

Grit In My Gizzard, No. 19

The Trauma of Change

The game of musical chairs when preachers vie for pulpits does not come into full play until June when school is out. Weeks and months passed with few leads and no prospects. But as “fruit-basket-turnover” time drew near, Dan Woodroof, serving then in Kerrville, gave the names of persons to call in New Braunfels, Texas. That led to our acceptance of the invitation of the church there – back in our home state.

I had heard of New Braunfels as an old German town but had never been there. On IH 35 the city of about 25,000 was twenty miles from the city limits of San Antonio and fifty miles from Austin. The beautiful, industrious city has done much to preserve its German flavor in rustic architecture and with such events as the annual Wurstfest to which Mryon Floren brought his accordion for many years. Their long-time fabric milling and garment making gradually gave way to tourism with such notable water parks as Schlitterbahn. The city is built on the Balcones fault line dividing it into two levels, the lower level starting the rolling terrain leading to the coastal plain and the upper level beginning the oak and juniper covered Hill Country. At the base of the escarpment great springs from the Edwards Aquifer coming from many miles farther west form the two-mile long, cold and clear Comal River which begins and ends within the city with its flow into the Guadalupe River. A dam north on the Guadalupe created Canyon Lake. With these affording so much water recreation, weekenders and vacationers flock to them.

As I entered into my work I was disturbed that my problems with concentration were not relieved. As the third weekend approached, I was so distressed that I went to a doctor and asked for a vitamin shot. After he learned my symptoms, he replied that he did not think I needed vitamins but a glucose tolerance test. He told me to be there at 8:00 Monday morning at which time blood samples were taken at intervals before and after I had drunk some potion he gave. That done, about eleven o'clock he called me into his office asking, “You didn't die in the waiting room, did you? I don't know how you got out of bed this morning!” Then he explained that sugar is the fuel for the body; that the pancreas secretes insulin to utilize it, and that a disorder caused mine to send too much insulin counteracting the sugar, like a car with a flooded carburetor. I was trying to run without fuel. There was no medication to help. It was sounding serious! But he explained that I could control it by a diet of protein and fat leaving off the carbohydrates. Shortly before getting up to preach, I was to eat a piece of candy. I took him literally at his word and very quickly began to feel better. Gradually including some carbohydrates, after six months he dismissed me telling me to adjust my diet as I felt the need. My hypoglycemia, “low blood sugar,” was finally diagnosed and under control. What a relief!

Even though the congregation was not a choice “plum” in our estimation, we gave it a plus because it was between both sets of our aging parents. The church of about 250 crowded into a poorly accommodating building located on IH 35. Soon after our arrival, a busing program for children was begun which quickly began to overflow our facilities, so plans were started for a new building. We began to feel disheartened that the church

bound traditional strictures that we had outgrown. Lea and I discussed the matter and decided to begin teaching some broader concepts we had learned, well aware of the problems it might bring.

Knowing that people accept changes slowly, I began to venture a fresh idea every now and then, and the response was positive. The congregation was evangelistic and growing, so I did not want to dampen that enthusiasm or turn attention to peripheral issues. Both by conversions and members moving in, we were growing in an exciting manner.

My father died the next year and in our third year, Lea's father had a bad stroke and we moved him into a nursing home in New Braunfels and her mother was accepted to share his room also. With as many as ten residents from our church in the care homes and always persons in the hospitals, visits to them were a great part of my ministry. Soon after we moved, Sol and Linda moved to San Antonio where he worked for Allstate Insurance, and Daniel and Ryan were born there. Sol, however, had the misfortune of being a white male. Although he outperformed others in the office, promotions had to go to women and minorities. So they moved to Louisiana.

Some of the women, including Lea, began to play bridge. Eventually, they wanted to get their husbands to play with them but few of us knew much about bridge. Why not start a beginners' bridge club? One was started involving younger couples, except for Lea and me. About twenty of us met monthly and enjoyed a pot luck meal along with it.

Our nice, new building was built beside the older ones. Its capacity of 450 was reached at the first service. Including bussed children, we often reached that figure. During most of my career I complained that sometime I wanted to preach where all our members went for vacations. New Braunfels was that place! We most always had more in attendance than were on our roll.

As the years passed I continued to toss out corrective ideas but some began to hear strange sounds. As people shook my hand on the way out after service and were enthusiastic about the new thought I had presented, I came to know that I would have to give account about it at the next elders' meeting. After a time of cooling off, I would challenge some other of our traditions made into dogma. By this process more people were responding positively all along. Once an elder stated in a class he was teaching that he did not think the use of instruments in worship was wrong. Another elder in that class later got on my case because I did not refute the teaching elder though he had not done so himself.

About this time Carl Ketcherside published *The Twisted Scriptures*. That book was almost like a new revelation for me. Everyone in our Movement needs to read it. I was appointed to teach a midweek class of middle-aged adults. I asked the students if they would like to have a class that restudied many of our traditional practices openly and honestly without anyone getting upset at what others might say. They all agreed. I began going through Carl's book lesson by lesson. The class was excited. At the beginning of another quarter, a few new ones came into the class, one of whom was a good woman who had taught the small kids for years. She was well-versed about Adam and Eve, creation is six days, and about Noah and the ark but she was shocked by what she heard in the class. The next week she had our oldest elder with her. He was on guard. Quickly he contested a point someone made and the students as quickly showed his error. That

happening several times quieted him down. But he was an elder, not just a student, and had to correct the situation, so that started what might be called a three-year running battle involving the congregation.

All along during our meal at the bridge party the group would discuss the new concepts they were gaining. As the matters intensified in the church, they were almost forgetting to play bridge. A suggestion was made that we turn it into a discussion period, and all agreed. I quickly formulated some rules. We would not talk about the local situation. We would not talk about people. We each would be free to express opinions without the others being judgmental and taking offense. And we would not tell others about our discussion class. All agreed. They were all educated, responsible people who kept their word.

I would write out a lesson for open criticism, correction, and re-study. After the discussion I would revise it to include any new elements I might have gained from the class. This procedure was followed until many of the chapters of what would later be included in *Free In Christ* and some of *Free To Speak* were finalized. This was the most honest, searching, and exciting class I ever participated in. There was no motive of ill-will or effort to deprecate people or the church. Why would I have to wait forty years for such an intelligent study?

As these years were passing, my mother died. Lea continued to deal with her bi-polar disorder. Then after many complications and much suffering Lea's father died. Since Lea's mother did not need nursing care we brought her to live with us. That showed more love than wisdom, however, for she became very lonely. Understandably, few church folks visited her for she was with family. The trouble was that we were the only ones she ever saw. In our in-house association with her we recognized that Lea had inherited her bi-polar disorder from her mother. Why had we not seen that before? Even though Elma Lea (she had always been called by both names) and Elma loved each other devotedly, two bi-polar people living together became very problematic, to state it nicely. That's when Elma Lea decided that two *Elmas* in one house were too many, so she asked us to just call her *Lea*. It is remarkable how quickly everyone accepted that including her mother in her eighties.

Ordinarily, when a preacher's teaching met opposition, it was resolved readily, not by studying together, but by dispatching the preacher. The elders and I had studies together to no good effect. I would have been gone and forgotten except that three of the six elders and much of the inner core of the congregation were in agreement with my teachings. None of us wanted division so effort was made to promote unity. I was approaching the age of sixty-two. An agreement was reached to engage a new preacher who would fill the pulpit three Sundays each month and I would give him relief by filling the other – and I would do the janitorial work being done by professionals. That would allow me to begin drawing Social Security.

I suppose it has been an unconsciously developed technique of defense that I have been able to fade out or block out traumatic memories. I have recounted the things being reviewed here so little that I cannot remember time, sequence, and developments with any true accuracy. I gain no satisfaction in trying to recall them. I hold no ill-will toward any of those involved which would tempt me to mention their names. A great number of the major characters have already gone to their rewards which I hope are with the redeemed.

A very gifted younger preacher was being considered. He called and talked with me at length to gain my perspective of the situation. As I informed him of my grace-oriented and liberating teachings he expressed much excitement and agreement. I was pleased to welcome and serve with him. However, from the pulpit, even though he gave brilliant lessons, I did not hear any reinforcement of the things we had agreed upon. So his and my messages from the pulpit did not always mesh and that intensified the unrest instead of solving the problem. I would have preferred the cotton patch to escape all the conflict but our divisive legalism which allowed us to reject others in Christ was soul-threatening and needed correction.

After a time – I cannot remember how long – the elders called me into a meeting and very sincerely and humbly asked me what I thought could be done to relieve the situation. I told them that Lea and I had been looking at mobile homes and as soon as we could arrange for a place to live, I would resign – but I would like to retain the janitorial job. I left them for any discussion or decision they might make.

A few days later, when our bridge group met, our rule against discussion of the local situation was broken. The group told us we were not going to live in a mobile home. They discussed buying a house for us. Also, they admitted to having been letting me bear all the onslaughts while they said little, so they agreed to stand up and assure the elders that they also held the views that I was teaching. Some of them talked with the elders explaining that because housing had been a part of my salary through the years, I was actually helping churches pay for those houses, and then was left with none of my own in which to live.

With softened attitude the elders began to discuss how Lea and I might continue to live in the house rent free. No proposal that could be devised was satisfactory for it would be counted as income and wipe out my Social Security. Well, there was one route available and they followed it – giving Lea and me a deed of gift based on “love and affection”! It would be ours as long as either of us lived in it and, if we moved out, they would reclaim it after paying us any increase in value that might have accrued. I could not have asked for or dreamed of such a gracious solution. So, in 1984 after ten years I was relieved to trade my office for the janitorial supply room! I have since heard from other preachers who wished for such a trade.

As all this was developing we put Lea’s mother in a care home after keeping her with us for seven years. She was much more adjusted there among her peers and Lea was much more relaxed also. We had not lived alone since Sol was born. Her mother was staunchly traditional in her beliefs and did not know of our changed perspectives due to her hearing difficulties. She still held fears of dying and facing God until Lea spent much time teaching her about the mercy and grace of God. She died peacefully at 92 in a care home.

Earlier also, I had begun to send articles to Reuel Lemmons who greatly encouraged me by publishing them in *Firm Foundation*. Leroy Garrett seldom used contributed articles but I sent one and he published it and invited more which he used for years afterward. People were reading my stuff! I set a lofty, unattainable goal for myself – not to repeat what others were saying but to always challenge traditional error so that readers would always identify my name with newer viewpoints. I also filled the pulpit in Seguin a good number of times teaching what I was writing with great reception. I came to have a deep appreciation for those people. Reuel Lemmons spoke there one Sunday

and I went over to hear him and ate lunch with him and others. That week the Showalters had sold the *Firm Foundation* and dismissed him from his long-held editorship. He had become too liberal for them. Had I helped Reuel lose his job?!

Lea and I lived eleven more years there during the tenures of three preachers before moving to Oregon. After my return to Texas ten years later, friends arranged a reception for me in their fellowship room. It was a happy reunion with people dear to me. []

(Cecil Hook: July 2006)

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