

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 17

Back In Texas

Among the continuous flow of new persons moving into our congregation in New Iberia were a few who knew little of its background but began to promote change. After more than four years after our first broadcast, it was discontinued and nice pews were installed and other improvements were made to the building. There was some change of spirit that I detected and I could feel some disaffection toward me developing. Surely it was understandable that I would become tiring to them after eight years. To keep the batteries of our cars from draining, we have alternators that keep charging them. Congregations generally made no provision for the draining batteries of their preachers by providing time for study and attendance to seminars or providing money for helpful books. It was easier to exploit new preachers until their batteries drained.

Even though many loving and lasting friendships are made, it is always disappointing when decisions are made for a change. There is always a renewed sense of failure just as anyone would feel if his employer saw need to replace him.

In August of 1950 we were relieved again to be back in Texas with the congregation in Port Neches between Beaumont and Port Arthur where the church was larger and the support better. It was back among the petro-chemical smells including a strong one from the synthetic rubber plant. The locals called it the smell of money for most of them had good jobs in those plants.

This time I had a church office – about the size of a closet with no room for a chair for a visitor. We began to form new friendships with the good people, but a different spirit prevailed than we had known in New Iberia. The many different unresolved doctrinal scruples prevailing among them had to be respected making for tension as I taught.

There was prospect among them, however, so that their crowded assemblies called for a new building. With our facilities being bought readily by the Mormons, we hired a foreman and built mostly by donated labor on four acres in a choice location. It was no picnic – well, we did have lots of miserable fun and camaraderie, but it was during a rainy winter. We almost despaired of keeping water out of the trenches long enough to pour concrete which we did with wheelbarrows. When finished it was attractive and the most conveniently arranged church building I ever worked in. A hallway entirely circled the auditorium and it was circled by classrooms. It is sad to note that years after we were away, the congregation finally dwindled so that the few remaining sold the building and gave the money to Boles Home for children.

While we were working on that building, Lea became sick with some sort of bug – the same kind that had lasted a full miserable term before. Having given up hope, we were truly surprised and delighted. We named her Mira Lea after her mother and her grandmother whose name was Elma, but kinfolks called her Elmira. Along with his friend, ten-year-old Sol held her in his lap as we brought her home. Sol and Mira have always had a strong love for each other and for each other's family.

During our three years in Port Neches, we especially liked being so close to Elma Lea's parents who had moved back to Daisetta, but we felt it wise to leave Port Neches. The Handley church of the Fort Worth area invited us for a visit. In the motel while preparing for services and while Lea was bathing Mira in the lavatory, Mira grabbed and turned a faucet which sent scalding water down her side and leg. Speeding to the hospital, a policeman stopped us but then led us on the unfamiliar route to the hospital. After the situation was being cared for, I went on to the church and preached. We were accepted in the center of Texas Church of Christ country!

Again, we enjoyed the nice reception the 350-member group gave us. The preacher's home was extra nice. Mira was born with a muscle imbalance in her eyes so an ophthalmologist in the congregation did two surgeries on her eyes. The correction was not perfect but it was thought to be as good as was possible. She has always had some difficulty in focusing her eyes but has never let that bother her. She is a constant reader and a beautiful person.

A very intelligent younger man and I developed a friendship. Although I do not recall ever telling him about it, he taught me two lessons that I always remembered. He commented that if a speaker wastes ten minutes of time of an audience of 360, he wastes sixty man-hours, and if he wastes thirty minutes it would amount to 180 man-hours. And in commenting on a lesson, sometimes he would ask only one or two questions that would wreck the logic that I had presented. He was not being mean to me, but he made me more conscious of gaps in logic. And I have learned that when I write out my thoughts, I can detect those logical gaps more readily. I have tried to apply those lessons on brevity and logic but my listeners would probably argue about my success.

One day I was making calls and came to a house where they were intently watching television. President Kennedy had been killed. I could have been in Dallas and witnessed that but had not cared to go. I had opportunity to attend a breakfast for preachers but had not accepted that either. Some time later I had a funeral with burial at the cemetery down the way from our building. Someone pointed out the fresh mound about fifty yards away where Oswald was buried, but I went no closer.

Though it was always a part of my ministry to visit the sick, shut-ins, and hospitalized, a new area for this work was encountered in Fort Worth – the nursing home. From the first entrance into such a crowded, odorous housing of the helpless aged was repulsive. In some of the once elegant homes, beds were crowded allowing no privacy and one had to pass through other bedrooms to reach some of the patients. In time great improvement has been made in every way but, while being thankful that the helpless are being cared for, I have described them cynically as evils made necessary by medical science.

As it was in Port Neches, I began to discern that there were as many peripheral doctrinal scruples there as a dog has fleas. Too, in reading some historical data about the group, I saw that they had had numerous preachers, some "name brand" ones, and many had served only a year or two. With tenures of five, eight, and three, I had a better record than they, but I knew to be on guard. However, once without thought I mentioned how a man in our congregation in New Iberia who lived fifty miles from the church attended every service even though he believed in evolution. That raised a tempest in a teapot, but it seemed to settle down.

In my eighteenth month there I brought a lesson concerning elders. Elders are not necessary, for many small churches have no elders. They are expedients appointed at our judgment to better facilitate the work of the congregation. The authority that they have is that which the congregation gives them. And those who appoint them can recall them. Well, I did not need my evening sermon! I was out – notified by telephone without conference or discussion, evidently having treaded on holy ground. Some of the folks were shocked and came to us with supportive sympathy but that only resulted in the elders' request that we vacate the house shortly.

What do you do when you suddenly face homelessness with no money in reserve, have household furniture, and have a boy in middle school? You panic! Then you go to kinfolks after nice folks give you a place to store your furniture. We had an unscheduled vacation with Lea's parents in Daisetta enrolling Sol in the school behind their house where his mother had attended.

Weeks dragged by painfully as I sought contacts and made visits with a few churches. I filled local pulpits some on Sundays and received gratuities which helped. After two visits with the Ferguson Road congregation in Dallas, agreement was reached for us to move there. Reaching the house with only what we had stuffed into our car, we happily slept on the floor that night. The next day two good brothers provided a truck and brought our furniture from Fort Worth. We stopped on the way back for Cokes and I did not have even the thirty cents to pay for the drinks. The house had needed attention, so before we came, a volunteer crew had repainted the interior with cheap paint that did not cover well. It was color of a paper grocery bag, painted over walls, ceilings, facings, and the plates of outlets and light switches – without discrimination! No range was in the kitchen so we cooked in an electric skillet for a while. But it was great to be back at work with an income.

Several months after Mira was born, Lea began to have unexplained mood shifts which were very puzzling and disturbing. We had observed similar moods in a few others but I do not know if even the doctors had defined bi-polar disorder or manic-depressive behavior. The depressions began to hit her occasionally in Dallas making her listless for a week or more at the time but she would bounce back into a buoyant mood. In our third year there, I also began to have slumps in energy and loss of concentration. Sometimes a cup of coffee or sweet snack would give me a lift, but then at other times it would send me into a deeper funk. I attributed it to the added tensions. All this was affecting my work and I could feel the pressure from the congregation, especially from a newly appointed elder whose disaffection for me became evident.

Our neighboring congregation was Shamrock Shores served by Winston Atkinson. They needed to expand but had no room. Located a block from Loop 12, we had a good location with acreage but an inadequate building. I suggested to Winston that we propose a merger of the churches, and having done so, the congregations became sold on the idea and thus the White Rock congregation on Ferguson Road was conceived. The elders from both congregations would be retained but neither preacher would be chosen over the other.

As things progressed I visited a congregation in Cleburne and agreed to serve there. The next Sunday I announced my intentions with my resignation. The next night I received a telephone call from the elders in Cleburne canceling their agreement! Someone from Handley had called and warned them about me, so they did not bother to discuss with me.

I requested an extension from the elders at Ferguson Road but the new elder would not hear to it. So there I was strung up by the heels and hung out to dry. Enough was enough! With Lea's approval I was ready to abandon the pulpit. I began looking for a job but there was no market for a man nearing fifty except for sales jobs in which I would have been a miserable failure. So Lea and I took an apartment managing course and were hired by a complex in Garland operated by a Christian brother.

The current manager was a sister of the operator. She was to introduce us to the work as the complex was expanding, but very quickly we saw that she was possessive and jealous of our intrusion. After several weeks the operator dismissed us but allowed us to remain in our apartment for a time of relocation. Was it the grit in our gizzard or the diet? We were at our wits end. My sense of adequacy as a preacher, which was never high, was shattered. I was disillusioned by elders, as well meaning as they were. Now I was introduced to the cruelty of the business world.

Again, I began seeking leads to vacancies in churches. One evening I was given an interview by elders in Commerce, Texas. In that session an elder asked what my major in college was. When I answered that it was in secondary education, he commented that their last preacher had not majored in Bible, hence, was weak in the pulpit. When I offered that I followed Paul's example thinking of the possible need for being a tent-making preacher, he asked, "Don't you think that showed a lack of faith?" Sol got a job in a convenience store which was robbed while he was there. I filled area pulpits several weeks and received a little money from that. I distributed phone books. Some of our friends from Ferguson Road gave us a bit of help. We were surviving but going nowhere.

Having heard of a vacancy in Lovington, New Mexico, I contacted them and was given an appointment right away. For some reason, Lea and the children were not able to go with me. On Tuesday after my return, they called offering me the work, and I accepted – the biggest decision I ever made without consultation with Lea.

In that year, 1967, 50,000 people joined an anti-war march in Washington. Riots by blacks in Newark killed 26 and injured 1,500. Riots in Detroit killed 43 and injured 2,000, and burnings there left 5,000 homeless. []

(Cecil Hook: May 2006)