

Prologue

View from the Skybox

Bending over the counter of the small kitchenette, the middle-aged homemaker carefully spread a layer of grape jelly to cover the crusty bread slices that soon would be sandwiches for her husband and some of his friends in the next room.

Adjacent to her, leaning over several sheets of waxed paper, two other women presided over the peanut-butter side of the sandwich-making assembly line.

This might have been a typical noontime scene in any home in America, except that the woman wielding the jelly-spreader was Nancy Pressler, wife of Texas State District Court Judge H. Paul Pressler III, who was in the beginning stages of dramatically transforming the Southern Baptist Convention. The friends who gathered around Pressler and awaited their sandwiches represented names that were soon to become the most powerful forces in the SBC—the nation’s largest Protestant denomination—and who would be Pressler’s operatives in the SBC’s legendary conservative turnaround.

The kitchenette the women were using was stationed in a “skybox” high above the basketball arena of the Houston Summit, then the home court for the Houston Rockets professional team. Though everything about this particular scene bespoke of Houston’s elite watching a major playoff game below, the subject *du jour* had nothing whatsoever to do with the sport of basketball. Instead, all eyes were fixed on the 1979 annual SBC session meeting about 100 feet below the elegant viewing area.

As this scene unfolded in front of me, I marveled that I

was there—actually *there!*—witnessing firsthand what would become one of the most important developments in 20th-century Christianity—the transformation of the Southern Baptist Convention from a little-known (outside of the South) church group with a distinctively Southern Democratic style into one of the most powerful conservative political and social forces in the United States of America.

I had no crystal ball to tell me the exact details of the future or the full implications of what I was seeing. I only knew, deep down inside of myself, that I (as the lone reporter in the room) managed that day to have a ringside seat to something truly cataclysmic.

This was the same feeling I had experienced four months earlier at an airport in Mexico City when I stood on the tarmac and observed a highly youthful and vibrant Pope John Paul II descend the stairway from his just-landed airplane. Reaching the bottom, the pontiff quickly bent all the way to the ground, with his face brushing the asphalt surface under his feet. He stooped so far over that the huge collar atop his long, flowing robe literally cascaded down around and covered his entire head.

Standing only about 10 feet away (with only a handful of other reporters who happened to be that close to the scene), for a brief moment I thought the pope had slipped and fallen in what would surely be a highly embarrassing public spectacle on a Mexico City runway. My mind raced back to about 12 hours earlier when a modest earthquake had shaken the entire Mexico City basin and prompted many to see a connection between the trembling ground and the expected arrival of the Holy Father from Rome.

Now the poor fellow has tripped, I thought. This will confirm in many people's minds the belief that Pope John Paul II should never be traveling on this side of the globe.

But I soon realized that his deep, dramatic waistbend was totally deliberate, as the pontiff stooped to give a history-making kiss to the ground upon which he stepped. It was a symbolic way of saying to Mexico (his first trip as pope outside Italy) that he loved the country and its people voluminously and was humbled by being on its soil. This was a gesture I would watch *PJP2* (as I grew to call him to myself) repeat again and again as he established a reputation as a modern, globe-trotting pope and made countless goodwill visits to bring the Church to the world.

For the rest of 1979, I looked back on these mind-bending events of February and June with a tremendous sense of awe and amazement. I could hardly believe that the little boy who had grown up on the wrong side of the river in Oklahoma City and daydreamed of someday being able to write about what religious life was really like all across the globe was actually an eyewitness to the beginning of two such monumental religious events of the 20th century.

These two earthshaking happenings were but a tip of the iceberg, however, to the many events I would personally witness that shaped the modern church during my journalistic career that now has spanned more than four decades.

As I examine my life as a secular reporter and editor, columnist, denominational journalist, book author, publisher, and ongoing observer of American happenings in religion, I am astounded that, again and again, I have managed to turn up on the cutting edge of so many important religious developments that have shaped the modern church.

For example:

- In 1972 I was present in the living room of a small bungalow in the Montrose area of Houston as a group of Muslim men designated the house as the first mosque in Texas—a house that would go on to help launch the spread of Islam into

everyday American life.

- In 1973 I was on the meeting floor in Louisville, KY, when the Episcopal General Convention in its triennial session altered its definition of *marriage*, a decision that became the launching pad for numerous social issues Episcopalians and other Christians face today.

- In 1982 my wife, Kay, and I found ourselves as early trailblazers in the emerging two-paycheck marriage lifestyle, which drew great ecclesiastical ire because churches stood to lose their great source of volunteer labor as women poured back into the outside employment workforce in droves. The resulting book we wrote, *When You Both Go to Work: How the Two-Paycheck Family Can Stay Active in the Church*, landed us on the Jim and Tammy Bakker *PTL* television show at the height of the televangelists' popularity and just on the brink of the Bakkers' scandal-rocked fall from the ministry.

- In 1985, I managed to be in Moscow and Leningrad visiting in the homes of Jewish "Refuseniks" who were being held against their will just as Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to power. I participated in clandestine meetings with Refusenik leadership on the eve of the Soviet Union's fall and as the stage was being set for these persecuted ones to gain freedom to leave for their motherland.

- In 1989, in accepting a job as a denominational journalist, I found myself in the first wave of "new-regime" employees after the SBC's denominational schism began to make major inroads among the rank and file. Thus, on the scene in Nashville, at the heartthrob of SBC life, I became an inside observer to the crumbling of a former religious establishment that had held sway for decades and the emergence of a new religious order that was beginning to take root.

- In 1999 I visited China at the very moment in which the Chinese government was cracking down on unregistered

“house churches,” including those that were enabled by clandestine American missionaries fronting as regular business people in that country.

- In 2006, I happened to be serving a term as a fill-in trustee on a denomination board just as a fresh and mind-blowing move unfolded in Southern Baptist life—a move to endorse glossolalia (speaking in tongues and ecstatic utterances), a practice that would have horrified and thoroughly offended Southern Baptists of previous generations.

And these are merely a few of the times that, for one reason or another, I looked up and saw that, once again, I stood on the precipice of contemporary religious history.

Not for one minute do I believe all these experiences happened to me because I was some sort of super-journalist or someone whose work performance merited special treatment. In most cases I was simply doing the job I’d been assigned.

Nor would I leave the impression that all my experiences have been professionally and personally rewarding. While many represent the true zeniths of my career, in other cases the age-old desire to “shoot the messenger” prevailed. Oftentimes, since I was covering cutting-edge, controversial events, readers’ angst would be directed at me for reporting on a squabble rather than directed at the issues themselves.

Separating myself as an objective bystander has been simpler in some instances than in others—especially those in which my economic livelihood and that of my family was at stake. The perspective of history, hindsight, and maturity always causes one to view things more philosophically and be more charitable to his protagonists than at the period in which the fur was flying.

But for whatever His reasons and in His providence, God saw fit to place me in “the right place at the right time”—contemporary religious history in the making—usually with my

journalist/observer's notepad in hand in some sort of capacity. I've seen more than my fair share of what God (and His competing gods) have been doing over the past half-century, both in the United States and around the world.

What I've seen and observed of religious life in the U.S. and elsewhere is something I feel compelled to summarize for my readers here. I see it as being a good steward of the experiences God has bequeathed me.

In doing so, I don't intend to write religious history as a collection of footnotes from other people or a laborious tome of dates, times, and precise details bundled into some kind of religious textbook. I will leave those tasks to others.

My goal is to share the feelings, the sights, the sounds, the behind-the-scenes nuances of all that these eyes have seen, these ears have heard, and this body has experienced as just an ordinary guy who happened to be in some of the most extraordinary spots at just the right moment.

Beyond just a collection of memoirs, however, I have another, more overarching goal. I want to reveal certain core truths, discerned from my unique vantage point, that I've gleaned about organized religion—truths that link together Southern Baptists, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, charismatics, and even to some extent Jews, Mormons, and Buddhists. While their theologies and worldviews differ, so often the personalities of their leaders and their social and psychological interactions with others reflect similar traits, characteristics, motivations, and attitudes. Each of these 26 core truths corresponds to a chapter in the book. Some of them form the basis of a central theme for an entire chapter, while others may relate to one or several illustrations the chapter contains.

I believe that the person in the pew—as well as the pastor or church leader—can benefit by seeing common-denominator patterns that link the fellowship of faith—patterns that have

little to do with doctrines or belief systems. I believe that the faithful will be enlightened (and even comforted) to realize that the demagogue they experience as their United Methodist bishop is really no different than the egocentric megachurch pastor in another's Baptist tradition—that a denominational bureaucrat is a denominational bureaucrat regardless of whether the Lutherans or the Presbyterians are paying his or her salary.

I hope readers will also be gladdened to see that much good work is being done in God's name by believers all over the world but also be troubled and inspired to realize how much more effort is yet needed.

I believe that when some of the hidebound arrive at heaven's portals someday and begin to spot faces among the *great cloud of witnesses* (Heb. 12:1), they may be surprised to see the Episcopalian who lived down the block or the Catholic whose church they passed on the way to theirs. I suspect that one of the most frequent comments heard in the hallways of heaven may be a surprised "Oh, really?" as a narrow-minded newcomer gives some veterans there a shocked once-over.

As I tell my story and share these insights, I do so through the eyes of one who early on claimed as his life's verse John 18:37, "*For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.*" This was Jesus' claim as He stood before Pilate, but it also became my marching orders and the lens through which I focused as I attempted to share religious life with my readers over the decades.

That's again my goal as I sincerely pass on to you the truths that I've been privileged to witness.

Chapter 1

That Nothing Be Wasted

Truth No. 1: God can use any situation or circumstance at His disposal, both inside and outside the church, to fulfill His purposes on earth. In His great economy, nothing is wasted.

What makes one an incessant hound of the news?

What shapes the kind of personality that must look under every stone, every bed, and every chair cushion just for the unadulterated act of finding out what's there?

What kind of early orientation would lay the groundwork for some of the on-the-edge scrapes I would find myself in during later life?

Curiosity about the world around me has defined me from my earliest days. When I was in elementary school, my mother and teachers forever scolded me for never remaining in my seat, for always questioning others, and for generally collecting information about whatever recent interest propelled me.

If a fire, fight, car accident, or some other major incident occurred somewhere in our southwest Oklahoma City neighborhood, I wanted to go "check it out" in person. If a new rumor was circulating, I'd pounce on it like a dog on a bone to extract more juicy morsels of news. When my parents weren't looking, I'd dig holes in our backyard just to see what turned up.

When I was 13, I became so fascinated with how the workers were installing a new roof on our home that I waited until

the roofers took a lunch break and then climbed their ladder to take a look. At the top, I suddenly felt the ladder collapsing around me. The next thing I knew, I was hospitalized with a broken arm and nose. Even that didn't stop my insatiable curiosity,

Today, some teachers and parents might label as *hyperactive* the kind of child I was. I still consider myself absolutely normal for my simple interest in just about anything and everything in my world.

Early on, my curiosity began to focus increasingly on all things religious. I would try to imagine what the world was like before God began to exist. That futile exercise inevitably led me back to the conviction that God must always have existed. *After all, how could God ever have been born? Did He have parents?* I wondered. *Preposterous*, I concluded.

I loved to read my Bible and then imagine what Jesus, Abraham, Peter, Paul, and all the other leading biblical characters must really have been like. One of my favorite activities was challenging my Sunday-school teachers on whatever point they seemed to be trying to make in the lesson that day. If they said *black*, I said *white* just for the fun of it—and also to watch them squirm.

When I was 9, I decided to “walk the aisle” at our church and make my public profession that Jesus was going to be my Savior and Lord for the rest of my life. I knew this was something I had to do because I had listened so intently to all the arguments my teachers and our pastor had given me about Christ as the only savior of the world. I truly wanted to be a follower of Jesus.

A few weeks later I was baptized in what had to have been the coldest water available in Oklahoma City in early March. When I slipped into my white baptismal gown, I was so excited and curious about the other baptismal candidates and what

the congregation would look like from the baptistery vantage point that I forgot what my daddy had told me about removing my underwear before I put on my swimsuit to go under my robe. Since we had forgotten to bring an extra pair, he said I needed to conserve the dry ones I had on for when I would redress a few minutes later. Sitting in the pew afterward, the hour-long worship service seemed like an all-day event to my freezing, wet backside. To this day, I can still hear my mother's reaction when we got home and she spotted the telltale signs of my wet undergarments. The commotion almost overshadowed the real significance of why I was in the water in the first place.

Reared in Southern Baptist churches, I thoroughly soaked up every activity (Sunday school, Training Union, Royal Ambassadors, church camp, and so forth) available to a young boy springing up in the 1950s. These forums offered me wonderful opportunities to ask questions, debate issues, and generally investigate everything I wanted to know about the Christian faith. As soon as I was old enough, I signed up for a week at the Falls Creek Baptist Assembly, truly a rite of passage for most Oklahoma Baptist teens of my era. This again presented more wonderful opportunities to ask questions and explore possibilities. I especially enjoyed trekking out into nature with my Bible in hand to pray and read the Scriptures and then to think about all the ramifications of what I had read.

Singing in the choir in one of the evening worship services at Falls Creek, I became convinced that God was calling me into some kind of special ministry. Since I couldn't imagine myself as a pastor and since I eagerly listened whenever I heard a "foreign" missionary give a testimony, I presumed God was saying that overseas missions was the calling for me. Having just read Tom Dooley's *The Night They Burned the*

Mountain about his missionary work in faraway Laos, I just knew that my life's work had to be that of a medical missionary, too. *I wanna be just like Dr. Tom Dooley*, I told myself. Years later I realized that Tom Dooley was a Roman Catholic—and good Southern Baptist boys weren't supposed to have Roman Catholic missionaries as their heroes. Nevertheless, to this day I still see Dr. Dooley as one of my spiritual mentors. Had he not died while I was in high school, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I would have tried to locate him and talk with him personally after I became religion editor of the *Houston Chronicle*. Such was and is my nature.

Somehow I failed to get the message that being a good Southern Baptist boy meant I was supposed to stay with like kind. During my teen-age years, I thoroughly enjoyed slipping out of my Southern Baptist church and driving over to visit the nearby Roman Catholic church for Christmas Eve Mass, the neighborhood Pentecostal church for an excitement-filled Wednesday-evening healing service, and the fascinating circular auditorium of the biggest Methodist church in Oklahoma City for a “cultural experience.” In doing so, I wasn't aligning with the theology of any of these churches; I just found seeing what they did and what they believed fascinating. I found the burning incense at the Catholic church rather quaint and the unusual vocalization at the Pentecostal church rather humorous. I was not repulsed by them; they just made me all the more curious about why religious people did things so differently from each other!

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About this time, two back-to-back events occurred that changed my life unalterably.

From as early as I can remember, my parents talked about my daddy's "heart condition." From time to time when Daddy was in the hospital, Mother would intimate that Daddy probably wouldn't be around when I was grown. That seemed almost as far-fetched as the story my parents told about how my daddy managed to contract this "heart condition." Daddy was 34 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and plunged the U.S. into World War II. Like his father and brothers, Daddy often had tried his hand at carpentry and was really good at it. As the U.S. geared up for war, the U.S. Navy pressed forward with forming and staffing the Seabees, otherwise known as the Naval Construction Battalion. Daddy was a natural fit for the Seabees, so he joined them and went off to war. He served in several battles in the South Pacific. His final battle occurred when General Douglas MacArthur made good on his promise to return to the Philippines. Daddy was there on the beach on the Island of Leyte, where today stands a huge statute in tribute to the great general's return. Daddy, however, suffered a massive heart attack on the beach during the early days of the battle and spent the next 11 months in naval hospitals, first in the South Pacific, then back home in America in the San Diego Naval Hospital.

Until later in life, I was somewhat embarrassed by this story. Other fathers got shot or gave their lives on the battlefield. My daddy had a heart attack in the midst of the war and had to be carried off the battlefield on a stretcher! Good grief! That wasn't exactly something I thought I should brag about.

Then about five years ago a friend loaned me a copy of a book about the history of the Seabees. The day I got it, I stayed up all night to read it. Much to my surprise, the book described the horrible stress under which the poor Seabees worked as they relentlessly followed the advancing soldiers onto the battlefields to build bunkers, airfields, roads, and all

the necessary support facilities for our military. Though unarmed, the Seabees were targets for the Japanese as much as the regular soldiers were.

Then my eyes suddenly fixated on a statistic that instantly changed my thinking. The stress had been so horrible on these men that 10 percent of all Seabees participating in any given battle either suffered heart attacks or suffered mental breakdowns from the stress they were under. The book said these wounded Seabees were considered as heroic as the men who had actually been shot on the battlefield.

Unfortunately, I never was able to tell Daddy what I had learned—that he really was a war hero after all. When I was 16, Daddy suffered a final massive heart attack and died quickly. That left my widowed mother with me and my two younger siblings to support.

On the heels of Daddy's death, Mother asked me to accompany her to the local Veterans Administration office to find out how she could collect on Daddy's \$10,000 life-insurance policy. The nice gentleman at the VA who helped us stepped out of his office to go get Daddy's file. When he returned, his words continued to reverberate in my ears for many years later.

Daddy's heart attack was considered a battle injury—a "service-connected disability," the insurance man said. Since his death occurred because of this disability, the VA would pay for the college education of any of Daddy's minor children. The VA also would give my mother a certain amount of money each month to help her rear my brother, sister, and me until we reached college age.

All the way home, my mother and I kept comparing notes just to be sure we had heard the same words.

Because of Daddy's illness, Mother had to work as a government secretary to support our family. Money was in short supply. Living in Oklahoma City's southwest quadrant—not

the more affluent north side that was situated across the Canadian River—we lacked material things that others seemed to have. People on our side of town didn't, as a rule, back then aspire to higher educations. I had presumed that I would have to work full time and go to the local state-supported college part time, if I was to attend college at all. When the VA paperwork was completed, I realized that the range of universities I could now afford to consider was far greater than I could ever have imagined. It had the feel of a major miracle!

Suddenly my world changed forever. I really could get the education to be the missionary I wanted to be! My first choice was the largest Baptist university in the world—Baylor University in Waco, TX—but it was out of reach financially. So I spent a year at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, OK, during which time something else amazing happened. As a part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" program, the Social Security program was extended so that a child of a deceased parent could continue to receive Social Security payments through his or her college years; previously the payments stopped when a child reached age 18. I was in the first group to qualify under the new law. The \$40.40 I received each month from Social Security provided the exact amount of money I needed to be able to transfer from OBU to Baylor.

I have always been grateful to the Social Security program for this benefit. Subsequently, over the years I have never once complained about having to pay my FICA taxes. I thank God for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's wisdom in creating the program before I was even a gleam in my parents' eyes. Thus two different governmental actions had the role of helping fulfill God's purpose in my life in totally surprising ways. The Scripture promises that *the Lord will fulfill his purpose for me* (Ps. 138:8). In my case He used these governmental entities to do just that.

Many times the church sees itself as the exclusive be-all and end-all for God's work to be done in the world. Some church people think that the body of believers represents the sole major enabler to see God's will accomplished in human lives.

But in my career as a Christian journalist, I saw countless times in which God was at work using secular, or non-church, circumstances or events for His purposes, just as this happened with me.

After all, Jimmy Carter's 1976 campaign for the presidency was the event that for all times made the term *born again* a household phrase and gave Evangelicals an unprecedented public forum to explain the tenets of their faith. (I first met Carter, by the way, when he was a lone, unnoticed governor attempting to attract attention for his presidential aspirations.) Only heaven will reveal the countless numbers of people who turned to Christ simply because a candidate in a highly secular election made this concept a matter of public discussion.

Perhaps the clearest example in modern times of God using totally secular forces to accomplish His purposes is the incident I mentioned in the Prologue that occurred in the grand finale of the former Soviet Union, when Mikail Gorbachev, a non-believer, dismantled the Evil Empire in 1991. This paved the way for Christianity's rebirth in Russia and the former Soviet satellite countries.

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Although my dream of attending the brightest gem in Baptist education's crown was realized, my euphoria about pursuing a career as a foreign missionary was short-lived. It ended my first semester at Baylor when I took—and nearly

failed—my first course in French. The final nail went in that dream’s coffin when the next semester I took—and also did poorly in—my first course in Spanish. I by then was face-to-face with the reality that learning a foreign language was not something I could ever do. *What about that vocational call to the ministry I experienced that evening at Falls Creek?* I asked myself. *Did I only dream that God was speaking to me in this direction?*

My despair over this reality lingered until my junior year at Baylor, when on a lark I decided to take a course in religious journalism. By the middle of that semester I suddenly realized that I hadn’t misunderstood my call to the ministry; I had simply jumped to conclusions too quickly about its taking the form of foreign missions. Everything I read and learned about religious journalism seemed to fit my personality, interests, and talents as though this form of Christian service was tailor-made just for me. The awareness flowed over me almost like another conversion experience.

Throughout the next three years God showed me repeatedly that a career in religious journalism was where I belonged.

Oh, yes, and about that original, long-ago calling that I thought was to missions. Years later, when I was named to direct the media operations of the largest missions-sending agency in the world—helping young, curious, missions-oriented journalists as I had once been—I realized, to my amazement, that God definitely hadn’t once made a mistake. That missions yen that once motivated a fervent, 15-year-old boy at Falls Creek wasn’t wasted after all.

In God’s economy, nothing ever is.