

What Happened to Me in 1952

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BEFORE

I was a graduate of RPTS, installed as pastor of what was then Central-Pittsburgh Reformed Presbyterian Church located in the lower north-side of Pittsburgh. I had been preaching for two years during seminary—at Westmayfield chapel in Beaver Falls, PA and at Parnassus Reformed Presbyterian Church in New Kensington, PA. As far as I knew, no one had come to Christ. During those days, my good friend Roy Blackwood and I wondered: our respective calls were with pain, yet plain. Why were we called into this dying branch of His church? We prayed for His answer.

The work at Central-Pittsburgh was challenging and I was feeling the pressure of preparations. I was not sure that I could fulfill what I longed for: a fruitful ministry. I felt quite unprepared and had told my professors of my frustration. That produced one good conversation with the president over dinner when I learned his philosophy of teaching. He taught differently on the golf course! But the elders of the church were supportive and faithful. I was grateful for them.

It was 1952. A Billy Graham Crusade was scheduled for September in Pittsburgh, and our Session agreed to participate with prayer, contribution, and participation. (By the way, thirty-six persons from our congregation made “decisions” of one sort or another during that Crusade.) One thing new in this evangelistic effort was what was being called “Follow Up” classes. Graham had sleepless nights concerned for those who had made decisions, so he contacted Dawson Trotman of the Navigators to give him help. Consequently, when the Crusade came to Pittsburgh, they held follow-up sessions for those who wanted to learn what to do with persons who had made decisions for Christ—especially those who made first-time decisions for Christ.

DURING

Robert McConaughy, clerk of our session, who worked in the Gulf building downtown, asked if I would like to attend one of these follow-up meetings. I, of course, said yes, and on Thursday morning at 6:45 a.m. we joined a packed house in 1st Presbyterian Church. Down front a man was talking. He was holding in his hand a mock-up kind of “wheel” and was describing how to care for a new believer. I had never heard anything like this before, and I was intrigued how he freely quoted the Scriptures and described how to help a new Christian learn to live his life in Christ. There was something different about his presentation. There was no challenge at this point. It was more like an explanation of what the Bible says that a new believer needs and how to help him learn to feed on the Word of God, as 1 Peter 2:2 says: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow thereby if so be you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.”

But then I heard him tell something of how the Navigators began with just a sailor, named Lester, whom Dawson helped to grow. In time, Lester brought another sailor to Dawson to

“follow up.” Trotman told him, “No, Lester, you do it, because if you can’t do it, I’ve failed.” So Lester took him on and taught him. Dawson took on another. It was then that Dawson introduced the word “multiply.” At creation God had made man, male and female, to multiply. Again I was intrigued, even fascinated. As a Reformed Presbyterian I was more acquainted with subtraction. But multiplication? “Is what he’s saying real?” I asked myself. I could hardly believe it. But he kept on quoting the Word and telling of men growing in Jesus. When World War II broke out, they knew of men walking with Jesus on a thousand ships and army bases, all traceable back to Lester! I am thinking: this vision of multiplying is what the Reformed Presbyterian Church is missing! Amazing!

That first session excited me, and I began to follow Trotman every time he spoke to learn more. I drove to the Seminary and told the guys they needed to get to these follow-up meetings—and some of them did! Then one day I heard Trotman speak three times in one morning. As I was listening, it all suddenly made sense. I had been approaching my ministry exactly opposite to what Trotman was describing. When the meeting was over, I was glued to my seat. My neighbor said, “Ken, are you all right?” He looked perplexed when I said, “You know, for the first time in my life I feel all right!” I understood! I understood!

So I went to Dawson, and said that I understood what he was saying. He barked, “How old are you?” I said, “Twenty-five.” Then he said, “We’ve been asking God to raise up men who mean business.” I said, “Well I mean business, but I have a congregation of one-hundred and thirty people across the river, and I need help.” He said, “Would you like to have some time with one of our men?” I leaped at the opportunity, and thus I began meeting regularly with Don Rosenberger, a Navy veteran converted at Pearl Harbor in 1941 who took me by the warm hand, so to speak, and began to show me how to help a new believer. Whether he knew it or not, he was really helping me for the first time in my life learn what it means experientially to walk with Christ and look to Him for growth and ministry on a daily basis.

AFTER

I began to memorize Scripture as I had never done it before! The promises came alive, the warnings significant, the joy unmistakable. I now knew why I was reading the Word: it was to fellowship with the Lord Jesus! Sometimes I say it became communication, not just information. As a consequence my preaching took on a vitality that was obviously evidencing the power of the Risen Christ by His Spirit, and people responded. I began to inquire at the door into their response. “What was particularly helpful? Did it make sense? Can we get together to talk about it?” I found that I no longer feared inquiring into a person’s relationship to Christ, and I also found that many were eager to discuss their inner life. It was not long until people were asking for spiritual help, and now I knew how to help them. I began a weekly Bible study with a couple up in the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. Ministry began to blossom! Through Don I learned how to spend personal time with another man one-on-one, with the purpose of his eventually doing the same with other men.

Sometime later I began to ask, “What happened to me?” Trotman had said, “A chain is as strong as its weakest link.” I knew I had found the link that completed my seminary education. But what was it? I could not explain this to others by telling my experience. It was then my colleague Joe Hill put me on to John Murray’s *Principles of Conduct*, particularly the chapter “The Dynamic of the Biblical Ethic.” I had come to experience my union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Out of Jesus flowed my life and ministry—and they still do.