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SOME MINISTRY EXPERIENCES

This article—less doctrinal and more personal than what I usually write—shares some experiences gleaned from my years in the ministry. Some of these stories I have used in sermons or writings to illustrate various points. Others are included here for the first time.

When I was perhaps 15 years old, concerned about God’s will for my life, I dreamed a man came to our door and handed me a box. When I opened it, inside was a smaller box, which also contained a smaller box, etc. When all were finally opened, there was only a slip of paper with a Scripture reference written on it: “Galatians 3:31.” I immediately awoke, thinking God was telling me something. I reached for my Bible on the nightstand, only to find *there is no Galatians 3:31!*

The Scriptures record numerous instances in which God spoke to people through dreams. But it is obvious that not every dream is a divine message!

When I was 19, holding revival meetings at a church in Dinuba, California, there was a large glass of water on the pulpit. I don’t normally drink water when speaking, but since it was there for me, I took a drink. The water tasted strange. Later, I found out why: a week or so before there had been some flowers in this glass. Someone had dumped out the flowers, but had forgotten to empty the water they were in!

One night at this church the pastor and I were shaking hands as the people left. One lady told me: “That was great preaching—we haven’t heard preaching that good around here in years!” She was no doubt trying to encourage me as a young preacher, but it was embarrassing in that the pastor (perhaps three times my age) was standing right there with me!

At one church where I held meetings, following the Sunday morning service, the pastor and I baptized several people. The last one was a woman, about age 75. Afterwards, assuming everyone was gone, we left the church. When we gathered for service that night, the woman was still there—had been there all afternoon. She said we had locked her in—and *was glad we did!* She said she had spent the time in prayer, that it was a great blessing to her being there all afternoon!

What had happened was this: The church, as required by the fire department, had recently installed crash bars on all the outside doors. Such allow even a locked door to be opened from the inside. But not knowing what crash bars were, with no doorknobs or handles on the doors, this lady thought there was no way out.

The lesson we can learn from this: If we face a delay, need to wait somewhere, or are stuck in traffic, why not use this as a time to pray? There are enough things in life to pull us *down*; through prayer, we can build ourselves *up* (Jude 20).

When I was about 20, I held meetings at a church in Culver City, California (Los Angeles area). After a Sunday morning service the pastor and his wife took me, along with a couple from the church, to a restaurant for lunch. On the back of his car was a little sign that said “Clergy.” As we were driving along a busy street near the Los Angeles International Airport, the pastor (though not meaning to) evidently cut in front of another car. When we came to a stop light, the man angrily yelled: “You’re a lousy Pastor!”—at least this is what I *thought* he said.

The Pastor, visibly upset, learned across his wife’s lap (the window was rolled down) and hollered back at the man—something to the effect that he had ladies riding in his car! As the light changed, the pastor’s wife tried to calm him down. The couple with me in the back seat seemed tense. Innocently, I said to the Pastor,

“I guess he saw the Clergy sign on the back of your car.”

“What do you mean?”

“He called you a lousy Pastor.”

“Yes, he called me a lousy Pastor, all right—Pastor with a B on the front of it!”

A few years later, but not too far away, I was holding meetings at a church in Venice, California. I was invited for lunch, along with the pastor and his wife, and a couple others, to the lovely home of some people who attended the church. We had gathered around the table, but before we ate, I was served a cup of coffee. When asked, I said I would take sugar. As I stirred it, I noticed what appeared to be a dead fly on my spoon. Not wanting to embarrass anyone, when prayer was

offered over the food, I quickly took out the spoon and, under the table, tried to scrape off the fly! It would not budge. It was one of those items purchased at a joke store. Everyone else was in on it, so with the conclusion of the prayer, there was laughter all around the table. It was not until then I realized it was a prank!

It is interesting that we remember something bizarre like this, and may forget other things more important!

In 1959, I was holding revival meetings at a country church in Missouri. The pastor, D.C. Helms, told me an incident I have never forgotten. He went to see some people who were sorrowing because of a miscarriage. As they talked, nearby was a bucket where they put leftovers and scraps to slop the hogs. The husband asked Pastor Helms if he would like to see the baby. He went over and reached into that bucket, down through potato peelings floating in water, and pulled out the fetus. It was developed enough to indicate it was a little male baby. The whole incident was abhorrent to the pastor. It is difficult to understand this primitive lack of reverence for life.

Years ago the pastor of a church in Prescott, Arizona, for whom I spoke a number of times, told me the following story:

A young preacher (whom I also knew) was holding revival meetings for him. A local minister (who did not believe in divine healing for today) had repeatedly challenged anyone to publicly debate him on the subject. The young man, being a believer in divine healing, decided to accept the challenge. A date was set for the debate and interest soared among Christians on both sides of the issue.

Arriving in town, the young man was nervous about the debate that night. He asked the pastor of the church where he had held the meetings for any books he had on divine healing. Several hours passed; a crowd was gathering for the debate. When the pastor asked him if the books had been helpful, he explained he could not get his mind on the books, so just decided to *pray!*

The minister of the church that did not believe in divine healing was more knowledgeable of his material, better skilled in the art of debate, than the young man. In the course of the evening, one lady stood and said she had been healed through prayer. The minister who did not believe in healing said, "I see you are wearing glasses; why didn't God heal your eyes?"—statements like that. Using sarcasm and put down, he made the young man look like a simpleton. By outward appearances, it seemed he won the debate. But throughout, the young man maintained a good spirit, was loving, and sincere. Afterward, even some of the people from the other church commended him for this. They said they were ashamed of their minister and embarrassed for the way he had handled the debate.

A person with a right attitude is often more effective than one who comes across like he has the final word on everything. "Renew a *right spirit* within me" (Psalms 51:10).

After I spoke at a meeting some years ago, a lady came up to ask me a question. "I have something I want you to explain

to me," she said, as she thumbed through several books of her Bible. Finally she found the book she was looking for. "Here it is," she continued, "it is this book of Revelation—will you explain this to me?" Perhaps this precious lady—obviously new to the faith—supposed I had all the answers!

I don't know all the answers—at least I know this. I would rather say I don't know, if I don't know, than to give an answer I know is wrong!

When I was 21, while holding meetings in Porterville, California, someone directed me to a Christian barber. As I got into the chair, I introduced myself, and the barber was thrilled to learn I was a preacher. With enthusiasm he showed me the method he used to witness. First he turned the chair one direction where a customer could not fail to see a sign on the wall: "And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever..." (Rev. 14:11). This became the text for the first part of his sermon! As the customer was turned in the chair, he faced another verse, similar in nature to the first, and the message continued. He didn't beat around the bush. Sin was black, Heaven was high, and Hell was hot!

By the time he had the straight-edged razorblade in his hand, he was really excited, jerking and waving his hand around, praising the Lord! I felt uneasy, and I was a *preacher!* I wondered about the poor sinner who might venture into this place! I did get a good haircut, and was not charged any extra for the sermon! Sometimes well-meaning people have "a zeal for God" (cf. Rom. 10:2), but if their methods are too extreme or dogmatic, they can turn people off.

The setting for this next story is Riverside, California, back in the late 1960s. Joe Maraggio, who sent offerings monthly to my ministry, had shared some of my writings with a man in another state who wanted to come by and visit me. I agreed to pick him up at the Greyhound Bus Station on a certain day. My schedule was such that I needed to spend some time in that area before taking him on to my house. I suggested that we drive to nearby Fairmont Park. We could park the car there in a lovely setting beneath palm trees by the lake and visit. After a while, he said he wanted to pray for me. Taking my hand, he started "praying." How can I describe the sound? Possibly like a cross between the siren of a fire truck and a howling dog—and very *loud*—and on and on!

Now while I believe in fervent prayer, holy boldness, and all of that, I did wonder what the people in a car parked about 50 feet away were thinking! There are those who say we should not care what others think. But even Paul said things should be done in an orderly way, lest others think we are insane (1 Cor. 14:23). If we do a right thing in a wrong way, it can become a negative.

Joe Maraggio (mentioned above), who lived in Long Beach, California, liked me to call him "Brother Joe." When he died, it was his desire that I conduct his funeral. From my house to the cemetery was about a two hour drive. Ralph K.,

my son, who was probably 18 by this time, went with me. Heading south on the 57 Freeway, not far from the well-known Crystal Cathedral founded by Robert Schuller, I had a tire blow out. Because of a recent injury, my son's arm was in a sling, so he could not help. With no change of clothes with me, in my suit I started to change the tire. The freeway at this place did not allow much room to pull over. It was the rear tire on the left hand side, so I was very close to the cars that were whizzing by. All of a sudden some smart alecks in a passing car, seeing my vulnerability, screamed just as they got to me, while banging their hands on the side of their car to make a loud noise! It was scary. Finally I got the tire changed, stopped at a McDonalds to wash the best I could, and made it to the funeral—just in time to do the service for Brother Joe.

One afternoon between services at a conference in San Diego, Arlene and I went with another couple—a pastor and his wife—on a little outing down across the border into Tijuana, Mexico. We parked on the American side and walked across the border. Returning from Mexico, as we passed through the border inspection, we were asked what we were bringing back. “Only some drugs,” the pastor answered, not thinking how this would be taken. When his wife saw the stern look of the inspector, she immediately chimed in: “*Prescription* drugs.” He had filled a prescription in Mexico because the price was much less.

This reminded me of a long trip I took into some remote areas of Mexico—back in the 1970s—with a missionary. He explained to me that the border inspectors don't appreciate any joking around. He told about some young men who were asked what they were bringing back. Their answer, “Only a little MARY-Wanna,” resulted in a long delay while their car was checked from one end to the other, including inside the hubcaps! (cf. Matt. 5:25,26).

During the late 1960s I met two elderly sisters—Margaret and Ethel—who lived in San Jacinto, California, about 30 miles from Riverside (where I lived at the time). Having read some of my writings, they invited me to come see them. When I did, I was amazed to discover their house was a stone's throw—literally—from the house where I was born! They told me they liked to loan money to individuals who were in the Lord's work. Because of verses like Deuteronomy 23:20, they did so without charging interest.

Some time later, I took them up on this offer. Because of their willingness to loan me money, I was able to buy a 1970 Pontiac Catalina (the only time in my life I have ever owned a brand new car). The cost: \$3,700! This car served us well, providing transportation into Mexico (mentioned above), up into Canada for meetings, and in a number of states, as far east as Texas.

By the late 1970s, with nearly 200,000 miles on the car, mostly ministry miles, I decided it was time to sell. It still looked nice, seemed to be running alright, and the air conditioning worked well (a selling point because of the hot summers in the San Joaquin Valley where I was living at this time). It would

make someone a good transportation car, but I felt it was no longer reliable for long trips. Seeing my ad in the paper, a very nice Mexican couple came to look at it and bought it. Checking an old diary, they paid \$595 cash.

The woman spoke affectionately about their previous car. The license plate had the letters H-U-N, so they called it “Honey.” Occasionally they would still see Honey around town and somewhat regretted they had sold it. As she looked at the license plate of our car, she noticed the letters J-C-Q and pondered what she would name it. Several people were standing there—someone said the initials could stand for “Jimmy Carter Quits”! She very sincerely responded, “No, I'm going to call this car *Jesus Christ!*” I did not sense any sarcasm in her statement whatsoever. Apparently she liked this car very much!

I told Jim Hart, a friend of mine who was a local pastor, about this. He laughed and said, “I can hear it now—‘We got half way to town and Jesus Christ let us down!’”

At a conference where I spoke some years ago, another speaker—John, a pastor from the state of Washington—told this story: Realizing that all the people who attended his church drove from some distance, he became concerned about trying to also reach people who lived close to the church. He worked out a plan to systematically cover the neighborhood, introduce himself, and simply let people know about the church. As he started out, only two or three houses away, a woman answered the door and asked: “Are you John?” Somewhat surprised, he acknowledged that he was. She immediately grabbed him, hugged him, and pulled him into the house! What a reception!

Someone close to the woman—I believe it was her mother—had died. A relative she had not seen for many years, named John, was coming for the funeral. When the pastor acknowledged his name was John, she assumed he was the relative. Soon the pastor clarified who he was. But because of this unique meeting, in her time of grief, he was able to pray with her and bring comfort. As a result, she began coming to his church and became one of his most loyal members! God can be in all kinds of things, even those that are seemingly coincidental.

—Ralph Woodrow



Ralph and Arlene Woodrow



Nostalgia department: Ralph Woodrow, age 19.

During the meetings in Dinuba, California (mentioned in this article), some people from the church invited me to their house. They took this picture of me sitting in their living room holding my Bible.

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