anyone be sure that another person had gone to Hell?"

My question was good enough for me, so I didn't ask why Mr. Sweeney's son had gone to Hell. Was he an alcoholic? Was he a fornicator? Was he a pervert? Had he stood up in a congregation to blaspheme God?

The issue of Mr. Sweeney's son dropped from my mind. I had a lot of other things to concern me. About a week later I was sitting on the other side of my parish when the same

conversation came up,

"It's too bad about Mr. Sweeney's son going to Hell," one of the ladies said to me. But then she was a little more talkative. She added,

"He committed the unpardonable sin!"

"Pow . . ." It hit me again. Not only had he gone to Hell, he had committed the unpardonable sin. I had heard the phrase "unpardonable sin," but didn't have a clue what it was.

"I see," I nodded my head not knowing what else to do. Vaguely, somewhere at Bible college we had discussed it, but I couldn't discuss it with the lady because I didn't know what question to ask. I was afraid if I said anything it would show my ignorance, and the last thing in life I wanted to do was for the people to know how ignorant their young pastor was. So I continued to smile, nodding my head knowingly, all the while not having a clue what we were talking about.

It happened another time. I was in one of the local stores drinking a grape, a small grape drink that we could purchase for a dime. I laid my Bible on the soft drink box and asked the owner to visit Westminster Presbyterian Church. I told the owner we had good singing and I thought pretty good preaching. We chatted about two or three things, then I asked the owner,

"Have you been born again?"

Like many people when you try to talk about their soul, they change the subject. The owner didn't want to face spiritual accountability, so he focused in on Sweeney's son.

"Do you really think Sweeney's son lost his salvation and went to Hell?" the owner asked.

"What do you mean?"

The owner was a safe person to ask this question. It couldn't hurt me too much if I revealed any ignorance. So I asked again,

"What do you mean lost his salvation?"

"The Sweeney boy was a good boy . . ." The pot-bellied owner wrapped his hairy arms around his protruding dirty white apron and continued,

"The boy was christened . . . had a good godparent . . . and went to Sunday School all the time . . ." Then the owner described how the boy went to Sunday School, and was respectful to parents.

"I never remember him ever trying to steal one thing in the store," the proprietor explained.

I should have listened more carefully and asked deeper questions. I had some sand on my shoe, and kicked it against the wooden floor.

"Here, let me get that," the store proprietor came from the back of the counter with the broom to sweep my shoes clean. I was not sensitive to the store owner because I began to give him reasons why a saved person could not lose his salvation. I said something like,

"Once saved, always saved . . ." then quoted two or three verses to support my view of eternal security.

"That may be so," the owner surmised with a grin, by this time picking his teeth with a toothpick. "But I have seen some good men do evil things, and God ought to stick 'em in Hell."

Next week back at Columbia Bible College I decided that I had enough. Getting a Bible dictionary, I looked up the topic, "Unpardonable Sin." The only verse that I found directly related to the topic were the words of Jesus, "Wherefore I say unto you; all matter of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost will not be forgiven unto them and whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world,

neither in the world to come" (Matt. 12:31, 32).

That week I found out there were several views by believers to interpret the unpardonable sin. Christians were not uniform in their view of it. Some believe the unpardonable sin is a heinous act whereby a person lifts his fists towards God in rebellion to curse God, that person loses his salvation. Next, the dispensationalists believe that the unpardonable sin could be committed only during the physical life of Jesus Christ by those who attributed the miracles of Jesus to the Devil. Still another evangelist taught that continued rejection of Jesus Christ by unsaved people hardened the heart until it became unable to respond. The view I like best was that any person who died without receiving Jesus Christ as Savior committed a sin that was not pardonable, because God cannot pardon the sin of unbelief . . . It is the final rejection of Jesus Christ. Anyone who died without receiving Jesus Christ had committed a sin that could not be pardoned. Why? Because being dead, they were beyond the time of choice.

I wrote these views down in the front of my Bible, along with some supporting scripture references. A couple days later I was talking with one of the upper classmen who lived down the hall at Columbia Bible College. I told him the story about the unpardonable sin. I believe this conversation was ordained of God, because what he told me actually was the root of my problem with Mr. Sweeney's son. He told me about the Roman Catholic view. Roman Catholics teach that someone who commits a mortal sin that leads to death, such as suicide, committed a sin that was so heinous to God that he could not be pardoned. At the time I didn't give much credibility to this position because I didn't believe in the Roman Catholic view. But I was armed with some facts, so I had as they say, "My gun loaded and ready."

I did not walk around looking for an opportunity to bring up a discussion about the unpardonable sin. As a matter of fact, I put it out of my mind and forgot about my research. But

in the providence of God, a couple of weeks later I was making a visit in the home of an elderly lady who said, "It was a shame about the Sweeney's boy committing the unpardonable sin . . ." Quicker than an unexpected flat tire, the question popped out of my mouth.

"How did he die?" The lady began a detailed explanation. The boy had put his father's shotgun into his mouth and with one of the toes on his right foot had pressed the trigger, blowing the top of his head against the wall.

I am not sure whether the church believed Mr. Sweeney's boy committed the unpardonable sin because of the influence of Roman Catholicism in Savannah, Georgia, or my community. Maybe it was the strong five-point Calvinism by some in the church that taught that anyone who would kill himself was not saved in the first place. But the people in my community ignorantly believed that if a person took his or her life, that person was not converted, i.e. that person went to Hell.

I listened politely as the lady told me the whole grizzly details of the Sweeney's boy afternoon suicide. She told how people had heard the gun blast, and they came standing around the house waiting for the ambulance attendants to bring out the body. She went on to describe the morbid funeral. She told me how a depressed young man with mental problems and failures took his own life. I didn't recognize the name of the minister who preached the sermon, but she said everyone in the community listened carefully. Then she explained,

"The minister didn't say that the Sweeney's son went to Heaven . . ." Then she repeated, "We listened very carefully to see what he would say, and he didn't say that Sweeney's son went to Heaven."

Young preachers not yet twenty years old are sometimes more bold than wise, more enthusiastic than mature, more motivated by foolhardy ego than by faith grounded in love for

people. I went around the community telling people that next Sunday I was going to preach, "Why Mr. Sweeney's son went to Heaven."

Now that I look back on my public announcement, I was not sensitive to the Sweeney's or the grief that they had gone through. I had not even told them I was going to use them for a spectacular message.

"Whatcha going to preach on?" a man drove by, slowed his car and yelled out the window to me.

"You'd better come and hear . . .," I shot back with the same inquisitiveness that he had given the question.

Obviously, the Sweeney's didn't come the Sunday I announced my topic, "Why the Sweeney's son went to Heaven." The grief was probably too much for them, and they wisely stayed away. I should have known I was treading on thin ice, the elders who came to pray with me before the sermon, did not show up that Sunday. I had to pray by myself. Metaphorically, I was out on the edge of a limb with a saw. That saw was going to kill me, or I may fly.

Anyone who has heard me preach know that today I tend to be more academic than emotional. Even with such an emotional topic and an emotional experience as Sweeney's son, I still approached my sermon that day from an academic orientation. I announced that there were five views of the unpardonable sin, I asked the people to listen carefully to all five views, and at the end of the sermon I was going to ask them to make a decision,

"Which view is right?"

Not being very original, I presented the views in which I had discovered them in the dictionaries and commentaries. The last view I gave was the Roman Catholic view.

"Only Catholics believe the Sweeney's son went to Hell!!!"

When you're young . . . you can even pause for effect . . . not knowing how thin the ice really is . . . or what terrible repercussions you produce in people.

"If you think Sweeney's boy went to Hell because he committed suicide . . .," then I repeated the phrase again,

"You're wrong!!!"

So I asked, "If I could show you one person in the Bible who committed suicide . . . who went to Heaven . . . who we know went into the presence of God . . . would you change your mind about Mr. Sweeney's son?"

I told them of Samson, the adulterer who was addicted to sexual sins, who died in a backslidden state by crushing the Philistine temple down upon his head.

"Surely this is an act of suicide," I announced with all authority. Then I turned to God's hall of fame, Hebrews 11. And there right in the middle of the hall of fame is Samson's name, waxing bold again I pronounced,

"If Samson who committed sexual sins, . . . If Samson who broke his Nazarite vow . . . If Samson who killed himself went to Heaven . . . surely the Sweeney's boy went to Heaven . . ."

At this point in the sermon I turned from a correcting prophet to a compassionate minister preaching an eulogy at a funeral. I began to talk about all the good things the Sweeney boy had done. He had won Sunday School pins for faithful attendance, had memorized scripture, had not stolen one thing from the community store, and had made a decision for Jesus Christ at the Presbyterian Laurel Walker Camp, Waycross, Georgia.

"If a person sincerely has accepted Jesus Christ as his savior . . . that person will go to live with Jesus upon death," I said with a finality. "The Bible guarantees it . . ."

And then with wisdom beyond my years, I explained that mental disease was not

something for which he was accountable, and that God would not punish a person because he had a disease for which he was not accountable. This boy had been so severely depressed that it haunted him, driving him to take his own life.

The sermon was a personal triumph in pulpitry. People talked about the sermon about as long as I pastored in the community. They admired it, and appreciated me setting the record straight. As far as I know, no one ever said again that the Sweeney's boy went to Hell because he committed the unpardonable sin. Notice, I said it was a personal triumph, but no one came forward and got saved that day. I don't know if it was a triumph for God. I don't remember how I gave the invitation, whether I was bold or reticent. I don't remember whether I was a flaming evangelist asking people to come forward, or a sympathetic minister at a funeral. All I remember is that there were no results that day, nor do I remember anyone later coming to Christ because of that sermon.

Also, the Sweeney's and I never had a conversation about my sermon on their son. No way was I going to ask them, "What did you think about my sermon?" I had enough common sense to leave well enough alone. Even though I sensationalized their son and they probably didn't appreciate the way I focused on him for a sermon, in my heart I believe they must appreciate the fact that I set the community straight about the unpardonable sin and the fact the people thought their son went to Hell.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Principle of Wise Silence. Sometimes when you don't know what people are talking about, and you don't have a basis for asking a question, it is better to keep quiet. Then, go study the matter, find out what they are talking about; and next time the issue is brought up, then ask your questions.

2. The principle of reflective repentance. Today I would not preach a sensational sermon on a person's private problems. I would not sensationalize the people of my congregation. What I did in naiveté, was motivated by impulsive youthfulness. God may have used the sermon, but today I would inform the community differently.

3. The principle of researched opinion. When you are not sure how to answer a question or problem, study the scriptures and what godly people have said about the problem. When you have good information you are prepared to deal with the problem.

CHAPTER NINE

LOSING THE WAR OF THE STREET LIGHTS

Nothing in life is absolutely black or white, most of it is "gray." We live between perfect dreams and perfect fears. As a young pastor I was going to be confronted with an alternative . . . and I determined to fight it till death. Compromise was not a user-friendly term in my vocabulary.

"I'll not use my church pulpit for the projects of liberals . . . or do-gooders . . . there is no place in Westminster Presbyterian Church for a the social gospel." This was the essence of a sermon I preached and within a few weeks, my convictions were going to be tested. Would I stick by my words . . . or eat my words?

I was eating supper at my Mother's house around 4:30 PM when the phone call came. The voice at the other end was a city official who said,

"Reverend Towns, I would like to ask . . ."

Before he could go on, I cut him off abruptly. Since I was not yet ordained, I would not let anyone call me a "Reverend." I felt it was hypocritical.

"Just call me "Preacher," I told the city official. "Everybody at the church calls me "Preacher."

I could tell over the receiver that he was uncomfortable with the title, "Preacher." It was not a term in his ecclesiastical vocabulary. Nevertheless, we continued to talk.

"I've had a hard time finding you," he explained, "but Mr. Seckinger told me where I could reach you."

Mr. Seckinger was the chairman of the Board of Elders at Westminster Presbyterian Church, and Mr. Seckinger and I did not always see "eye-to eye" on many issues. Mr. Seckinger didn't like my revivalistic preaching, plus he had a reputation of taking a few drinks, and slipping a

cuss word once in a while, plus a few other unpleasant confrontations I had with him. I didn't warm up when the city official used the magical name, "Mr. Seckinger."

"If we get enough signatures on a petition, your neighborhood could get street lights around the church . . .," the city official stated. He explained many neighborhoods had to pay for the installation of street lights. By added tax bills, West Savannah could get them free. This official and Mr. Seckinger had worked out a special grant to get the street lights without cost to anyone . . . if the community requested them.

"You can get the neighborhood to do anything," the official told me that was the opinion of Mr. Seckinger.

"Street lights will cut down on crime," the city official told me. From Friday night until Sunday morning, I went through pure hell. I felt it was a compromise to use the church for social improvement. I didn't know what to do. I felt the only thing the church should do was to get people saved and teach the Word of god . . . not to use its energy to get street lights. I was determined not to make the announcement about the street lights, not to let the petition to be circulated in my church, nor was I even going to allow Mr. Seckinger to personally pass this petition to the members after the morning service.

I rehearsed the things I would say in the tradition of Elijah . . . exercising holy boldness like John Wesley . . . or preaching like a fearless frontier preacher. I kept saying to myself,

"Mr. Seckinger, there will be no compromise with bureaucrats . . . we're not pussy-footin' liberals who want to dangle lights on the corners of our street."

I practiced my rhetoric carefully, "We want to preach Jesus the Light of the World . . . not get street lights."

At the time I didn't realize that I had been influenced by a message I had heard recently at

Columbia Bible College. Some speaker had warned against the insidious creeping liberalism that would strangle the gospel out of our churches. In my college days, students were naive and unsuspecting . . . as a result speakers used absolute terms describing white . . . absolute white . . . what was the only thing God liked.

Then with a sneer and squinted eyes, I described black, and warned of impending doom should we cross the line into blackness.

On the way to church that Sunday morning, I saw every street light in the city. Of course, they were turned off, and only those who have eyes to see what is his heart, saw the innocent street lights dangling unadorned on light poles.

Eight blocks before I reached Westminster Presbyterian Church, I saw my last street light where Augusta Avenue went under the Central of Georgia tracks. Because it was a main intersection, the street light was necessary. I passed four streets where African Americans lived. They didn't have street lights. Then coming to my parish, the four square blocks known as West Savannah; we also didn't have street lights.

A street light is a simple mechanism designed to illuminate where people are walking or driving. But that day they were menacing instruments, each one laughingly ridiculing my faith. Because I was going to church, I should have been singing, "My faith looks up to thee, Dear Lamb of Calvary . . ." But I could only see red. I screwed up my courage, and practiced again my rebuking to Mr. Seckinger.

I locked my bicycle next to the back door and as I climbed the brick stairs, Mr. Strickland also a church elder didn't ask me to support the petition. He assumed it was a done deal, because he noted,

"When we get these street lights, more people will come to church on Sunday night . . .

and on Wednesday night . . .," Mr. Strickland rationalized. "One of the street lights will be right in front of the church, and the children will probably be playing on the front porch of the church in the evening time . . . that'll make them more comfortable with the church . . . they'll come back to Sunday School."

My boldness was only internal. If I were going to argue against the street lights, I should have said something immediately, but Mr. Strickland was older and wiser. Since I had never won a debate with him, I said nothing.

I had dedicated a point in my sermon under the simple title, "Warnings" where I would point out how sin gets to us when we compromise with liquor . . . moving pictures . . . City Hall . . . and scarlet women. I was then going to add to my denunciation . . . social gospel . . . street lights. I was going to put them all together, then call my people to a rousing defense of the faith.

"Choose you this day whom you will serve, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." I hadn't preached it yet, this is what I planned to preach.

"Those street lights will be nice for the children playing at night," Mrs. Snyder, teacher of the Ladies Bible Class commented as she passed me in the hall.

"That's right . . .," someone else responded.

I went to my office to pray alone, my usual practice before the sermon. Sometimes, the room was joyful and sunny, with beams of sunlight peering through the stained glass window. The dark oak paneling of the study hid many stories. Decades of godly men prayed there, they had interceded for the souls of men. I was too young for a study this expensive, so I called it an office. The study, although expensive at one time, had seen better days. I described it as, "decayed elegance." The most distinguished Presbyterian pastors had studied there.

But today was different. The stained glass window was not happy, but the sun struggled to penetrate its darkness. Even the frosted glass in the transom of the door clouded out the hall light. The tall room was more threatening than I remembered, and the light in the ceiling was dimmer.

The large oak desk did not invite me to sit down. Along one long wall was a row of bookcases, each with its glass door to protect the sacred volumes from moisture. Since one long pew from the back of the auditorium had been stretched in front of the glass doors, I had not used the bookcases. I had taken out the old, worn wool carpet. The naked floor at one time had been brilliantly varnished and polished, but with time had yellowed. Today, the floor pained my knees as I knelt to pray. Everything was against me, the office . . . the hardwood floor . . . the elders . . . and the city bureaucrats.

Every time I tried to pray, my request bounced off the tall ceiling. My heart was hollow, and panic echoed in my brain. I didn't want to lose, but I couldn't pray for victory. I could not pray against the street lights . . . I could not pray against the elders . . . I could not pray about anything.

When I tried to review my sermon on my 3 x 5 cards; my notes did not sing to me. They were dead.

"How can I preach, when I don't feel it?" I asked.

The pianist played the Invocation which was my signal that it was time for me to open my study door, walk a few feet to the sanctuary, and mount the one-stair to the pulpit platform.

Usually, I bounded through the door, floating to the platform. Preaching was my joy.

Remember, everybody called me "Preacher!"

I didn't want to go out the door. I was afraid of Mr. Seckinger, and what he would do.

What if I told him "No" and he made the announcement anyway.

"What would the people think?"

I reached for the doorknob but paused to pray. "Lord, give me boldness to stand for my convictions."

As I entered the auditorium, Mr. Seckinger was standing between me and the pulpit platform.

"This is it . . .," I thought to myself as I stopped before him. He had the petitions in his hand, it was the first time I had seen the petition. It was nothing but a simple white sheet of paper, with lines drawn by a pencil where people might sign. I could see the typed statement at the top of the worn sheet of paper. Then I saw the sheet had been signed with all types of writing instruments. . . pencils . . . ink pens . . . ball point pens . . . hard lead and soft lead.

"I won't take it if he offers it," I thought to myself. But, "What will I say?" Mr. Seckinger thumped the eraser of a pencil on the paper and announced,

"Preacher, we don't need you to make the announcement. Everybody has already signed the petition."

Then with a wide grin, "We've got more signatures than we need."

It should have been a great relief to me, but it wasn't. It should have meant that I didn't have to confront anyone, but I had another problem. Rather than rejoicing in what had happened, I was immediately terrified with a problem that was much larger to me.

"How will I fill five minutes of sermon?"

I had planned approximately five minutes of warnings and consequences, but everyone had already signed. Now I had to change my sermon. Rather than being happy or sad; I was frustrated. Here I had planned a pugilistic attack against various evils, but the one that vexed me

most was bureaucracy and City Hall, especially its threat to compromise a young soul-winning church. I was going to keep the first amendment by separating church and state. But everybody had signed the petition, and for all I knew, they may have been signing the petition while I was praying against them . . . and they probably signed it right in the church pew.

Now my biggest question was, "What am I going to preach?" Not having a great reservoir of knowledge and experience, I planned for every second of a twenty minute sermon. When I lost a point, I didn't have the ability to ad lib. When an illustration went short, so did my sermon. Now that I think back on it, perhaps that's why the people liked my preaching. I was loud, enthusiastic and short. Short and to the point.

Later in the morning service, I got to the announcements saying the traditional thing, "Does anybody else have any announcements that need to be made?"

Mr. Seckinger arose and thanked the people for their signatures, telling them they now had more than enough to get the street lights. He was happy . . . everyone was happy . . . the children seemed happiest.

I pastored the church for another year, never mentioning the street lights. I never told the people that I was against the petition being signed in a church, nor did I ever mention the evil compromise with City Hall.

As the people left that Sunday morning, two or three chuckled about Mr. Seckinger, "One of the first nice things he's ever done for the neighborhood," one of the ladies said.

"Thanks Mr. Seckinger . . .," a young boy waved to him.

How could a pastor be against something that all his people are for?

The answer to that question is simple. The pastor was wrong. He had wrong theology, wrong information and wrong attitudes. He was a simpleton who saw life in two categories . . .

wrong is always black . . . right is always light. In this case the street lights were not black, they were white, as white as light . . . street lights were right.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Principle of obsessive spirituality. A church's spirituality is not measured in its separation from the world, City Hall, or even the "boogie man" that was preached at our theological institutions of training. Rather, spirituality is related to the Holy Spirit who lives through us to manifest the glory of God in the most mundane of situations, i.e. support of a petition to get street lights in the poor area of town. Getting street lights was the spiritual thing to do.
2. The Principle of perceived wickedness. It is sometimes difficult to remember that sin is not a thing, person, or even a street light or bureaucrat. Sin is an act, attitude or reaction. Sin is the response of the people to the issues of life. As I look now back over the crisis of street lights, I realize that I perceived that wickedness was found in a simple function of life, and the preacher's response became more wicked than the perceived wickedness of Mr. Seckinger and the bureaucrat.
3. The principle of the greatest good for the most people. The propositional gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that changes our life when the person of Jesus Christ lives through us to communicate His love to people in the mundane affairs of their life. Because of my opposition, I lost a great opportunity to be a testimony to the community. I was never able to capitalize on the congregation's support of street lights as a testimony of our concern for the community. If I had fought the street lights as planned, I would have been a barrier to reaching many unsaved and would have created problems in my ministry to the saved.
4. The principle of protection by reluctance. If I had immediately responded from the top of

my head and the bottom of my heart, I would have alienated my people, the neighborhood and the elder's board. But, I was quiet, they got their street lights and eventually I saw my error. My youthful reluctance and a withdrawing personality saved me from making many mistakes in my first pastorate that might have otherwise crippled the ministry I had at the time.

CHAPTER TEN

I SAW JESUS

As a young preacher I had never thought much about seeing Jesus Christ in the flesh. I had heard about the Roman Catholic mystics who had seen him and touched him, but I was not sure it happened. I was not sure that anyone could see Jesus . . . touch Jesus . . . talk to Jesus . . . that is, the actual, physical Jesus who had walked in the flesh and had been crucified on the cross.

There is no textbook to help a young preacher in his first congregation, he encounters many strange and wonderful experiences, he will even meet people who claim to have seen and talked with Jesus.

Of all the men in the church, I trusted Mr. Miller. I visited his house when he was drunk, and preached the sermon when he walked foreword and was born again. I saw his life turn around, he became a new creature in Jesus Christ. And the Bible says, "Behold all things become new" (II Corinthians 5:17). Mr. Miller carried his Bible to church, asked significant questions of me, and even went visiting with me, soul-winning door-to-door in the neighborhood. He was truly changed from darkness to the light. So when he told me he saw and talked with Jesus, I couldn't doubt the source. I couldn't accuse him of being an emotional unfit or even a busybody wanting a reputation or wanting to stir up trouble. Mr. Miller was solid.

Sunday afternoon I was in my office at the church, putting together a sermon for that night. A knock came to the door, it was Mr. Miller.

"I got something important to talk with you about . . ." Mr. Miller left the words trail off into nothing. He was a straight forward man, and had several people who worked for him at the Central of Georgia Railway. He didn't stutter. But there he sat in my office running the rim of his hat around in circles, staring at the floor.

Miller was a grizzly man, even when well-shaven he looked like he needed a shave. Black chest hair came out over his white shirt next to the Adam's apple. He continued to fumble over the words, then finally blurted it out.

"Jesus came and stood at the foot of my bed this morning . . ." that was it, he didn't finish his sentence. He just told me that Jesus came into his room and stood at the foot of his bed.

My first response was disbelief. I didn't really believe Jesus had been in West Savannah, nor did I believe he had been in Mr. Miller's house, but what was I going to say? I didn't want to call him a liar. I didn't even want to question his credibility. I didn't know what to say; I quickly and silently prayed for Jesus to help me know what to say.

"Did he talk to you?" I asked. I didn't immediately ask what Jesus looked like, later in the conversation I did that. But my first question was to know the words that Jesus might have said.

"Jesus said he wanted my car," Mr. Miller said. That news also bothered me. I figured that if Jesus were on earth, he would walk, or could instantly transpose himself from one site to another. Never in my wildest thoughts had I ever thought that Jesus would want a car. So I repeated the words,

"Jesus wants your car?" I lifted my voice at the end of the sentence to make it a question.

"Yep."

The conversation was cut off for a couple of seconds. Mr. Miller didn't say anything nor did he look up at me. I was trying to register in my mind what I was hearing, and not trying to interpret it. All I could say,

"Hum-m-m-m-m-m-m . . ."

Again the room was silent. The warm sun from the west, streamed in on the yellow walls and a house fly buzzed on the warm window pane, trying to get outside. The bumping of the fly on the

window pane was the only noise in the room. Then Mr. Miller broke into the whole story.

"Jesus told me that if he came to Bull and Broad Street (the geographical center of Savannah, Georgia) and announce to the city that he needed a car, I couldn't get within two or three miles of the intersection. If everybody saw Him or heard Him announce from the tallest building that he needed a car, everyone would create the biggest traffic jam this city has ever seen to give their car to Him."

"I was amazed that Jesus knew the geographical boundaries of Savannah, Georgia, but what he said made sense to me. Mr. Miller continued,

"I want you to give your car to the preacher every weekend . . ." Mr. Miller told me. I knew exactly what he was asking, because everyone called me "preacher" and I knew he was telling me that Jesus wanted him to give me his car.

"Understand me," Miller quickly clarified, "not give you my car for keeps, but let you use my car each weekend."

Back in the 50's clergymen got a pass to ride in the coach of any railway car at almost a giveaway price. I could ride from Columbia, South Carolina, to Savannah, Georgia, for fifty-three cents. But not on the Central of Georgia Railway where Mr. Miller worked, but on the Southern Railway, which also used Central of Georgia terminal. When I arrived in Savannah, Georgia, I left the terminal and got on the bus at West Broad Street and Augusta Road, dropping my eight cent token in the slot, and riding out to the church. The hospitals were approximately eight miles away, and I used my English racing bike to make my hospital visits being a little embarrassed that I was not as sophisticated as the other ministers in Savannah, I always parked my racing bike around back and locked it to a gas meter, then rolled down my pant leg, adjusted my suit coat and walked with dignity up the front stairs to make my pastoral calls.

I didn't have a car, the freedom of a car, nor access to a car. I never even thought about

wanting a car or even purchasing a car. I was getting the job done on a bicycle, and the city bus.

Mr. Miller continued to tell me what Jesus told him to do. "When you come into town on the Southern Railway, don't get off the train and walk into the terminal." Then he instructed me, "Rather, turn and walk out into the railway yard where my office is." There was a little shack about ten feet square in the middle of the railway yard where Mr. Miller's office was located. He was the yard pilot, he guided trains in and out the Central of Georgia Railway station. His was a very crucial job, because the Central of Georgia required every train to back into the station, and his job was to help them back in; something like a person may help a semi-truck back into a parking stall.

Mr. Miller continued with his instruction, telling me that when I got off the train, I was to turn and walk out into the railway yard where his shack was located. He told, "I'll leave my Ford parked right next to my office shack," he told me. Then explaining, "The key will be in the ignition, take the car and use it all weekend. The tank will be full of gas."

"But someone will steal it . . ." I began to reason and tell him it was not a good idea.

"If Jesus told me to leave the car there for you, He'll make sure no one steals it, " Mr. Miller explained.

Then he told me when I got finished on Sunday evening to drive his car back to the station, leave his car parked by the shack and he would get it the next morning when he rode the bus to work. Again, I wanted to remind him that leaving his car in that neighborhood over night was risky, I wanted to tell him someone would steal it. But he knew what was on my mind.

"Nobody will steal it, because we're doing what Jesus wants."

I didn't want to take the man's brand new Ford, this was 1953 and he had a dark blue 1952 4-door Ford. I would have one of the fanciest cars of any minister in Savannah, Georgia. I didn't feel like I was worthy of the Ford, and I was not sure I could take it. I began to think of how I could turn

the car down. Miller must have known what was going on in my mind because he said,

"I am not giving this car to you, I am loaning it to Jesus . . ."

Savannah is known for its gully washers when the bottom drops out of the sky and all the water in the world comes down. Mr. Miller never once backed away from this commitment in over a year. He rode the bus to work in the rain, and ran through the muddy parking lot to his shack out in the middle of the Central of Georgia Railway yard. Without a complaint, without a second thought, without a doubt; because he had seen Jesus.

After he told me what Jesus had told him to do about the car, I got around to asking him what did Jesus look like. Miller told me he had blond hair, blond beard and a very kind face.

"Did he shine?" I continued to ask him, not a skeptical question but rather a curious one.

"Just a little bit . . ."

"What do you mean a little bit," I asked.

"He wasn't so bright that He hurt my eyes like looking into a spotlight," Mr. Miller said. "He had a little shine like the exit light in the movies . . ."

I understood what he was saying, but I was not sure that he was actually seeing Jesus. So I asked him, "Are you sure it was Jesus, and not an angel?" I gave him an opportunity to back away from his story.

"I ought to know who Jesus is, after all He saved me," Miller replied to me with all of the integrity of a shivering, cold, wet person who was telling us that the water was freezing in the pool.

I didn't question him any further. I didn't question him any further because he might think I didn't believe that he saw Jesus. As a matter of fact, at the time I was not really sure that he had seen Jesus. My theology told me that any appearance of Jesus was a post resurrection appearance and He had not done that since He returned back to heaven in the ascension. So theologically I didn't believe

that Mr. Miller had really seen Jesus. At least that's what my head told me, but I was not sure in my heart.

So every week I took the car, and drove his car to win souls. I was able to go farther, do more, and do it more quickly, and stretching my weekends, hence packing more into my weekends that I would have been able to do without a car. As a result, I won more people to Christ than I would have done otherwise. As I look back on the experience, do it now think that Mr. Miller saw Jesus? I don't know what answer to give. But I do know that we would not have accomplish what God did in West Savannah without the car. Not only did it economize my time, it also laid a heavier burden on me to the commitment of soul-winning. When I realized that Mr. Miller was riding the bus in the cold and the rain, I never once misused his car. I was conscientious to make as many evangelistic calls as I possibly could, knowing that's what Jesus would tell me to do if He came and stood at the foot of my bed.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Tub Principle. I often that often each tub sits on its own bottom, and each person is responsible for their actions and words to God. Whether I completely believed that Miller had actually seen the physical Jesus in the flesh is not the issue. The issue is that he was completely obedient to what he perceived to be the command of Jesus to him about his car. And since Miller was completely obedient, whether I agreed or not; I followed through with the same instructions and was true in my integrity to his gift of commitment.

2. The "Can Do" Principle. Who am I to tell God what He can do or what He cannot do. Do I have the right to say that Jesus cannot actually reveal Himself in the flesh in West Savannah, Georgia? I may think that Jesus will not reveal Himself in the flesh, but that's only an opinion. I am careful not to tell people what God will or will not do, because God can do anything He wants to do, and will do

anything He wants to do.

3. The "Provoke" Principle. The dedication and good works of one person will provoke another to better service of Jesus Christ. Miller's gift of a car to me did something that Miller was unable to do. He was not a soul-winner, and to my knowledge did not actually lead someone to Jesus Christ while I was pastor. However, I probably led someone to Christ every week in West Savannah as a result of using his car to economize my time and energy. While I may be the actual tool that God used, as much credit goes to Miller, as to any other human vehicle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHOSE CHURCH IS IT ANYWAY?

Every young pastor has a "shoot out" with the official board. Somewhere along the line a young pastor has been questioned . . . called down . . . voted down . . . or had his wings clipped. My "shoot out" at OK Corral came approximately three to four months after I became pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church.

On the inevitable Saturday afternoon the sun was pouring through the stained glass window in my office, the room was happy; and I was preparing my sermon for Sunday. I had just spent two hours knocking on doors, talking to people about Jesus Christ. I was expecting a great day on Sunday, and was writing some notes on 3 x 5 cards for my sermon the next day.

I heard scratching at the front door. Next I heard steps coming down the hallway to my office. There was a large milk glass panel in the office door between my office and the hall way. I could see two bodily forms standing in the hallway.

"Come on in . . ., I shouted."

It was Mr. Seckinger and Mr. Strickland, two men in the church. They had started attending the worship service after the five women with the key to the front door "called" me to be their pastor. Neither Mr. Seckinger or Mr. Strickland was married to any of the five ladies who had called me to pastor. Neither of the men had been saved under my ministry. Both Seckinger and Strickland were in the church before it was disbanded by Independent Presbyterian Church. They announced to me,

"We are elders . . ."

With that statement my world crashed inward. I had never thought about elders, deacons, or any type of board. I had never asked anyone in the community if there were elders or deacons before the church closed down. As a matter of fact, I had never tried to find the membership list before the

church closed down. I was not interested in history, I was only interested in the now, and future.

"We don't approve the way things are going . . ." Elderly Seckinger let the words die in the middle of the room. Then said nothing.

I usually react in one of two ways to criticism. Sometimes I knee jerk react like someone kicking a dog off the porch. Because I have a timid side, I apologize or run away. At other times I get mad when someone criticizes me. I get the fur up on my back and go into an attack. When I heard the phrase,

"We don't approve the way things are going on . . .," my world collapsed.

No one in the church had criticized me. I thought everyone liked my preaching. When people left the service, they shook my hand and told me what a good preacher I was. I believed them. Almost every Sunday somebody had walked forward to the altar to get saved. I felt that was God's approval on my actions; at least that is what I thought.

"We don't approve of the way things are going . . .," Elder Seckinger broke the silence and again left the words dangling in the room for more silence.

I was stunned at their response. They had been in the church. They had heard me preach. I had been in both of their homes three or four times. I couldn't think of any reason why they would not approve of what I was doing.

"We're gonna have an elder's meeting right now . . .," again the elderly Seckinger spit out the words and let them die in mid-air.

I began to shake.

I don't know if my shaking was out of fear, because these men were elders; and as a Presbyterian I knew the elders controlled the church. Perhaps my shaking was out of anger. They had let the old church die. They had let Independent Presbyterian Church close the doors. They were

responsible for the death of the church and I was responsible for its resurrection . . . for its new life . . . for the salvation of over fifty people.

Mr. Seckinger called the meeting to order, and then assumed the position of moderator of the elders. He announced that was the position he held before the church was shut down. Mr. Seckinger appointed Mr. Strickland the Secretary. I don't know if they recognized me as an elder or as their pastor. I don't know if they recognized me at all. At least they didn't ask me to leave. Then came the first item of business,

"Why didn't you ask us for permission to paint the church?" Seckinger inquired. Mr. Strickland chimed in, "Yea . . . we've been discussing that . . . why you didn't ask us?"

It dawned on me that they had been discussing this item among themselves, and now I was on the spot. My voice got high and tight, I squeaked,

"You knew about it . . .," I protested to Mr. Seckinger, "you even brought a ladder for painting the church . . ."

Then turning to Mr. Strickland I said, "You even got a donation of paint for the church, and helped organize the equipment."

"Yes . . .," Seckinger's scowling face revealed anger, "but you didn't ask us before you announced it to the church."

Nowhere in my thinking did I ever youthfully imagine that I needed permission to paint a church. The building needed paint, so I just got it done. The boards were rotten, the paint was peeling, it was falling apart.

"I decided it needed to be painted, and I thought it was God's will." I told the men that, "Since the Lord wanted it to be painted, I told the people and when they agreed; I thought that was all the permission I needed."

They knew my answer ahead of time, but just didn't like it. Then came the next question,

"Where's all the money going?" Seckinger's inquisition continued.

"Mrs. Silla Hair has the money," I explained.

"What have you done with the money?"

"I've never touched any of the money, I don't even count it . . ."

"Who gave Mrs. Hair the authority to keep the church's money?"

I again went into a long explanation of how the church was reconstituted. I explained to them how the ladies had the key to the building, and began teaching Sunday School. They invited me to come and preach. They took up money among themselves to pay for my train ticket.

Then I told Mr. Seckinger and Mr. Strickland about the two pastors who showed up one Saturday afternoon, to find out why I had opened up the Westminster Presbyterian Church. Then it dawned upon me, I was a man under authority. Not their authority. So I blurted out,

"I am under the authority of Reverend Carroll Stegall, pastor of Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church."

I explained to the two men how that the Presbytery had re-constituted the church and placed me under Rev. Stegall, my home pastor.

Seckinger and Strickland had a list of five or six other things that they didn't like. They didn't like the potted plants around the pulpit, and they didn't like the loud rhythmic way I rang the bell at 9:00 AM every Sunday morning. They didn't like me going to every house in the neighborhood because some of the neighbors belonged to the Salvation Army, the Pentecostal church, and a Baptist church on Highway 17. They accused me of leaving out "Presbyterian things" out of the worship service like repeating the Apostle's Creed and reading from both the Old Testament and New Testament.

They were right on both counts. I only read the scriptures from the sermon that I preached; sometimes from the Old, sometimes from the New. They didn't like people visiting the church and parking on the front grass. During a rain storm some of them had driven right across the grass and let people out at the front steps, leaving ruts in the grass. Mr. Seckinger said,

"We're not poor white trash that leaves cars all over the yard," he was angry at some of the people who had gotten saved in the church.

"Make them keep their cars off the grass," Seckinger barked.

When Mr. Seckinger closed the meeting in prayer, the two men arose and walked out of the office. I thought they would have thanked me for reopening the church, getting people saved, or doing a good job.

Seckinger told me there were several things they wanted me to do from now on. He pulled a tablet sheet out of his pocket, and had several more items written down with pencil.

1. Get their permission to spend any money.
2. Get their permission for any special meetings that was not a part of the general schedule.
3. Get their permission for any special speakers or special music.
4. Get their permission for anyone who would fill the pulpit if I wouldn't be there.

I looked at the list of demands. All of my freedom to lead the church was taken from me. As the pastor, I felt God led me to bring in special music or to have a friend from Bible college come to speak to the young people. God had blessed my plans, not their plans.

I was being handcuffed.

The sunshine through the stained glass window dried up. The air was heavy, and my delightful office that gave me so much happiness, and a sense of power . . . suddenly was threatening. The yellow paint was dirty, the curtains were grungy, the oak panels were old and scarred. The presence of

God seemed to leave the office. It was Ichabod.

I cried in my office for quite awhile. I was 20 years old and it had been a long time since I had shed tears. Tears dripped on to my oak desk, and spattered my sermon notes.

I bounced alternatively between anger and retreat. The first thing I decided,

"Tomorrow I will resign, go back to Columbia Bible College and let them keep their church."

I thought better of that. They hadn't called me to be the pastor, and they weren't going to run me off. I decided to fight. I began writing a sermon and decided to answer each of the seven accusations. I was going to read them and answer them. I was going to attack Seckinger and Strickland . . . face to face . . . from the pulpit.

"I am going to scorch them tomorrow," I decided.

I took the seven points of criticism, and began to put together a sermon describing what God had done in the church. I was going to describe to the congregation the furor and criticisms of Seckinger and Strickland. Then I was going to answer them.

I knelt in prayer and offered my petitions to God, but my prayers bounced off the ceiling. God began crushing my spirit. I had righteous indignation, but my prayers wouldn't let me preach in the pulpit what I wanted to preach. Somewhere a still small voice whispered to me,

"Don't use the pulpit to attack individuals . . . don't use the pulpit for pettiness . . ."

After praying, God answered my prayer, but God did it differently than I had prayed.

I was praying for God to remove them . . . to change their mind . . . just for God to do my thing. God's answer was to remind me of Rev. Stegall, my counselor.

I decided to phone Reverend Carroll Stegall but the Westminster Presbyterian Church didn't have a phone. I thought about going to one of the neighbors to make my phone call, but I didn't want anyone to hear my problem. I was embarrassed. So I got on my racing bike and went two miles up to

the Central of Georgia Railway Station. Finding a phone booth and putting a nickel in the slot, I phoned Carroll Stegall, Jr. Soon as he picked up the receiver, I blurted out my problem. I'm sure he heard my anger . . . or frustration. Then he began to laugh in cadence,

"Ho, Ho . . . Ho, Ho . . . Ho, Ho . . .," the barrel chest Stegall laughed into the phone heartily.

I didn't think it was funny.

"You are going through what every young preacher faces," the wise Stegall began to counsel me and prepared me for the inevitable.

"First . . .," Stegall pointed me to Presbyterian law. "When a Presbyterian church is reduced into mission status, or voted out of existence; the office elders and deacons are eliminated."

"What's that . . .?" I said to myself.

"Seckinger and Strickland are not elders? . . .," the laughing Stegall told me.

The sun came out, the day got brighter. My countenance began to lift. Stegall told me that Seckinger and Strickland were no longer elders in the church until they were voted back into office by the Presbytery. Stegall assured me that even though Seckinger and Strickland had been elders, and they understood what elders did; they no longer had any legal authority at Westminster Presbyterian Church. However, Stegall warned me,

"They are elderly men . . . wise men . . . powerful men . . ." He told me that I would have to handle the men very carefully, because many in the community respected them. Also, the Savannah Presbytery respected them because they were once office holders. Stegall reminded me that if these men called someone in the Presbytery to complain about me, and while they couldn't fire me, they could get me fired; or at least they could get me in a lot of trouble. Then Stegall asked me,

"Who's got the checkbook?"

I explained to him that Mrs. Silla Hair had the checkbook. I explained the money was counted

each week by three or four people, deposited into the Citizens and Southern National Bank and the bills were paid out of the money. He then asked me two more questions,

"Are you happy with the way the ladies are taking care of the money?"

"Yes."

"Will the ladies spend the money the way you want it spent?"

"Yes."

Then Stegall told me not to worry about anything. The person who controls the money had the authority in the church. He reminded me of the Golden Rule,

"He who has the gold . . . rules."

Then Stegall gave me some wise counsel on how to handle Seckinger and Strickland,

"Call them into the office every Sunday morning before you preach. Tell them everything you are doing. Give them your plans before you announce anything to the church." Stegall told me to respect them, call on them to pray. Then Stegall instructed me,

"You tell those men that according to Presbyterian law they are not elders, but you want their permission to call them elders and to recognize them as elders in public."

Stegall explained to me that I should honor them with the title of elder, but he warned me very carefully,

"Never let them vote on anything. You must not ask them to vote on any of your projects, because that would give them authority." Stegall told me to make sure that there was a full public account of every check that was spent by the church, and an accurate posting of every penny that came into the account. He told me to make sure that three people always counted the offering, and that I should never touch any money . . . I should never sign a check . . . I should never even carry the money to the treasurer even if she were not in a church service.

"If you touch the money once," Stegall warned, "they will scalp you."

Sunday morning before church I asked Mr. Seckinger and Mr. Strickland to meet me in my office for prayer. It was there that I announced to them what Mr. Stegall had said . . . that they were no longer elders . . . I asked them if I might publicly call them elders . . . I asked them for their wisdom to help guide the church.

"We never heard that before . . .," Mr. Seckinger said to me. He was talking about the fact elders lose their appointment when a church is reduced to mission status or voted out of existence.

Also, Mr. Seckinger and Mr. Strickland never told me if I could publicly call them elders.

Mr. Seckinger and Strickland never called an elder's meeting in the next year.

I publicly call them elders, and each Sunday morning they met with me for prayer before my sermon.

I went over all the church plans with them, but I also had Mr. Miller in the room with me.

I began repeating the Apostle's Creed and read from both the Old and New Testament as Mr. Seckinger suggested. From time to time Mr. Seckinger would make suggestions of things all could do in the church, and to the best of my knowledge I always carried out his suggestions. After our confrontation and the first elder's meeting, we had a good relationship. Mr. Seckinger and Strickland never told me whether they ever contacted another minister in the Savannah Presbytery concerning their official status. I think they probably did because they lived by the rules Rev. Carroll Stegall gave me.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Principle of the Crushed Rose. Young preachers are like a rose that desire to give fragrance and beauty to other people. Church officials should realize when they destroy the confidence and optimism of the minister, they are crushing the fragrance of God's blessing to their lives and the

lives of others.

2. The Principle of Good Information. Too often we get mad or we quit because someone has given us bad information. The principle is simply: we make good decisions on good information, bad decisions on bad information, and if we don't have any information, we make lucky decisions. Some of our lucky decisions work out for good, and some of our lucky decisions work out for our harm. Before reacting to criticism about your ministry, make sure that you have full information about the attack and your attackers.

3. The Principle of the Iron Fist With the Velvet Glove. Stegall told me to be firm with Seckinger and Strickland, not to let them control the church nor me. That was the iron glove. He told me to be kind, respectful and to use them wherever I could. That was the velvet glove.

4. The Principle of Incredulous Absurdity. Stegall laughed at me when I told him about the proposed elder's meetings and what I was supposed to do. He had not given them any credibility because he knew they had no authority. The absurdity with which he treated them, was equal to the absurdity by which they treated me. I learned an important principle from Reverend Stegall, sometimes it is better to laugh than to get mad. Your anger always makes you lose, while laughter makes you infectious.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NO ONE CAME TO VBS

I sat dejectedly on the stage next to the pulpit. The five ladies who had called me to the church sat on the front pew of the auditorium listened with funeral dread.

No one had come to VBS . . . not one visitor.

My world collapsed on me and I was paralyzed. I was on the verge of tears and the ladies could see "defeat" written in every word I said and every time I shifted my sitting position.

"Failure."

Not only had I failed my first outreach event, I was about to cry in front of the ladies and convince them I was only an immature boy 20 years old.

While I never had trouble getting people to come and hear me preach, I didn't understand the dynamics of marketing and advertising that attracted a crowd. The people of West Savannah came to hear me preach because I went door to door to invite them to church. I was in every home in our neighborhood many times. Because there were only 40 to 50 houses in the neighborhood, it was easy to saturate my Jerusalem. I had gone door to door, asking people if they were born again, reading to them John 3, reminding them Jesus told Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again." But, that concern was not translated into Vacation Bible School.

In the summer of 1953 I planned and led my first Vacation Bible School. For those not familiar with this church program, a Vacation Bible School is conducted each morning at the church from approximately 9:00 AM until noon where children are taught the Word of God, play games, and experience various other Christian activities to involve them in learning the faith. Since children are out of school in summer vacation, many parents have seen Vacation Bible School as a built in "baby sitter," hence many unchurched children are reached for Christ.

I had not even thought about Vacation Bible School, when the five ladies who had called me to the church gathered around me after one of my sermons, talking about Vacation Bible School,

"We need to start planning early . . .," Mrs. Miller exhorted me.

Going to Swanebeck's Bible and Book Store, I purchased a VBS planning kit, and resolved to follow the pre-planning steps meticulously. These five ladies were my teachers so getting a staff was no problem. We scheduled two training sessions, each of them went according to plan.

We planned a western theme, so on Sunday afternoon after my morning sermon, the ladies and I hauled into the sanctuary some lumber and constructed a corral in front of the piano. Mrs. Smith made a large red barn in back of the pulpit from several packets of red construction paper. Straw was thrown all over the platform in front of the pulpit to resemble the floor of a barn.

We dressed western. I and the teenage boys dressed in blue jeans, flannel shirts and boots with a kerchief tied around the neck. The women dressed western, two of them had a child's cowboy hat draped over the back of the neck like we thought cowboys did.

Since I was teaching Junior boys, I hung on the wall some cap pistols and holsters belonging to Richard, my little brother. Under them was displayed a "Red Rider" BB gun. Each teacher carefully lettered the Bible memory verses on cards and attached them to the walls.

Early Monday morning of Bible School, we showed up at the church around 6:00 AM to build four corrals in the front yard of the church. Our plans were to "corral" the children into these pens, then march into Vacation Bible School, singing a Christian chorus. I dug holes in the front lawn for the logs that would be the cornerpost. Bringing in split rails would have been too difficult, so we stretched crepe paper "logs" from corner pole corner pole, making four corrals, i.e. kindergarten, beginner, primary, junior. A large sign printed on paper laundry bags identifying each corral.

Then from one pillar on the front porch to the other, we hung a large banner under which the

children and teachers would march into church, supposedly singing a Christian chorus. The banner had a western motto, we had purchased the banner from the Christian supplier of material.

We expected a hundred children for Vacation Bible School, so Mrs. Silla Hair had set out a hundred paper cups out on tables in the church kitchen, these were for Kool-Aid at snack time. Not wanting to be stingy, we had over 500 cookies on plates, ready for hungry little "westerners."

At about five minutes to 8, I walked out to the front porch to count the children, and to my surprise there were only five or six children in the corrals, and they were not behaving. These children were the children of the five ladies who were my teachers.

"Hey, kids," I yelled, "don't tear that crepe paper down." I wanted the crepe paper logs to remain up for the visual effect. I wanted all the children to feel the western theme.

But only five or six children were in the yard. Going back inside the church I asked Mrs. Hair,

"Where are all the children?"

"They'll be along."

"H-m-m-m," I thought.

"About 40 of them came last year," Mrs. Hair responded.

At eight o'clock I went back out to the front yard, still only 5 or 6 children were playing, by this time none of them were in the corrals.

"Get back into the corrals," I yelled, "we're almost ready to begin."

I am an early person, and I like to be early for every event, I don't like to waste other people's time. I've always felt there were only two kinds of people in the world . . . early people . . . late people. No one ever comes on time. Those who usually think they come on time . . . don't. Those who think they come on time, are usually a minute or two late. So I wanted to start Vacation Bible School on time, but only 5 or 6 children were there.

"Let's wait 5 or 10 minutes . . .," Mrs. Silla Hair said to me.

Since everything was prepared, all the decorations up, the food was ready and the corrals were in place; we sat at the front of the church sanctuary waiting. I sat on the platform next to the pulpit, and the ladies sat on the first pew. But, the longer I sat there, the ladies could read my face. I was getting more discouraged by the minute. Every two minutes, I nervously jumped up, walked to the back door of the sanctuary, counted children again and repeated to the ladies,

"Still only 5 or 6 children . . ."

By 8:20 I was devastated. I symbolically sat before the ladies, as a pastor is supposed to be a leader out in front of his people, but I was slipping beyond despondency to despair.

"No one had come . . ."

Sure, there were over 10 people there, but ten people represented 5 ladies, and their children.

"They'll come . . .," Mrs. Miller kept saying, "let's just be patient, they came last year."

At 8:45 each of the ladies could see on my face the feelings of my heart. My enthusiasm was drained, my spirit was gone, and my smile had disappeared. This was the first Bible School I had ever planned. As a matter of fact, of all the events I had planned for Westminster Presbyterian Church, this was the biggest. Yet, it could only be described in one word,

"Failure."

My mind closed in on me, and I couldn't think. I wanted to keep up my optimism in front of the ladies, but how could I? I didn't have a clue of what to do next. I believed God would bless the Vacation Bible School. We had had two special cottage prayer meetings, praying specifically for Vacation Bible School. We had prayed that children might get saved and that we might reach their parents for Christ. We could not have done more to plan the Bible school, decorate for the Bible school, pray for the Bible school--we could not have done more.

My nervousness began to freeze over, I no longer jumped up and ran to the door to count the children. I sat inhibited by failure, I couldn't move. Therefore, when I came to the place where I didn't know what to do, I resorted back to a familiar line,

"We ought to spend some time in prayer . . ."

"We've already done that," Mrs. Silla Hair overruled my suggestion.

"Let's go get the children."

She suggested a Vacation Bible School parade. We would line our cars up, paste balloons all over the cars, drive up and down the streets honking our horns, and yell at everyone to come to Bible School. While we were driving, the children delivered handbills, running house to house, putting them on the front door. We invited everyone in sight to Bible School. We planned to make enough noise to wake up the neighborhood and get every child to come to Bible School.

"We'll start VBS at 10:00," Mrs. Hair announced.

So with balloons, scotch tape and a lot of hot air from all of us, we began decorating five cars out in front of the church. We took our banner from off the pillars at the front door and draped it across the radiator of the first car. Then this noisy crew in "tacky" looking cars began honking horns, yelling and waving at everyone, slowly going down Fourth Avenue.

"It worked."

Ladies came to the door, we yelled and waved at them, and the ladies waved back. At each home one of the children would dash over to give them a handbill. I was yelling at the top of my voice,

"We're starting at 10:00 AM!"

I'd point back to the church and add,

"Make sure your children are there."

In most of the homes, a lady appeared at the front door from her morning chores, waving back

at us. Since Silla Hair or one of the ladies knew most of them by name. They explained what they were doing. However, some of the men in the neighborhood worked night shifts on one of the railway lines, they were not always pleased to be awakened by honking horns, yelling VBS leaders and laughing children. One man came to the front door with only an undershirt and shorts on, pumping his fist in the air, yelling,

"Shut your d _ _ _ mouths . . ."

"We'll be gone in a minute . . .," Silla Hair smiling yelled back.

That morning about 40 children showed up for Vacation Bible School. The corrals were gone by the time they got there. Instead of waiting in the front yard as we had planned, children just meandered into the sanctuary because Mrs. Smith was playing the piano.

That week we had a contest for each child to bring a friend, and it worked. By the end of the week we had almost 100 in Vacation Bible School. I don't remember the average attendance, nor do I remember how many children came to Jesus Christ. I do remember that the next day we pushed back starting time to 9:00 AM, because 8:00 AM was too early for most of the people in the neighborhood.

Two months later I planned an evangelistic meeting in the church, and I learned my lesson. I had planned the Vacation Bible School flawlessly. We had prayer meetings, teacher training meetings, decorations, everything was ready. The only problem being, I never adequately planned advertisement and outreach to the community. Even though I had made church announcements, children didn't come to the Vacation Bible School because they didn't know that we had a Bible School. Even if I had put the decorations up in church the day before we started, it would have generated excitement, but I didn't.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The law of communication. When we pray for God to do things, we should be careful not to

ask Him to break the laws by which he runs the universe. Just as it is impossible to communicate from a vacuum, so we should not expect people in our community to attend church services if they don't know about the church services. Can we ask God to send people to a church service they don't know about? People are made in the image of God, which means they are intellect, emotion and wisdom, i.e. they have personality. Therefore, they must know about church meetings, feel a reason to attend church meetings, and they must make a decision to attend church meetings. Rather than asking God to violate the laws of communication, or transcend the laws of communication, we should make use of the laws of communication by marketing and advertisement to motivate people to attend our church meetings.

2. The law of the vision of labor. The work of God is divided into two equal distinct spheres. There is the work of God and there is the work of man. God convicts of sin, reveals his Word to blinded minds and motivates people to be converted, i.e. God works internally in the hearts. On the other side of the door, God expects us to go to them, as He has commanded. God expects us to gather the people together, as He has commanded. God expects us to work so "my house may be full." When we do our work best, God is able to do His work best and effectively. God will not do for us what He has commanded us to do, and we cannot do what God has reserved as His sphere of influence.

3. The law of prepared communication. Whereas I had prepared for Vacation Bible School with cottage prayer meetings, teacher training, advertisement and covered every organizational detail; I had not communicated the meeting to the community. We should learn that we cannot do the work of God with mere organization and preparation within the church house, we must also prepare communication and advertisement. We can't do the work of God with just communication and advertisement, we probably won't do the work of God without advertisement and communication.

4. The law of balance outreach. There are two facets in church growth. First there is internal growth which involves spiritual factors, things like prayer, revival, and the working of the Spirit of God in hearts. The second aspect is external growth which involves the natural factors such as inviting friends, advertisement, and getting people committed to attend church services. While some churches go from one extreme to another, those which have a balanced outreach are those that are most effective.

5. The principle of leadership reinforcement. When I as a leader had done all I could do to get people to attend Vacation Bible School, I was discouraged and gave up because no one came. One of those that I was leading reinforced my leadership with a very simple suggestion, "Let's go get the children." When I could not think of one thing to snatch Vacation Bible School from the jaws of failure, the most obvious answer was, "We need children." And the only thing to do was to go get them.

6. The principle of the obvious. Sometimes leaders don't know what to do when they are boxed in and feel defeated. Rather than looking inward for the causes of failure, or giving up in frustration; leaders ought to do that which is most obvious. Most churches have an empty pew problem. They don't have people listening to sermons or Bible lessons. The most obvious answer is, "Let's go get the people." Many pastors feel they are failures because people don't come to hear them preach, even though they prepare well, plan well, and even pray sufficiently. The most obvious answer to their problem, "Let's go get the people."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IT ONLY TAKES ONE

On July 7, 1953 there was an old fashioned "atmospheric" revival at Westminster Presbyterian Church where the Lord "poured His Spirit" on the people. A total of 37 adults were converted plus a number of children made public professions of faith. Brothers who argued for years came to the altar to embrace in reconciliation. People went to the neighborhood store to pay off bills that they owed. The altar was filled with sobbing people . . . people hungry for the touch of God . . . people who were confessing secret sins.

The key to the success of the crusade was the sermon I preached Sunday before the crusade began. I thought it was a "poor" sermon with "poor" results, because only one person came to the altar. but it only takes one person to unleash revival. God used one person to bring revival to West Savannah.

I define revival as, "God pouring Himself on His people." For God to pour out Himself, He only needs one person who will unreservedly surrender everything to Him. That one person was a young mother who came forward in response to my sermon. I had expected everyone in the church to come to the altar, she was the only one to respond to my sermon. That's why I said the sermon had "poor" results.

To prepare for revival I preached on the verse, "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and forgive their sins and heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14). I felt when church people did four things God would send revival, (1) humble themselves, (2) pray, (3) seek God's face, and (4) repent. I wanted more than an evangelistic crusade, I wanted revival. Technically, an evangelistic crusade is when the gospel is preached with a view of evangelizing the lost. A revival is God's spirit

being poured out on His people, i.e. God touches the people, and they in turn touch Him.

In preparation for my sermon on revival, I sneaked away each morning to pray at a city park in the Gordston area, a park where no one ever went. I arrived at the city park each morning at 6:00 AM to intercede for that sermon on revival. Whereas sometimes I feel heaven is shut up and my prayers don't get through, during those early morning times of prayer prior to the evangelistic crusade, my prayers felt like they were getting through. I felt God was hearing and would give us a great crusade. Because of this, I was disappointed when only one lady came to the altar.

After praying for a week, I preached my sermon on II Chronicles 7:14, concluding with a call for everyone in the church to come to the altar to pray for revival. In my mind I could see a great number of people at the altar. I could see every person in the audience getting out of his/her pew, walking forward and kneeling at the altar, crying out for revival. However, nothing happened. No one responded.

I had made the invitation clear. "Come forward and pray for revival." The invitation was aimed at everyone, i.e. Sunday School teachers, leaders, fathers, mothers . . . "Everyone come to the altar and pray for revival." But even with a clear statement, no one came to the altar.

We sang the first verse of the invitation song, and no one came. The lack of response surprised me because in my prayer time I had convinced myself that people would come, and the altar would be filled.

We sang a second verse and no one came.

My confidence began to evaporate. "Where were the results for which I had prayed?" I questioned.

Then it happened, a young mother came forward and knelt at the altar. She began to weep.

No one came to pray with the young mother. After we finished singing, I went and stood

beside her, shaking her hand.

"Thank you for coming," I commented, "God will answer your prayer."

Little did I know that her prayer was for many of her relatives to get saved.

That afternoon this young mother left her children with the father, and went to every house in West Savannah, telling everyone, "You just gotta come to the church and get saved

... ." I was later told that she cried in most of the homes. They were genuine tears of concern for the people in each house.

The revival meeting was a great success, and to this day I credit its effectiveness with the young mother who went door to door. Thirty-seven people prayed to receive Christ during the crusade. While not great numbers compared to the thousands converted in a Billy Graham crusade, for a church averaging approximately a 100 in attendance, we thought thirty-seven conversions was as great as the Day of Pentecost.

To this day, the evangelist Earl McQuay looks back on the crusade saying, "This was the greatest crusade I ever preached . . ." He doesn't mean the greatest in number of conversions and surely not the greatest in crowd size, but the greatest in the demonstration of the power of God.

Earl had worked all summer and at first was reluctant to take off from his job to come to Savannah to preach a revival. I did not promise him an amount of money, and he needed money to return to school in the Fall. In those days, room, board and tuition at Columbia Bible College for an entire semester was only \$315.00. Whereas Earl had worked all summer to save for college, he barely made a dent in what he needed for the Fall. In the providence of God, the love offering was \$315, enough to pay his entire Fall bill.

A month earlier no one came the first day to Vacation Bible School because I thought that if I planned a good program, the children would come. I thought that getting people to pray was all that

was needed to have a great VBS. My failure at VBS taught me the necessity of marketing and communication. A month after VBS I advertised the evangelistic crusade, and in contrast to Vacation Bible School, we had a church full of people from the first night.

As I approached the evangelistic crusade, I determined not to have an empty auditorium. So I began advertising to get people there. I had a flyer printed announcing Earl McQuay, a dynamic young evangelist from Columbia Bible College as the speaker. Earl was my classmate, and I had seen the power of God upon him in the street meetings. So, I organized the Junior boys, giving them boxes of tacks, flyers, and told them to tack an announcement on every light pole, tree, and fence in the neighborhood.

They literally obeyed, and wallpapered West Savannah with mimeographed flyers.

A printer from Independent Presbyterian Church heard about the evangelistic crusade and volunteered to print invitations. He gave us invitations to the evangelistic crusade that looked like wedding invitations, with a line at the bottom of each invitation so church members could write in their names to let friends know who mailed the invitations.

"Write the name of the person you are inviting to the evangelistic crusade on the invitation." Then I instructed, "There is a place for you to sign your name."

A list of every person in the neighborhood was taped on the rear church door. I asked everyone to sign up to mail an invitation to a neighbor, next phone the neighbor, finally visit the neighbor and invite them to the evangelistic crusade.

"Every person in the neighborhood should come to the crusade at least once," I exhorted.

This was Earl McQuay's first evangelistic crusade, and it was the first time I had conducted a crusade. Earl McQuay later became Vice President of Columbia Bible College, teaching courses in evangelism, Bible, and Practical Theology.

The crusade began on Monday night. Only one lady--a young mother--had come to the altar on Sunday morning. I announced a prayer meeting at 6:00 AM on Monday morning. As a matter of fact, we held a prayer meeting at the church altar every morning of the crusade from 6:00 AM to 7:30 AM.

"Drop by the church on your way to work . . . pray with us for revival." I explained. "We don't all have to pray at the same time, but if we all prayed . . . God will send revival.

"As soon as you pray, leave for work . . .," I exhorted.

That first Monday morning at 6:00 AM the sun was not quite up. Earl and I arrived at the church when it was that gray time between the darkness of night and the brightness of sunrise.

Promptly at 6:00 AM in the morning, Earl and I stood at the church altar, no one was there. Since I was an "on time person" I wanted to start at 6:00 AM . . . whether anyone else comes to pray with us.

I read the Scriptures and explained to Earl that the key to revival was the spirit of God being poured on His people. Then we knelt at the altar and I began praying. Still no one was there to pray with us. When I finished, Earl began praying. While he was praying, I heard the creak of the church door and footsteps on the rug coming down the center aisle. I didn't want to be disrespectful and look up from praying. Someone knelt beside Earl, then that person prayed . . . and another . . . and another . . . and another . . . and another.

While there was never a great crowd of people, someone was always there to pray next. A chain of prayer stretched from 6:00 AM past 7:30 AM, praying for the lost people of West Savannah.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The power of one dedicated individual. Many ministers look for the larger number of people

to do the work of God, but a great work for God can be done by one person who is completely dedicated to God. It only takes one person to release God's power in any given event. We are told to, "Despise not the day of small things" and this one person did more to bring revival, than all of the other planning and advertising that I did.

2. The principle of the unexpected prayer return. I preached a sermon expecting every person in the audience to come and kneel in prayer. Now I realize that there was ego wrapped up in my desire to see an altar filled with people. God answered my prayer and gave spiritual power, but not through many praying. Through one person God "poured Himself out on the congregation."

3. The principles of God's unexpected supply. Whereas Earl McQuay had worked all summer to earn money to pay for his Bible college bill, in one week of dedicated service, he received a love offering large enough to pay his entire room, board and tuition for one semester at Columbia Bible College. God supplied for Earl McQuay as he in turn gave all of his abilities to the Lord without reserve.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

YOU WANT SOME ICE CREAM?

Savannah is known for its 4:00 o'clock "gulley washers" in a summer afternoon. Somewhere around 4:00 PM the bottom of the sky usually dropped out and rained for fifteen minutes. Yet thirty minutes later the sun will come out and by supper time children were playing in the street and men played softball after dinner. Because I knew about the 4:00 o'clock gulley washers, I was not concerned one Wednesday afternoon about being stuck at home. I knew that the rain would pass, and by church time; I could ride my English racing bike across town to West Savannah. Except . . . this particular Wednesday it kept raining . . . and raining . . . and raining.

"Lord . . . stop the rain so I can get to prayer meeting . . ." I prayed frantically.

But God didn't answer my prayer, at least not the way I wanted answers.

One hour before prayer meeting I was still frantically pacing up and down the front porch, waiting for the rain to stop. I had to lead prayer meeting at 7 PM, and it took me thirty five minutes to ride seven miles across town.

But I couldn't ride in the rain. An English racing bicycle is a peculiar contraption, especially on wet streets. It has no fenders, the front wheel spits dirty water off the pavement between your legs up the front of your shirt. The back wheel heaves dirty water up your backbone and across your shoulders. If you ride slow enough, it will not splash water; but that's not possible when you have to go seven miles across Savannah, Georgia, in a short time.

It was too unsophisticated to put on a swim suit, and dash through the rain to West Savannah; what would the people say about their "preacher" zipping up to the church in a swimming suit? No way!

So I covered my good ministerial trousers with plastic laundry bags, tying them tightly around

my ankles. Then, pulling another laundry bag over my head, and wrapping still more laundry bags around my arms; I tucked my Bible in my belt and took off across Savannah for prayer meeting.

The laundry bags worked almost perfectly . . . they didn't work perfectly. The dirty street water splashed where the bags met at my waist, and trickled down inside my legs making me look like I had an accident. And, from the back wheel dirty water splashed up underneath the bag to the back of my white starched shirt.

Locking my bike in back of the church, I made a mad dash through the side door to the Men's Room. I tried to sponge dirt off with paper towels, but Savannah dirt doesn't come off white starched shirts.

The prayer meeting began . . . what was I going to do? I rationalized, "If I could get behind the pulpit without any one seeing me, they won't know how dirty the front of my trousers looked."

Faster than a brisk walk, I turned my back to the audience and walked sideways to the pulpit and began the song service. It was obvious to everyone . . . I was a mess. Mrs. Miller kept gawking over her hymn book, trying to look around the edge of the pulpit.

Over the years I have learned that when you have made a mess, rather than try to hide your mess, admit it. Sometimes being honest will disarm people . . . sometimes they'll even like you more because of your transparency. So, I stepped from behind the pulpit for them to see,

"Your preacher is a sloppy mess . . ."

I expected them to laugh, but they sympathetically identified with me, more in embarrassment than in humor. What was a "loss of face" was actually an opportunity for the Lord to arrange for the people in the church to purchase my first car. However, I had no clue of what was happening. I got through prayer meeting and afterwards laughed together with some people about my looks.

The following Sunday morning the President of the Ladies Auxiliary came up to tell me,

"We're going to have a Bake Sale . . .," Mrs. Smith told me as she left church that Sunday morning.

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." I quickly interrupted her discussion. I explained that liberal churches had bake sales to raise money for missions, and that Westminster Presbyterian Church would give sacrificially. I went on to explain that we should support missions and that we should support missions with the gifts of God's people. From a heart of deep sincerity I explained why bake sales compromised Christianity.

"I don't know of any fundamental church that would have a Bake Sale . . .," I announced with finality.

"We didn't meant to harm anything," Mrs. Smith quickly added.

"The Ladies' Auxiliary won't have a bake sale," she assured me.

I was surprised how quickly the battle was won. There were certain things that made me bold, and this was one of them. I spoke authoritatively, and without forked tongue. Mrs. Smith understand what I said, and I was sure that she would tell the other ladies in the church my decision.

The following Saturday I rode the train to Savannah, and caught a bus to my church in West Savannah. One of the younger Miller girls was on the bus with me, just a primary tot. I was passing pleasantries with her when she giggled, dropped her head and blurted out,

"Preacher . . . we've got a surprise for you . . ."

I didn't pay much attention to her disclosure. The church people were always inviting me to their houses for a meal, and I just assumed this was another invitation.

I got off the bus approximately one block from the church, at the corner of 4th and Augusta Road. From a block away I could see a crowd of people around the church. I wondered what was going on. A little barefoot boy in short pants came running down the street to me, grabbed my hand,

pulling me toward the church,

"Guess what . . .?" he laughed his question to me.

"What?"

"I can't tell you . . .,"

He dropped my hand and ran back to the church.

Once I arrived at the church to find out that I had a funeral to conduct, and on another occasion I had found several families cutting the grass. I wondered what was going on now. When I got closer, it was evident,

"They're churning ice cream on the church porch . . .," I said to myself. Before I could say anything, Mrs. Smith yelled out,

"We're not selling cakes . . .," her voice giggled with anticipation.

"The Ladies Auxiliary is not sponsoring this . . . this . . . ice cream churn," Mrs. Miller raspy voice out echoed Mrs. Smith.

I was dumbfounded. There were 10 or 12 ladies from the church busily selling ice cream. The edge of the porch was covered with white table cloths. There were bowls, . . . ice cream bowls from different sets of dishes . . . representing many homes in the neighborhood. And none of the spoons matched. The ice cream in some of the churns was hard and it was packed down waiting for customers.

"What's going on?" I threw the question out to anyone in general.

"We're going to buy you a car," Mrs. Smith announced victoriously.

All the ladies laughed like friends surprising another friend with a gift. The children cheered.

"Have some ice cream, Preacher . . .," Mrs. Smith said pushing a bowl of vanilla into my hands.

Stunned, I was speechless. The preacher who was known for speaking, didn't have a word to say.

I was against bake sales to raise money for the church, and they had agreed to my pronouncement. There were no cakes in sight. They were selling ice cream to children by the dozens. They weren't doing this for the church, they were doing this for me. As I surveyed the church yard, I observed,

"There are more children here than there are in Sunday School . . . we ought to serve ice cream in Sunday School . . ."

I spoke from the top of my head and . . . from the bottom of my heart without thinking. If I had thought through what I had said in jest, I would have realized what the ladies of the church would have done.

Ice cream was served in Sunday School the following day.

But back to the front porch of the church. The ladies had been selling ice cream for three hours, and they had two more hours to go.

I sat on the front steps of the church for over an hour, talking to people that I had never seen before, that had never visited the church. I probably had more pastoral contact at the ice cream sale, than if I had gone door to door in visitation.

After two Saturdays of ice cream sales, the ladies presented me a check for \$175.00 to buy my first car. Mrs. Silla Hair got permission to give me the check in the morning service, everyone stood and applauded. Mr. Seckinger and Mr. Strickland, the church elders had agreed to the presentation.

"This is from the people of West Savannah," she was careful to point out, "not from the church!"

My first car was a 1939 two-door Chevy Coupe, with a rumble seat. However, the rumble

seat had been taken out. The rear compartment had been lined with mahogany. During World War II a small dairy farmer could not buy a truck. He had converted this '39 Chevy Coupe into a truck by lining the back seat and rumble seat area with mahogany. It looked like a coup but when the trunk door was opened, it could haul milk cans to the dairy. I bought it at the local Chevy company for \$175.00, there was no tax in those days, only \$2.00 for registration of title. Driving up and down the streets of Savannah, people remarked,

"There goes our pastor." They seemed to be proud of me. Then they added a second phrase,

"There goes our car . . ." Even though they had given money as a gift, they considered it their car. I considered it a gift from God; and used it for them.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The Principle of Supplying Our Needs Before We Ask. I was perfectly willing to pastor Westminster Presbyterian Church on bicycle . . . on a bus . . . and in Mr. Miller's car. But there came a time when I needed my own automobile, and God provided through the ladies of the church. I should have realized my need, and asked for a car; yet for some reasons my self-esteem was not strong enough to think I was worthy of a car and my faith was weak so I could not ask for a car.
2. The Principle of Man's Extremity Is God's Opportunity. The ladies of Westminster Presbyterian Church probably would not have purchased the car if I had not stood before them a soaking mess at prayer meeting. Even though I was laughing, they were probably ashamed of what had happened, motivating them to the gift of my first car.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A BOY'S FIRST LOVE

I told a joke . . . actually a story with a punch line . . . about Gertrude. The people of West Savannah loved my story about Gertrude. Because they liked it so much they had me repeat the story about Gertrude it at church suppers, youth meetings and at dinner tables when I visited in their homes for a meal. They liked my story about Gertrude so much that they named my first car Gertrude. The best way for you to understand how much the people of West Savannah became attached to the name Gertrude, is to tell the story to you.

THE SAGA OF GERTRUDE

I was walking down the railroad track with Gertrude . . . she were mine own true love. We held hands, swinging our arms back and forth like small children. It was a beautiful day to be walking with someone you loved, and the one who loved you. Everything was perfect for our love to bloom and grow.

The sun was up . . . the grass was riz . . . and the bird was on the wing. . . My word . . . how absurd . . . I thought the wing was on the bird.

"Gertrude . . . I love you with all my heart," I told her.

I waited for those warm words from her. I wanted her to tell me she loved me.

I waited . . . and I waited. . . and I waited . . . but Gertrude didn't say a word.

"Don't you love me? I asked. "When I said I loved you, you should tell me that you love me."

I waited . . . and I waited . . . and I waited . . . but Gertrude didn't say a word.

"See that beautiful tree over in the meadow," I pointed awkwardly to the tree. "Do you think it's beautiful?" I asked.

I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. . . but Gertrude didn't say a word.

"See that beautiful creek over on the other side of the railroad track," I pointed with my other hand awkwardly. "Do you think the creek is beautiful?" I asked.

I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited . . . but Gertrude didn't say a word.

"Gertrude, I think I hear a train coming," I warned. The train could smash us to smithereens. "Don't you think we ought to get off the track?" I asked.

I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited . . . but Gertrude didn't say a word.

"Wo-o-o-o, wo-o-o-o!!!" a train whistled in the distance.

"Gertrude, the train is getting closer." I was getting more and more worried. I warned her again. "It's on this very track. We'd better get off this track." I again warned.

I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited . . . Gertrude didn't say a word.

I looked back and the train was bearing down on us, fast. "It's coming fast. We'd better jump for our lives," I continued to warn her. I was scared we'd both be killed.

I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited . . . but Gertrude didn't say a word.

"Wo-o-o-o, wo-o-o-o!!!" the whistle got louder.

"Jump, Gertrude," I yelled as the train barreled down on us. I jumped clear of the on-coming danger. But Gertrude kept on walking.

I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. . . but Gertrude didn't say a word.

The train smashed her. She disintegrated in every direction. Her body parts flew in every direction as I jumped to safety. As the train roared past, I wondered what happened to her.

Pointing awkwardly to the tree I said, "There's her leg."

Pointing awkwardly to the meadow I said, "There's her arm."

Pointing awkwardly to the creek, I said, "There's her torso."

Looking to my feet I saw her two ears. I picked up the two ears with one ear in each hand and shook them as one would shake the crumbs off a napkin. Then holding the ears up before me, I said,

"Gertrude . . . Gertrude . . . can you hear me?"

And I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited . . . but Gertrude didn't say a word.

WEST SAVANNAH LOVED GERTRUDE

I never thought the story was as funny as the people of West Savannah did. Maybe it's because I knew the punch line, such as it was. As I visited in the home of the unchurched, they constantly asked me to tell the story of Gertrude. So in many homes I'd repeat the story of Gertrude.

When the whole community bought ice cream on the front porch of Westminster Presbyterian Church, they knew the money went for the preacher's new car. The ladies of West Savannah raised \$175.00 and gave it to me during a Sunday morning service.

Within a couple of days, I had purchased a 1939 Chevy coupe with a rumble seat. Technically, the compartment for the rumble seat had been taken out by the dairy farmer who owned the car. He had lined the rumble seat with mahogany paneling and used the Chevy coupe as a truck to haul his milk during WWII when vehicles weren't available.

Since there was no back seat or rumble seat in the car, I could only transport two in the front seat, one in the driver's seat and one in the passenger's seat.

Every time I was heading to town, I stopped by the bus stop to pick up anyone from West Savannah needing a ride downtown. The older people got the front seat, everyone else ended up sitting on the floor in the rear compartment. So I kept four or five little stools in the back compartment for passengers. With the rumble seat wide open, and hair waving in the breeze; everyone seemed to enjoy the short two mile ride to downtown.

It was during one of these trips when I was taking the youngest of the five Mrs. Smiths to town. She and her three children were sitting in the back seat when I told her,

"This car is like a girlfriend . . . it's like a boy's first love."

"Then I am going to call her Gertrude, because she won't say a word,"

Mrs. Smith said laughingly,

The name Gertrude stuck.

From that moment on the 1939 Chevy was called Gertrude by everyone in West Savannah and since a boy's first car is like his first love, I loved Gertrude.

"There comes the preacher and Gertrude . . .," people would comment as I would rumble down the street with my rumble seat wide open.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The leadership identification principle. When followers like their leader, they identify with him and his success. The people of West Savannah liked me, and rejoiced in my new car. They liked it so much that they called it, "Gertrude."
2. The principle of sharing your blessing. I was appreciative of the car that the people of West Savannah gave me. Every time I drove into town, I went by the bus stop, picked up people and drove them to town. This did more than show appreciation, it helped me to serve my community; and in the spirit of the "cup of cold water" Jesus told us to give in His name, I gave Gertrude to the people for their use, and they responded by getting saved.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE ILLUSION OF DREAMS THAT KEEP US GOING

I looked through the rain sprinkled windows of the auditorium of Westminster at four weed filled lots next to the church. I wanted that piece of ground for the church. Of all the things I prayed for . . . and didn't get . . . I desperately wanted the four lots to expand the church.

I closed my eyes and saw a beautiful Sunday School building . . . gleaming white . . . green shingles . . . and a paved parking lot. It was the most beautiful Sunday School building I had ever seen. I could see it sitting on those four lots. That building in my mind was as real as if the rain was pouring down its gutters.

You can't achieve what you can't conceive, so I dreamed of a beautiful Sunday School building . . . not an empty building. The porches and rooms were filled with laughing children.

The sky was steel gray, rain had been falling intermittently all day. My dreary spirit reflected the dreary day. The sandy streets of West Savannah had turned to mud, and I felt like a captive in the church building, and it was cold and damp. I didn't want to run through the rain house to house to visit people in the neighborhood. So I stood in sanctuary looking through the rain spattered windows at the four lots next door.

"Lord . . . give me those four lots so I can build a large sanctuary . . ."

I had made this prayer to God on many occasions. I didn't have a lot of faith that I would get the lots, but I had a deep desire. So, I didn't pray with assurance, I was like a little kid begging for something he knows he won't get.

Immediately behind Westminster Presbyterian Church were four lots, each measuring 100 feet in length on Third Street. They cost more money than I could trust God for . . . they cost \$100 each. My faith was small and \$100 for four lots was bigger than I could see or really believe. If anything, the

four lots and Sunday School convicted me of my "little faith." If Jesus had been physically standing there, He would have said,

"O ye of little faith . . ."

The Westminster sanctuary at one time seated over 500 people, but when the attendance went down, the sanctuary had been divided into classrooms, offices, rest rooms, and a hall. Now the downsized sanctuary seated about 150. My dream was to take all the walls out, and fill the 500 seats with warm bodies. I could see 500 people filling the sanctuary, listening to me preach the Word of God. I could see people packed into the 500 seats and standing around the walls.

I closed my eyes and saw me standing where the pulpit used to be. The pulpit in the future would be high, much higher than it was now.

The balcony had been closed off, so when I remodeled the sanctuary I would open the balcony for 100 people to sit and listen to me preach.

On that cold rainy afternoon I could see the sanctuary of Westminster Presbyterian Church return to its former glory days. One large sanctuary . . . the stained glass windows restored to their glory . . . there would even be a large organ that could rattle windows with its deep tones.

To me, a church of 500 people was the largest church in the world. My vision as a twenty-year old preacher was 500 people. I just couldn't see myself preaching to anything larger than that, or ministering to more than that.

Earlier, on a sunny afternoon I was eating dinner with the Greene family. What she said about these four lots made me choke on the fried chicken.

"We are to buy those four lots in back of the church so we can have room to expand for all the people who are coming to the church," Mrs. Green suggested over the table.

I should have shouted, "Amen!" I should have told her that was my dream. I should have told

her I was praying daily for those four lots. My lack of faith kept me quiet. I was intimidated. I didn't want my dream to be a "me, too," added to what she had just said.

Also, I felt the people might think it was ego or bragging if I told them about a filled church of 500 people. As a young preacher I constantly struggled with self. It seemed every day I knocked Christ off the throne of my heart. If I talked about a church of 500, or talked about buying four lots to build Sunday School rooms, people might think it was bragging.

So I just quietly prayed about my dream.

On Saturday before Easter 1953, I arrived at the church on Saturday morning to see a farmer on his tractor cutting the grass of the four lots in back of the church building. Mr. Miller was standing by the back door of the church, yelling at the top of his voice over the roar of the tractor.

"Cut it as short as possible," he repeated his command with a yell. "Cut it short so people can park in the field."

I hadn't thought about using the field for parking; the four lots were knee deep in weeds. The kids had cut a path through the middle of the field, but when the farmer cut the grass close to the ground, I saw the field flat and level ground perfect for parking.

Westminster Presbyterian Church didn't even have one parking space. The church was on a 100 foot lot, with a sanctuary built to within 10 feet of the property line. So visitors who drove to the church parked on both sides of Fourth Avenue, or on Alexander Street. There were no curbs, only dirt streets, so every once in awhile somebody parked in the church grass. Because of the constant haranguing of the elders, Seckinger and Strickland, I tried to keep everyone from parking on the grass in the front of the church.

Mr. Miller paid the farmer \$5.00 for cutting the four lots, then said to me,

"We've got people driving from Nathaniel Greene housing projects for Easter services," he

beamed with the excitement of a filled church. Then added, "They'll be driving from a mile away; they'll need a place to park tomorrow." Next, Miller explained about families coming from the other side of Highway 17, he wanted them to park in the field.

There was a small dust cloud of dry cut grass over the four lots. Mr. Miller looked out over the field and said,

"The church ought to buy these four lots," he scratched his head trying to read my thoughts. "They're not going to cost too much, probably \$100 a lot."

I should have shared with Mr. Miller my vision of purchasing the lots but I didn't do it. I should have pointed to the Sunday School building with green shingles and gutters, but I didn't do it. I should have described 500 people filling the old sanctuary, but I didn't do it.

The four lots were a dream that was constantly in my thoughts, but as a young preacher I didn't understand the power of dreams. I didn't understand that when followers buy into your dreams, they buy into your leadership. I didn't understand the power of vision. If I had understood the first law of leadership, I might have motivated the congregation to purchase the four lots. The first law of leadership simply states, "When people buy into your dreams, they buy into your leadership."

"Lord, why don't you give us those four lots . . .?" I poured out my dreams to God. At times in the early morning prayer, I would agonize before God, wondering why he didn't answer my prayers. While he answered many prayers for conversion of lost people, this is one request He seemed to ignore.

One day while studying, I read where God told Abraham to walk through the ground to possess it. Being moved by my sermon, I left the church and walked out to the four lots behind the Westminster Presbyterian Church. I didn't want people to know what I was doing, so I walked down Alexander Street, turned left down Third Avenue and walked the 400 feet in front of the empty lots.

The weeds were growing high between the last lot and the Arnstorff's house, so I couldn't walk the final boundary of the four lots, so I turned and walked catty-corner back through the four lots down the path made by the kids. As I walked, I prayed asking God to give me the property.

Going back into my office, I continued to pray for the four lots, asking God to give them to me. But my prayers mocked me. I had just been challenged by the faith of Abraham to walk around the property, but I let a few weeds next to the Arnstorff's house stop me.

I didn't walk completely around the property. I left one side of the property off. Later, I was sure that my lack of obedience in walking ALL THE WAY AROUND THE PROPERTY would keep me from getting the ground.

After I left the pastorate at Westminster Presbyterian Church, I thought about the four lots on many occasions. I thought about standing at the sanctuary window, looking at the four lots. The four lots will always be a dream of mine that was unfulfilled.

As I look back at the four acres, I always blame my lack of faith or my lack of intercession. However, with time I realize that it was not a lack of faith or a lack of prayer. It was my lack of leadership ability. If I had honestly wanted the property, I should have first communicated the dream to the people. Second, given them an opportunity to buy into my dream and pray with me. Third, I should have given them an opportunity to contribute money toward the dream. Finally, I should have asked the church board to purchase the property. However, because I did not understand leadership, I did none of the above and the dream died.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The principle of the impossible. We will never discover what God can do until we attempt the impossible. I had vision and desire, but was afraid to act on them. As a result, God was never able to complete the vision.

2. The principle of courage. My problem was fear, which is the opposite of courage. I had never experienced buying property, so I thought it was a much greater task than it was. Later, in life I purchased many pieces of property and today I look back at my lack of faith and laugh. I should have had courage to attempt a task I thought was impossible, so God could have answered my prayer and demonstrated His ability to answer prayer.

3. The principle of biblical faith. I thought I had faith because I believed in God, but my faith was extremely weak. If I had faith in God, I would have acted on it. The old farmer said, "What's in the well, comes up in the bucket." If I had biblical faith, I would have acted in an obedient way, but the fear in my heart kept me from pursuing my dream.

4. The principle of unfulfilled dreams. No one will do all their dreams, but without dreams, they won't do as much. No one can do every dream he/she has had, but dreams keep us going and dreams make the journey worthwhile. While I never realized the dream of purchasing the four lots, that dream, plus other dreams, motivated me to continued ministry. And while I didn't realize that dream, there were other accomplishments that were influenced by it.

5. The principle of dream-consensus. When you have a dream that's from God, others are probably also seeing the same thing. The leader's role is to dream.

Buy the dream.
See the dream.
Own the dream.
Share the dream.

But when the leader has a dream from God, really from God; others have probably gotten the same dream. So leaders should look for confirmation for their dream in others, then share their dreams, so others can become a part of it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE COAT-THROWER

I have had several nicknames in my life, the one I like most of all is "Preacher." I am not sure how effective I was as a minister at Westminster Presbyterian Church. I not only looked young, I was young . . . too young for effective empathy with the sick, dying and those in deep need. I couldn't be called Reverend because I was not yet ordained, and no one called me "Pastor." There were other names that were given to pastors such as bishop, elder, and some curse words used in anger. But the term that was most endearing to me, was characterized by what I did best, I was the "Preacher."

And for a short period of time they called me "The Coat Thrower."

Now that's an interesting title, why would someone call their pastor the coat thrower. Did he throw a coat on the floor while making a pastoral visit? Did he play a game at the Sunday School picnic and won the "coat throwing contest?"

No . . . there was another reason.

To understand why I was called "coat thrower," you have to examine the mind of a nineteen year old preacher, and ask a deeper question ". . . where did he get his sermons?" By all standards of community response, they liked my preaching, and the church grew because people liked my preaching, and they came Sunday morning and Sunday night to hear my preaching. They liked it so much that they everyone . . . members and non-members . . . called me "Preacher."

So . . . where did I get these sermons that they liked so much?

While a student at Columbia Bible College, I was constantly listening for any story that could spice up my sermon. I knew that people liked stories . . . remembered stories . . . were

motivated by stories . . . and laughed at my funny stories. So I had my ears tuned for stories, events that I could include in my preaching. I took careful notes in all of my classes, writing out carefully any story in the left hand margin. I considered great stories the meat of my sermons.

My best sermons came from my Bible classes where I was immersed into Bible study. Obviously, when I studied the Book of John, I preached from John. The same pattern followed with Daniel, Revelation, Romans and Genesis.

While attending classes during the week, I filled up my bucket, and on Sundays I poured out the Word of God into the hearts of my listeners in West Savannah.

At Columbia Bible College I attended five chapels a week, plus another eight to twelve semester hours of Bible and doctrine classes.

So I sprinkled several stories throughout my messages, outlining my sermons on 3 x 5 cards. I still have many of these sermons filed away in manila envelope, including the 3 x 5 cards, my original handwritten notes, and sometimes an actual typed outline I took into the pulpit with me.

So where did the title "coat thrower" come from?

After I had been at Westminster Presbyterian Church for about 6 months, I heard an English speaker at Columbia Bible College . . . a revivalist . . . an enthusiast . . . very emotional. There were several British speakers each year, and most were known for their sedate sermons, whereby they reasoned from the Word of God. Most Britishers controlled themselves in the pulpit. Never would you say that a Britisher was emotional or revivalistic.

This particular British homiletician was a big-boned man, his large head was covered with golden curly hair, and a hawk nose, eyes that pierced the listeners.

I admired his blue-striped shirt and solid blue tie. So I bought a blue striped shirt and solid

blue tie just like him. I liked what I felt when I heard him preach, so I wanted to look just like him. I wanted my audience to feel the same way when I preached.

The British pulpiteers described Joseph wearing the coat of many colors. I could see Joseph walking over the hills toward his ten brothers. With vivid narrative and whispered tones, the British accent repeated the words of the brothers.

" . . . Take that blasphemous coat of many colors from him and smear it in mud."

"No . . .," a second brother cited. "Let's dip it in blood," he reasoned. "Mud can be washed out, but never blood."

"Let's dip it in his own blood . . .," another brother spit out the words, seeing the hatred in the eyes of his brother that reflected his own animosity.

"Let's do it . . .," they all agreed.

This British pulpiteer lifted me up out of my chapel seat, I floated back to the Palestinian hills to survey the mob scene of ten brothers viciously attacking young Joseph. They grabbed him . . . they spit on him . . . they slapped him . . . they kicked him . . . and they stripped him of a beautiful coat of many colors.

In an instantaneous liquid movement, the British pulpiteer shed his coat from his broad shoulders, rolled it viciously into a ball, heaving it into the rear corner of the platform.

I was lifted to a pinnacle, then I crashed into the corner of the chapel platform, wrapped in that coat. I had so identified with the act of preaching, that when the coat was heaved into the corner, I felt hatred for the assault by the ten brothers on Joseph.

What the British preacher did to me in chapel, I instantly wanted to do to the people of West Savannah. What I had considered was a great sermon, would be just as great when I preached the next Sunday. In my sermon preparation I painted a mental picture seeing myself

lifting the people of West Savannah to hate the ten brothers toward Joseph. I wanted them to feel what I feel . . . to hear it the way I heard it . . . to experience it the way I experienced it.

And now over forty years later, I do not remember the point or thesis of the Britisher's sermon. I do not know whether it was a sermon to call young people to dedicate their lives to Jesus Christ, or a call to prayer, or a call to separation, or a call to patience. I don't remember why he threw the coat, other than to evoke a crowd response.

Neither do I remember the purpose of my sermon. As a matter of fact, most of my sermons did not have a well-conceived purpose. I just put together a great Bible lesson . . . explained the Bible . . ., illustrated it with stories; . . . and closed in prayer. When I closed in prayer, I always gave an invitation for people to walk forward and kneel at the altar. I always asked people to receive Christ as Savior. In the next part of my invitation, I asked young people to surrender their life to Jesus Christ . . . to put everything on the altar. If there were any other particular points of the sermon, I usually asked the people to commit themselves to prayer . . . to read their Bible . . . to share Christ with someone . . . or to have a better Christian home.

I would like you to think that I threw the coat in the pulpit of Westminster Presbyterian Church because it contributed to the point of the sermon I preached on Joseph and his ten brothers. I can't say that. I threw the coat for the sensational results I wanted my hearers to feel when I came to that dramatic moment.

As I look back on that sermon, I now see pride written all over the act. I wanted people to feel toward me as I felt toward the Britisher. I had pedestalized the Englishman. I wanted the people of West Savannah to also put me on a pedestal. I wanted them to think of me as a man of God. While there is nothing wrong with being a godly example, so you can influence others, my motive was pride so people will think well of me. Remember, Jesus condemned the Scribes and

Pharisees because they wanted all men to think well of them.

Another problem I had as a young preacher, was handling what I wanted. I wanted to be successful . . . sensational . . . effective; but when I became successful . . . sensational . . . effective . . ., I didn't know how to handle it. The following Sunday I preached the sermon of the ten brothers and Joseph, not exactly copying the words of the British preacher; for that would be blatant plagiarism. My sermon was veiled plagiarism. I told the story in my own way, adding my own Southern twist . . . obviously with a Southern accent . . . and the immaturity of a college sophomore.

I emphasized the coat more than the British preacher. I walked from behind the pulpit to stroke my coat as though it were long, pretending to be Joseph. I showed the audience how Joseph might have stroked his coat of many colors. I made more references to the coat of many colors, than did my British idol. I wanted to make sure no one missed the point. Trying to be as dramatic as my British counterpart, but not as descriptive and eloquent, I probably was a lot more rural and crude.

Arriving at the dramatic apex of the sermon, I then repeated what I had heard, "They grabbed him . . . they spit on him . . . they slapped him . . . they beat him . . . and they stripped him of the beautiful coat of many colors."

"Then . . . in an act of defiance they threw him into the pit."

Dramatically, I stripped my coat much slower than the Britisher. I didn't want the people to miss what I was doing. Slowly I rolled it into a ball, then turning I cast it against the back wall behind the pulpit.

My coat dropped to the platform floor.

My audience gasped . . . not the way some might at a movie theater. They gasped as a

person might suck air in his mouth, shaking his head in unbelief.

Five or six people stood, pulling themselves up with their hands on the pew in front of them. With cocked heads in the air, they strained to see the coat on the floor. They responded more physically than I had anticipated. At Columbia Bible College the students responded inwardly, with thoughts and hearts. But in West Savannah necks craned to see the coat. Heads bobbed to get a view of the actual crumpled jacket on the floor.

"What did he do, Momma?" a little girl asked.

"Sh-h-h-h-h . . ."

The sermon ended with my coat off. I called for one of the men to lead in prayer for the Benediction. Then, when no one was looking, I retrieved my coat. Standing at the back door they responded,

"That was some preaching . . .," one of the men shook my hand as he exited. "Some preaching . . ."

He had said exactly what I wanted to hear. I gulped deeply at his complements, as a young boy throwing down a Coca-Cola without coming up for air.

It was good!

"You really got into that sermon . . ., Preacher," one man laughed. Then correcting himself he added, "You really got out of that coat . . ."

We stood outside the church and talked about the visual lesson . . . how graphic . . . how memorable . . . how captivating.

That week I went down to the corner grocery store. The proprietor asked,

"Did you really throw that coat against the wall?"

"Yup . . ."

I like the adulation so much, that week my mind went to work. "What other story in the Bible had a coat?"

During the next week at Columbia Bible College I made a list of every event I could think of that included a coat:

Jesus' robe.

Peter put on his coat after fishing all night.

Jacob wrapping himself in a coat to sleep.

Paul asking for his coat.

Next week I preached a second sermon that included a dramatic coat throwing episode. I'd like to tell you exactly what sermon I preached, and describe how dramatically I ripped off a coat, or made an object lesson of a coat. But I don't remember what I preached. But I did take my coat off. One time I preached about Peter fishing all night and caught no fish. When Peter saw Jesus, he reached under the seat, to grab his coat. In doing, so I went over and put on my coat as though I were Peter. It really didn't add that much to the sermon, it was just a visual effect.

Over the next three or four weeks I preached a few sermons that included the taking off. . . putting on . . . or throwing a coat. It seemed to be a good show, but, I only continued it for about five sermons. Why? Because each time I dramatically went for the coat, I saw a decreasing affect of the dramatic. There were no more gasps from the audience. No one stood to see what I did, and the heads were not bobbing to see the coat on the floor. The people were nice, and the nicest thing they did was to say nothing. They didn't make fun, nor did they tell me that it was a great idea. As a matter of fact, after about three coat throwing episodes, people stopped talking about it in the yard after church was over. I probably quit using the coat as a prop because

people were no longer affected by its use. But about the time I stopped using my coat, the people in the community who didn't come to church started talking about it. The church members who had seen me throw the coat stopped talking about it; the people who didn't come to church began to talk about the incident. As I would go visit house to house, people asked,

"Are you the one that threw the coat?" Then they usually added a second question, "Did you really throw it on the floor?"

Obviously, it was sensational to throw a coat on the floor, and not every preacher has thrown his coat. Since I had done something so unusual, people talked about it.

"I'll come hear you when you throw your coat again . . .," one of the men of the neighborhood said.

I then realized coat throwing was more an act, not a true reflection of the sermon. I remember trying to tell this man that he should attend church because of the message of the Word of God, not because of any theatrics of the preacher.

"Come see the Lord Jesus Christ, not to see a preacher throw his coat."

I don't remember if he came or not.

Today, you would probably characterize my preaching as more substantive than form. This event was the beginning of a change in the way I preached. I was finding it more and more difficult to find stories. So I naturally looked for substance to put in my sermons. At this time I realized that the Word of God changed lives. The people of God have to hear the Word of God. I found myself reading more commentaries to get more meat from the scriptures. I found myself replacing stories with Bible expositional content. I found myself preaching the Word of God, rather than putting on an entertaining spectacle. While my sermons became more Bible centered, and less sensational, I saw a greater influence in my listeners.

One of the reasons I later chose Dallas Theological Seminary was because it trained men to preach the way that I wanted to preach. The founder of Dallas Theological Seminary had said, "You haven't preached the gospel, until you have given people something to believe." I wanted to give them something to change their lives.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. Principle of Deceptive Methodology. Many have such a deep desire to serve the Lord that they turn to questionable methods to be effective in Christ's service. However, should we recognize that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. We should not heed our heart's desire for recognition, but allow our methodology to come from the Word of God. We should attempt to put Christ first and make our prayer, what those seeking Jesus in the Bible asked, "We would see Jesus."
2. The Principles of Unwanted Success. I wanted people to think of me as a sensational preacher who could influence their emotions. When I got what I wanted, I was unsettled by my success, and uneasy with the disruptive results that it brought.
3. The Principle of Managed Enthusiasm. What my sermons lacked in substance and focus, they made up by enthusiasm and excitement. I wanted my hearers to feel the Word of God and they did. Therefore, I purposely planned excitement, stories and involvement in every sermon to communicate to them "life, and life more abundantly." Having success in this endeavor is evidenced by the name they gave me, "Preacher."
4. The Excess of Success Principle. I wanted my listener to "feel" my sermons, and they did. I wanted to move them to action, they stood and gawked and they strained to see a coat on the floor. But I was not satisfied when I got what I sought. The excessives of my success led to changes in my preaching. Today, I place more emphasis on substance, rather than form. I

attempt to preach the Word of God and let God hearts by the power of His Word.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHEN THE JAR BREAKS

Not only did I preach at the 11:00 AM worship service every Sunday morning, I also was Sunday School Superintendent of the 10:00 AM Sunday School. As Sunday School Superintendent, I felt my most important contribution was the "Superintendent's devotional" which was a five minute long talk to the children.

From the smallest of children to the adults, everyone gathered into the main sanctuary for opening exercise. Here, we sang a couple of songs, celebrated birthdays, and listened to the Superintendent (me) give a devotional before going to classes.

Since many of the children didn't stay for the worship service, I felt the "Superintendent's devotional" was my best opportunity to present the gospel to the young people and influence their lives.

"I liked it when you use the disposable handkerchief", someone told me. It wasn't a disposable handkerchief, it just turned different colors as I pulled it through my hand. I had used a magical handkerchief in my devotional as a visual aid to keep attention and help the children see what I was explaining. The handkerchief turned from black to red to white to green. Like the wordless book I did a magic trick explaining that the black part talked about our sins, the red part of the handkerchief described the blood of Christ, the white talked about cleansing our hearts from sin and the green symbolized eternal life.

"I like those flannel graph lessons," an elderly man told me. He went on to explain that when he saw the pictures of the people in the Bible he remembered the story better than hearing a sermon. As a result, I tried to find an object lesson each week for my Superintendent's message.

After one year of coming up with object lessons every week, the well was beginning to run dry.

For one Sunday morning I thought of an object lesson that would show Christ taking our penalty for sin. It was a simple object lesson that involved three things: first, a hammer I painted bright red. Second, a jar on which I scotchtaped the name, Christ; third, I needed a small figurine that would stand for sinners.

Dropping by the Five and Dime Store, I picked out a small, shiny figurine, because it only cost ten cents. It was a Chinese lady. At home, I painted the small figurine jet black to show the blackness of sin.

The following Sunday morning I introduced my object lesson by holding up the red hammer on which I had scotchtaped the word "judgment" on the handle. Bringing down the hammer from the sky, I explained to the children that God's judgment fell on all sin. Then walking over to a small table beside the pulpit, I pointed to my Chinese figurine that had been painted jet black.

"We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God," I quoted from Romans 3:23.

Then pretending that the hammer of God was going to fall on the jet black sinners, I made a full roundhouse swing with the hammer coming within inches of the figurine, but not smashing it.

"God's judgment should smash our sin," I explained to the children.

I repeated the roundhouse swing several times, the children on the front row were seated on the edge of the pew. Two or three of them got off the pew, and squatted to watch the red hammer come within inches of the jet black Chinese figurine that stood for sin.

"But Christ took our punishment for us," I explained to the children.

Then walking to the pulpit, I took out a large jar on which I had scotchtaped the word, "Christ." I placed the jet black Chinese figurine within the large jar. "On Calvary we were placed in Christ and the judgment of God did not smash the figurine, but rather the judgment of God smashed Jesus Christ on Calvary."

I showed the children that the hammer would smash the jar, not the jet black figurine of the Chinese lady.

When I went to look for the jar, I didn't find a mayonnaise or one of those frail jars that would break easily. My mother gave me a Mason jar, the kind of jar that ladies use in canning vegetables. The jar was heavy and durable, because it was sealed in a pressure cooker on the stove at hundreds of degrees Fahrenheit. In my naiveté I did not know the strength of the Mason jar. To me any glass jar was just another jar. And when a hammer hit the jar, it would break.

Standing in front of the children in Sunday School, I didn't know the danger that lay ahead of me. If I had any idea of what was going to happen, I would have stopped the demonstration right there. I would have explained what was going to happen, and not tried to break the jar.

In front of the children I laid the Mason jar on its side. This is the jar to which I scotch-taped the name, "Christ." I placed the jet black Chinese figurine within the jar and explained to the children,

"When the judgment of God, i.e. the hammer, falls on Christ, i.e. the Mason jar, we who are sinners are not harmed. The jar would be smashed, Christ took our penalty for us. The figurine would not be hurt, the sinner would not be punished for his sin.

I brought the hammer, full roundhouse circle but not at full speed. As the hammer got close to the jar, I slowed the motion, expecting the hammer to crack and break the jar. But everyone heard it at the same time.

"Klunk."

The hammer hit the jar, but the Mason jar didn't break.

A few children chuckled because the jar didn't break.

I determined that the next time I wouldn't slow the hammer. I had announced that the judgment of God breaks the jar and Christ would be crucified. And so beginning my roundhouse

swing again, I brought the hammer down at the normal speed on the Mason jar.

"KLUNK . . ."

The sound echoed through the auditorium. The Mason jar didn't break and my ears began to turn red. Children began to laugh. One pointed at the jar, and said out loud,

"It didn't break."

Several children put their hands to their mouth. In the back of the room the adults began to smile that knowing smile.

I was determined that the next time . . . would not be the last time . . . next time the jar would break. So I retold the story of the judgment of God on sin. I replaced the jet black Chinese figurine that stood for sin into the Mason jar. Placing the Mason jar on the small table, I took the red hammer and made a full roundhouse swing, twice as fast as before. I had no idea of what would happen when I hit the thick walls of the Mason jar.

"C . . . R . . . A . . . C . . . K ." The glass splintered and the sound echoed through the auditorium. The splintered glass sprayed the children sitting in the front row.

"Y . . . E E . . . E . . . Y . . . O . . . W" the children let out a scream in unison. Their hands flew to cover their face, the whole auditorium erupted with panic.

I was stunned at what I had done, and was frozen with fear. My first reaction was that I had put the eye out of some of the children.

Two or three mothers came running down the aisle, not caring that it was a church service. They panicked and ran to their children. The children kept screaming . . . crying . . . yelling . . . pandemonium broke out in the whole Sunday School.

It only took a few minutes to determine that no one was hurt. When I think of the protective providence of God, I continue to pray daily for the Lord to "deliver me from the Evil One." I thank

God that on this occasion none of the splintered glass hit any of the children in the eye. There were no cuts or contusions. None had been hit in the face with glass. Even though they were peppered with glass splinters, there were no obvious cuts that we could see.

Silla Hair suggested that we all go to our Sunday School class. She volunteered to sweep up the glass and get ready for the morning service.

I was shook to the core. In front of all the people I had done an immature thing. I had appeared foolish, and everyone knew it.

I don't remember anything about my Sunday School lesson to the Junior boys that day. I remember being so shook I really could deal with the lesson. At 11:00 AM I had to preach, and again I was still intimidated by the immature act. Again, I don't remember what I preached on and somehow I struggled to get through the sermon and the worship service.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The principle of expressing not impressing. While I wanted to use my Superintendent's devotional to make a spiritual impact on people, there was always the temptation of wanting to entertain or be impressive, rather than to explain the Word of God. The minister must try to be expressive, not impressive. As I look back on the broken jar, I realize that sometimes the minister is blinded to the purposes of his heart. Whereas he may think his motives are absolutely pure to serve Christ, sometimes the motives are self supporting and he is feeding his own ego while he serves the Lord.

2. The principle of "the show must go on." The world uses the expression, "The show must go on," and there is no strategical difference to us who preach sermons. "The sermon must go on." Because I embarrassed myself with the shattered glass, I was not able to teach a Sunday School lesson adequately or preach a sermon. Every minister makes mistakes, but must immediately walk

away from his mistakes and continue serving the Lord. However, my mistakes were so wrapped up with ego, that I was not able to forget it. In my heart I knew I was "showing off" while I presented a gospel message. If my motives had been right, I wouldn't have cared what people thought about me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE FINAL CHAPTER

I eagerly reached into the mailbox and pulled out the cream colored enveloped. Its return address was Fuller Theological Seminary. I knew this was my acceptance into seminary that I had eagerly awaited. Fuller Theological Seminary was the hottest seminary in the evangelical world, it was attracting the greatest Christian scholars from all over the world. Because it was considered the best, everyone wanted to go to Fuller. Because it was the best, I wanted to go to Fuller seminary . . . it was the only one I wanted to attend.

"We regret to inform you," my countenance dropped as I read the letter. "Your application has been denied because Columbia Bible College is not accredited, nor recognized . . ."

My vision of attending the best collapsed right there in front of the student mailboxes at Columbia Bible College. I had one more year of college left. I had planned that year carefully. I planned to continue pastoring Westminster Presbyterian Church for one more year, then move to California to attend Fuller.

When God shuts one door, I have found that He usually opens another. My father-in-law, Mr. E. B. Forbes, a Christian contractor in St. Louis, Missouri, told me I should transfer immediately to Northwestern College, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Billy Graham was president of Northwestern, and was an accredited college where I could graduate in one year, then enter Fuller Theological Seminary.

The following weekend I broke the news to the five ladies at Westminster Presbyterian Church about my plans to leave. Then I shared it with the two elders. I persuaded them that Herbie Dickinson, my friend at Columbia Bible College would make an outstanding pastor. So they called Herbie to pastor the church and I moved to Minnesota to attend Northwestern College. Herbie took over the church, but only stayed three months. His schedule got too hectic, and Herbie turned the

church over to a Chatham County policeman who was attending Westminster Presbyterian church. During the year 1954 the policeman pastored the church as a lay-pastor for over a year. While he was dedicated to hospital visitation and soul-winning, he was weak in pulpiteering; but of course he was not trained in that area.

I first met the policeman when he visited Westminster Presbyterian Church. He came as a result of revival in the community. He had grown up in West Savannah, attended the church as a teenager, but was not sure of his salvation. During one of my sermons he was convicted of sin, walked down the aisle at the invitation, and knelt at the altar to get his life right with God.

The policeman, like Paul on the road to Damascus, instantly turned from darkness to light. God gave him a burden for souls and he went with me door to door to win people to Christ. I preached every Thursday at the Union Mission, a downtown rescue mission for homeless men on the street. I took him with me to give his testimony. He went back with me every Thursday to share Christ with the men. Within a few months he was preaching at the Union Mission on a weekly basis, and when I went to St. Louis to be married on August 21, 1953, the policeman preached the morning and evening services at Westminster Presbyterian Church while I was gone. It was his first sermon in a church, even though he had preached at the rescue mission.

As faithful in ministry as the policeman was, he did not have the "spark" in the pulpit to attract large crowds. As faithful as he was in presenting the gospel, people didn't walk the aisle to get saved. The people missed the evangelistic fire. As a pastor he couldn't hold the attendance and the attendance began to decline. As people moved out of the community, they left the church. He was not able to get new members. It declined from over 100 to under fifty people.

About a mile away, a young Baptist preacher, Cecil Hodges became pastor of the newly established Bible Baptist Church on Highway 80. Cecil, a charismatic personality with the anointing of

God upon his ministry, led the Bible Baptist Church in explosive growth, as rapidly as the growth of the Westminster Presbyterian Church.

The Bible Baptist Church was nothing to look at. When Cecil Hodges first came it was a simple rectangular building with a dirt floor. The first thing he did was pour a concrete floor. The greatness of this crude little building was the powerful preaching of its new preacher.

The policeman asked Cecil Hodges to come preach a weekend revival, preaching Friday and Saturday night at Westminster Presbyterian Church. The five ladies who had called me as pastor got excited about revival. They went door to door inviting everyone, and the little Presbyterian Church was filled on Friday night. Cecil Hodges preached a powerful sermon, and over twenty-five people came forward to get saved.

The next night the crowd was even larger with people standing around the walls. Again, Cecil preached a powerful message, and again over twenty-five people came forward to get saved. After the people had been led to Christ, Cecil had the converts stand in front of the pulpit like he did in the Baptist church. The converts stretched from the piano to the outer wall. Pastor Hodges asked the new converts;

"When are you people going to get baptized?"

"We'll get Reverend Carroll Stegall to come and sprinkle them . . .," one of the five ladies answered from the pews. The people in West Savannah were used to speaking out in the church service.

"No . . .," Cecil answered the lady reaching for his Bible. "I mean when are you going to baptize them by immersion like the Bible commands?"

Pastor Hodges turned to the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, showing how he was immersed immediately after conversion. Then turning the pages of the New Testament, illustration to illustration,

Hodges showed how all new Christians in the Bible were immediately baptized. Then directing his question to the people standing in front of him, Hodges again asked,

"Do you want to obey God and be baptized?"

"Yes . . .," they answered in unison.

Hodges invited them to attend the Bible Baptist Church the following evening, which was Sunday night. He gave directions to the building on Highway 80 and promised them a Bible message on baptism.

"It will be a Bible study about baptism, not a sermon," he explained.

Sunday morning the policeman preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, and announced that the evening service would be held at the Bible Baptist Church. He gave the directions. Many of those in attendance that morning planned to go hear Pastor Hodges that evening.

About 50 people from the Presbyterian Church showed up to hear Pastor Hodges that Sunday evening. Not all of the fifty people who had come forward to be saved were there, about half of them were there. And then again, about half of the regulars at the little Presbyterian Church showed up. The Bible Baptist Church was packed and the building was hot.

"This is the largest Sunday evening crowd we have ever had," Pastor Hodges announced to those gathered in the concrete block building.

Then taking his Bible, Hodges turned from Scripture to Scripture, explaining the necessity of being baptized by immersion. To his credit, he never said sprinkling was wrong, nor did he attack the Presbyterian way of baptizing. Hodges simply taught what he believed about baptism from the Bible, and had the people read what the Bible said. Then he gave a gospel invitation,

"I want you to come forward as a candidate to be scripturally baptized tonight . . .," Cecil invited people to walk an aisle as a candidate for baptism by immersion.

Without making a big explanation, Cecil Hodges believed that immersion also meant church membership. To him, baptism was the doorway into the Baptist church. When the Presbyterians from Westminster were immersed in the Baptist church, they were doing more than following the Lord in baptism, they were becoming members of the Bible Baptist Church.

Not all of the Presbyterians that evening went forward, but many of them did; including most of the five ladies who had originally called me to pastor the church. Many were baptized that evening in the church's small baptistery, a few put it off until succeeding weeks for one reason or another. One said,

"I want my husband here to be baptized with me."

That evening Cecil Hodges functionally shut down Westminster Presbyterian Church, even though the next two weeks the policeman conducted Sunday School and church. The Presbyterian crowd was small and the leadership was gone. He resigned and the Independent Presbyterian Church shut down the Westminster Presbyterian Church of West Savannah. (Today there is another Westminster Presbyterian Church in Savannah, but it is not the same continuing congregation, nor the same building.)

The month that the Presbyterians of West Savannah became Baptists, the same thing was symbolically happening to me one thousand miles away in Dallas, Texas.

I had done everything possible to enter Fuller Theological Seminary, but ended up at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.

When my wife and I arrived in Dallas, we visited three or four Presbyterian churches, looking for a congregation that had the evangelistic zeal of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia. But we couldn't find a Presbyterian church that was exciting . . . evangelistic . . . with motivating preaching.

We visited First Baptist Church in downtown Dallas because a symphony orchestra played special music one Sunday evening. After my wife and I got home, my wife had a life-threatening emergency and she ended up in the Baptist Hospital in the middle of the night with surgery to save her life. When I was checking her into the hospital, the nurse filling out the registration papers asked an innocent question,

"What is your church home?"

"We don't have one, yet . . .," I answered.

"Where did you attend church today?"

"First Baptist Church in downtown Dallas," I answered.

I didn't think anything about the conversation, but the nurse had entered First Baptist Church as our church home. After surgery I was allowed into the post-operative recovery room to see my wife. Dr. Schaffer, visitation pastor of First Baptist Church, was standing there talking to her.

"I understand you kids don't have any money to take care of your bill . . .," Dr. Schaffer said to me.

"The First Baptist Church will help you . . .," he advised.

When I got home that evening at approximately 6 o'clock, a couple was sitting in their car at the curb outside our duplex. He introduced himself as the teacher of the Young Married Couples Class at First Baptist where we were assigned. She had brought a casserole for dinner. When we went into the duplex she made the beds, cleaned the kitchen and together we sat down to have dinner of the casserole they had brought.

"Tomorrow night somebody else from the class will be here with dinner," they said before leaving.

My wife and I were tremendously impressed with the friendliness and personal ministry of First

Baptist Church, but more than that we were amazed at the evangelistic outreach of one of the largest churches in America. Yet this big church could help one couple who were visitors.

"Let's attend First Baptist Church and learn the spirit of this great church," I told my wife.

Then added,

"Let's don't become Baptist."

Beginning in 1944, pastor W. A. Criswell preached verse by verse through the whole Bible from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. We attended the church in 1954-1955 from Romans 4 to I Corinthians 1.

When Dr. Criswell came to Romans, Chapter 6, he read,

³Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?

⁴Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

⁵For it we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also *in the likeness* of *his* resurrection:

⁶Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

"Tonight I am going to preach on baptism," then with a twinkle in his eye Dr. Criswell told the audience,

"There is no water in Romans 6."

That evening I came to the church and sat right in the middle of the congregation with my Greek New Testament. I wanted to compare Dr. Criswell with the biblical text. I didn't want to argue, I just wanted to see if he could properly interpret the biblical view of baptism. I was convinced that

baptism by sprinkling was correct. Back at Columbia Bible College I had argued with other students the mode of baptism, passionately defending baptism by sprinkling. That evening Dr. Criswell began his sermon by repeating what he had said that morning,

"There is no water baptism in Romans, Chapter 6 . . ."

"Amen," I said in my heart, fondly stroking my Greek New Testament.

"When Jesus died on the cross, you were placed in Christ," Dr. Criswell made his first point.

He went on to say that to be identified with Christ was spiritual baptism, not water baptism.

"Amen," I agreed.

"When Jesus was crucified on the cross, you were crucified with Him," Dr. Criswell proclaimed.

"Amen," I agreed.

"When Jesus was buried in the grave, you were buried with Him," Dr. Criswell preached.

"Amen," I agreed.

"When Jesus was raised from the dead, you were in Christ being raised from the dead with Him," Dr. Criswell maintained.

"Amen," I agreed.

The analogy of our being placed into Christ was repeated by Dr. Criswell several times, if not a dozen times. Each time he repeated the fact that this baptism was spiritual baptism not water baptism, I could only say,

"Amen," I agreed.

"If . . .," Dr. Criswell lifted his voice to his highest apex.

"If . . .," Dr. Criswell repeated himself again, louder.

"If you have been identified with Christ in His death . . . if you have been identified with Christ

in his burial . . . if you have been identified with Christ in His resurrection . . . why not tell the world by water symbolism?"

Like a crisis decision that must be made immediately, I changed my entire view of baptism instantaneously. What he said made sense. My spirit agreed with his view of water baptism.

"Amen," I agreed.

In the evening service Elmer Towns, the Presbyterian, died. Even though I would respect my Presbyterian roots, and love my Presbyterian mother; from that moment on I would never again be Presbyterian. At Columbia Bible College I had heard all the arguments for baptism by immersion from my classmates. I was able to answer all their arguments. But when faced with great passionate preaching, tied to biblical exegesis; I moved from the world of sprinkling into the world of immersion. I became a Baptist. (However, my greatest allegiance is not to the Baptist church, but to the body of Christ. I love those who love Christ and identify with those who take up His cross and follow Him, no matter their church affiliation.)

A thousand miles away, Westminster Presbyterian Church was experiencing a similar change. Many of those I had led to Christ were becoming Baptists. Cecil Hodges was immersing people into Bible Baptist Church and they would henceforth be Baptists. And in Dallas, Texas, the one who had led them to Christ also was making that change. From henceforth he would be Baptist.

PRINCIPLES TO TAKE AWAY

1. The principle of enlightened passion. It is not an argument or reasons that change the minds of people. Nor is it one correct rhetoric. It takes a combination of biblically based arguments that are presented with passion to change the thinking of people.

2. The principle of anointed preaching. The policeman who took the pastorate of Westminster Presbyterian Church had the right doctrine and was yielded to Christ, but didn't have an

anointing from God when he preached. Because of this, attendance went down in the church. When an anointed preacher came to the church, even though he had a different denominational persuasion, the people responded to his preaching. The church had revival and Cecil Hodges built a great church because the Holy spirit anointed his preaching.

3. The remnant principle. God always had a group of people, no matter how small, who will be true to Him. Even though the policeman wasn't an anointed preacher, there was a remnant at the church who remained true to God.

4. The sovereign design principle. I believe God wanted me at Dallas Theological Seminary, even though I did everything I could to get into Fuller Theological Seminary. Today, I am a dispensationalist and reflect the theology of Dallas. If I had not gone to Dallas Seminary, I would not had gotten the solid grounding in theology to go with my Presbyterian roots that gave me a balanced view of ministry. Dallas was imperative for me during the 1950s, and I'm glad I didn't go to Fuller for my basic seminary training. However, God heard my prayer and I graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary 25 years later with my doctorate degree.

5. Principle of following one's heart. While I was not seeking to become a Baptist nor was I studying the Baptist position, I simply was following my heart when I changed from being a Presbyterian to Baptist. I don't believe that any scholarly argument could have changed my convictions, but Dr. W. A. Criswell touched my heart with anointed preaching and scholarly exegesis.

6. My lifelong love affair with large churches. Several years later I wrote the book, *Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Made Them Grow*, Baker Book House, 1969. This book became a best seller and according to C. Peter Wagner of Fuller Theological Seminary, this was the first book on the mega churches of America and the first American church growth book. This book would never had happened if I had never fallen in love with the large First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. I loved

the church, not because of its size, but because of how they took care of one couple who visited their services. When I later tried to communicate the effectiveness of large churches, it was not from a scholarly perspective, but from the heart.

7. The principle of choice. I have always been intrigued with the way people make choices and arrive at decisions. Some choices are made because of intellectual knowledge, others because of heart felt emotions. Still other people make choices because of their background, pre-suppositions or many other reasons. Quite often I am asked why I changed from the Presbyterian church to become a Baptist. It is not always a theological answer that I give. I was following my heart in this change. At the time I didn't realize that Baptist churches were evangelistically more oriented than Presbyterian churches. But that's what I was looking for. Also, I didn't realize that Baptist churches were more "user friendly" in their commitment to congregational government and involving everyone in ministry. I made a choice on my knees because I felt God wanted me to change. What I did, I made a choice because God led me.

EPILOGUE

I love the church, which means I love to attend church services, I love to serve in the church, I love to pray for the church and I love to give money to the church. I love to reach people for Christ through the church. I love to fellowship with Christians in the church. I love the church because it is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22,23) and I love Jesus Christ. He has saved me, called me to full-time service and given meaning to my life.

Because of my love for Jesus Christ, I jumped on my bicycle to ride all over Savannah, Georgia, telling people they needed "to be born again." I did whatever was necessary visiting wayward members, praying for the sick, gathering crowds and organizing workers.

When you love someone, you cry and suffer pain when they hurt. I agonized with every failure at Westminster Presbyterian Church and wept while battling the former elders for leadership.

When you love someone, you smile and laugh at their victories. I delighted when the people painted the whole church in a whole day. I was happily affirmed by each victory.

When you love someone, you identify with their dreams and aspirations. Their hopes become your future. I wanted Westminster Presbyterian Church to grow, buy property and construct new buildings. The future of Westminster Presbyterian Church was my future. I planned to stay there the rest of my life, and would have except God moved me on in geography and understanding.

God has promised "I will pour out my Spirit" so we define atmospheric revival, "the presence of God among his people." While at Westminster Presbyterian Church, there was continuous revival. I felt God's presence in the church services. I felt Him because He WAS there. The good people of West Savannah yielded themselves to be filled by His presence and

God moved through the neighborhood. So I loved Westminster Presbyterian Church because I love Jesus Christ, who lives in the church and is the church.