

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 21

A Cyberspace Church

As teenagers when my brother and I slept out under the endless sky of West Texas, a thought of me ever having 100,000 books in print would have been as foreign as the thought of a man walking on the brilliant moon above us. We dreamed no such dreams. Yet I have been a guest in the home of Brigadier General Charles Duke who was the tenth man to walk on the moon and I have packaged almost 100,000 books with my own hands. Through the grit working in our gizzards, God can work that which is beyond our imagination.

I was frustrated that no one would publish my book but that, too, worked for my advantage. Through your contacting me instead of a business to order books, God has sent thousands of you great people to enrich my life. I began my records on index cards and found it inconvenient to change later when I got a computer. I have about eight feet of those cards. Many have only one entry; many have entries filling both sides, and still others have required multiple cards. I treasured your letters by filing the first 1,800 in the early years but gave up on saving them long ago.

Lea was my full and equal partner from the beginning. A great number of you have become partners in different ways. Some have helped by notes and calls encouraging us. Many have bought books and passed them along to others – even by the hundreds. Those who recommended the books to others became a part of the ministry. Often you have written your check for a few more dollars than your payment. Some have sent larger contributions while others have given continued support for longer periods of time. I have never met many of you who have become such vital fellow-workers. I have never met or had much personal communication with Dr. Jerry Gooch, a cardiac surgeon in Memphis, who has been the longest regular sustaining partner with the greatest financial help to this effort.

To all of you I can say in all sincerity and honesty, it is not **MY** ministry but **OUR** partnership in service. It is awesome that you have put so much trust in me. Because of the complication of my selling books and distributing free books in the same operation, I have never been able to keep accurate records to report to you, yet you have trusted me anyway.

All of my books were written in our home at 1350 Huisache in New Braunfels with my office crowded in our spare bedroom with the bed serving well as a place to collate papers. By hand I have folded thirteen zillion papers and brochures. Until the over-reaction of our government to the “uni-bomber,” I stamped many packages and mailed them in drop boxes saving a six-mile round trip to the post office. The first books were done mostly in handwriting at our kitchen bar. Even though I did not know I needed such a contraption, some of you bought a computer for my work and it quickly became indispensable, making composing and revising so much easier. Then Vic Phares of Shreveport, Louisiana, whom I had not met, proposed setting up a web site for me. He still graciously maintains it, sending out my weekly Freedom’s Ring articles and posting them at my site. By this he has extended our outreach around the world and beyond comprehension.

Since there is no counter, I do not know how many of you receive the weekly sendout, but many of you have been kind to reply, some saying you often send copies to others. There is a counter on the web site itself which indicates that it has received 2,096,164 hits in the last twelve months.

In my frugality I searched the dumpsters for packaging boxes. Adapting to the various sizes of packages, I began to encase the books in a panel of cardboard, wrap it in white kraft paper, and write the address by hand. I used more than a mile of paper before I started buying padded mailers by the case and addressing labels. This work was a joy.

At least a single book or one package has gone into 55 countries. My curiosity led me to list them: Zambia, India, Singapore, Canada, Namibia, Hong Kong, Australia, England, The Philippines, New Zealand, Hungary, Uruguay, Netherlands, Republic of South Africa, Nigeria, Costa Rica, Kenya, Austria, Ghana, Natal, Japan, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Brazil, Bulgaria, Spain, Malaysia, Cameroon, Malawi, Zimbabwe, The Bahamas, Ireland, Russia, Benin, Germany, Poland, Switzerland, Greece, Tiawan, Chile, Norway, Guam, Egypt, Argentina, Scotland, Mexico, Guyana, Togo, Belgium, China, West Indies, San Salvador, and Liberia. Roger Dickson has probably sent them to preachers in many more countries. Some in the military with only APO addresses have been helpful in distributing books.

Interesting stories have been told to me by readers as to how they came across the books. One man related the complex circumstances by which he received his book explaining that it was interesting to him to trace the route the raven flew to feed him. After Herbert Armstrong died leaving disillusioned followers, a good number of them ordered my books. Quite a number were read by those in the International Church of Christ, and after their recent shake-up that number has increased.

After publishing *Free In Christ* I was dismayed to see how many typographical and grammatical errors had slipped by my proof-reading. Willing to let you see my lack of sophistication, I let them remain until the eighth printing in which I also made a few textual revisions. For a long time Brian Casey proof-read and critiqued all my manuscripts, but now I rely again on my own proof-reading for all FR articles.

I have been reluctant to mention the names of any who have been such helpful partners in this effort because I would be failing to mention hundreds more of you. God has been working through people unknown to each other scattered around the globe. All this leads me to suggest that all of you and I who share in common through this means are a sort of CYBERSPACE CONGREGATION – a spiritual fellowship without physical presence that includes believers who do not all serve under the same church name. You probably assemble with other disciples regularly but you extend your fellowship through this miracle that ignores locality and distance. Surely, Peter and Paul would enjoy this sort of fellowship if they were on earth today!

My writings have neither deserved nor received recognition from the academic community. I am not qualified for that but have reached out to the pew-people whom I formerly taught in my sincere misdirection. They all might not have been from the cotton patch as I was, but they have had some of the same grit in their gizzards.

It would be a vain wish and a naïve expectation to look for approval of all readers. Maybe the Lord has been protecting my lack of self-confidence by deflecting extreme opposition. Though many have made honest inquiry in good spirit, I have received few calls or letters expressing hateful opposition. I have been told of many instances where my writings and I were denounced publicly from pulpits and I have been accused of dividing churches where I have never been. It seems a bit paradoxical that one can be accused of dividing churches by teaching unity. It is similar to the statement I heard just a few years ago from an otherwise rather sensible preacher. He told of a nice, sizeable congregation that was almost destroyed by the preacher emphasizing *love, love, love!*

In 1987 eight men mostly from Oregon published a 201-page book critical of *Free In Christ*. In 2003 a brother from Kentucky published a 315-page book with 152 pages of it being an effort to refute my book. And in 2000 a brother in the West Virginia area devoted 146 pages in *A Cloak of Malice*, not just in an effort to refute my teachings in *Free In Christ*, but questioning my integrity as the title would imply -- that I was deceitfully and maliciously working to lead disciples astray into apostasy. Several other extended unbound discourses have attacked the book, one being co-authored by a major league baseball pitcher.

My copies of those books are still in good condition. Why would I waste my time reading slanderous words of a man who, though never having seen or conferred with me would condemn my character? I scanned a few pages and put it aside. Having scanned a few pages of the other two books, I also retired them. Sixty or more years earlier, before I learned the difference between grace and legal works of righteousness, I could have made the same arguments that they were launching into. None of those brothers in Christ had discussed their concerns with me. I only hope that God is as patient with them as he was and continues to be with me.

Please do not conclude from these narrations that my ministry was always in conflict and constant controversy. One can still enjoy joy rides even though some are over rough roads with an occasional flat tire or even fender benders. The conflicts I encountered never involved personalities but were about teachings. In those conflicts, never to my knowledge did anyone bring an accusation against my character, nor did I impugn the motives of others. That does not mean that I always displayed the best judgment, dealt with the most tactful manner, and communicated sufficiently. Even when our motives are pure, our lack of consideration and diplomacy may be irritating. So I am making no claim that all conflict was the fault of others. Differences of convictions are inevitable.

We emphasize that each of us study the Scriptures for ourselves to learn the truth rather than depending upon others. I have not heard of, and never expect to hear of, elders telling their preachers and teachers to be free to teach their new-found truth in the congregation. I cannot really blame them for that for would create chaos due to different conclusions reached by the various teachers. Churches hire preachers to confirm their creed – written or unwritten -- rather than to teach change. Any reformer is branded as an insidious undermining “change agent” among many. So how can any corrective teaching be done in a congregation without rocking the boat? That problem has prevailed through history and will continue to prevail. Authoritatively structured churches like the Catholic Church are more successful in avoiding change and the disunity it might bring, but even among them a reforming Martin Luther sticks his head up ever now and then and is driven out with those who accept his corrective teachings.

There always has been and ever will be differences of opinions and convictions among the sincerest of disciples. Our gizzard stones grind the same grain differently. That is not the problem. The deathly disease is in our judging and rejecting other servants of God who disagree with us. How dare we reject others who hold the same confidence that they are children of God as we cherish! It is not the difference of opinions and convictions and meeting separately that is sinful; it is the rejecting of one another that is damning. We would all do well to memorize Romans, Chapter 14.

Both unity and change come through individuals rather than religious organizations. My books have gone mostly to individuals instead of churches. A few churches have bought books, the first that I recall being the Oak Hills church in San Antonio even before Max Lucado began work with it. That church has long since outgrown any ignorant and arrogant claim of being the only ones meeting God's approval in a courageous example for all our churches.

When I came to Round Rock two years ago, the elders urged me to "place membership." They have no problems with my teaching. They are great men leading a grace-oriented congregation but I have chosen to attend without having my name on the roll. I do not want the congregation to suffer any embarrassment due to my teachings and I do not want my teachings to have to meet the approval of any group. With all due respect to elders who have overseen my work, if I had waited for their approval, none of my books would ever have been printed. Structured religion stifles learning rather than promoting it. I enjoy a freedom which few who serve congregations can experience. I am free to share local associations and to enjoy you in the **cyberspace congregation** also.

It is regrettable that, in the inevitable grinding of love and differences, the conflict has been allowed to be so destructive. However, the very fact that you are reading this indicates that some good change in favor of love is working. []

(Cecil Hook: May 2006)

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

YOU HAVE ASKED – and encouraged. Yes, I am now planning to publish *GRIT IN MY GIZZARD* in a 192- page book. I will inform you when that is done. Please do not send your order until I publish the details.

AFTER YOU ARE GONE, who will all your books serve? The Elma Lea Memorial Library can serve students in India for many years. If you have useful study helps and commentaries that have been helpful to you but are no longer used, why not donate them for use in India where books are treasured? Ask me about details of shipping.