

GROWING AS A CHRISTIAN AND AS A PROFESSIONAL

Edward G. Holley
June 26, 1979

When Don [Davis] and Pat [Breivik] asked me if I would be interested in addressing the Fellowship of Christian Librarians, I was intrigued. For though I have lived most of my life as a committed Christian, and though I have struggled long and hard with the problem of how one reflects one's faith in his or her profession, I have not been wholly sympathetic to segregated groups of librarians. Because of my interest in the larger body of librarians, I take a dim view of separatist groups like Black Librarians, Asian Librarians, Jewish Librarians, etc. Yet I recognize the reality of group dynamics and understand the need for librarians with a specific philosophical point of view to talk with each other and share their common problems. That seems to me to apply no less to librarians who are Christian than it does to any other groups. Indeed, since professing Christians are likely to be a minority by the end of the century, there may be even more reason for us to share whatever perceptions we have with one another.

The topic which Pat and Don suggested was "How does one bring the principles of faith to apply to the practice of librarianship?" That is a question with which I have struggled for most of my life. In the effort to find answers I have read many books, talked with a good many people, and done a fair amount of praying. Alas, the answer seems still to elude me, but I'm not sure that my basic approach isn't reflected in that old sermon of Puritan divine, Cotton Mather, who said the godly man has two callings: his general calling and his personal calling. The first, said Mather, is "to serve the Lord Jesus Christ" and the second "a certain Particular Employment, by which his usefulness in his neighborhood is distinguished."

"A Christian, at his two callings," Mather added, "is a man in a boat, rowing for Heaven; the house which our Heavenly Father hath intended for us. If he mind but one of his callings, be it which it will, he pulls the oar, but on one side of the boat, and it will make but a poor dispatch to the Shoar of Eternal Blessedness." To be diligent in one's earthly calling was for Mather, then, a moral duty, a precept of that fundamental law basic to the theories of Calvinism and later of the democratic faith. (Ralph Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought, 1940, pp. 147-148)

One oar was his life in the world; the other was his Christian faith. Both callings are necessary if one is to serve Christ in the world. I stress that idea of service in the world since the monastic ideal has never appealed to me, though I don't deny its value for others. However, I'm not sure any faith has much of a chance of succeeding unless it has some relationship to what's going on in everyday life.

What help have I had in this struggle? Most importantly, I suppose, has been the help of family, of close personal friends, and of the Christian community. There may be Christians who are able to make it in splendid isolation from the rest of the world. That is not my business to judge. But I suspect for most of us the Christian community, as found in a regular and systematic gathering of what Elton Trueblood calls “The Company of the Committed” is an essential ingredient. Like Trueblood, I am well aware of the failures of the Christian Church, and know how dreary life in the local congregations can often be. Despite their high ideals, most local congregations are afflicted with problems all too characteristic of the society as a whole. Why? Because they are composed of people, redeemed people to be sure, but people, with all the faults, all the pride, all the self-righteousness, and all the narrowness of any in-group. Rare indeed is the congregation where one or the other of these characteristics is not a daily matter of concern for the leaders and the people who make it up.

To say this is not to deny the importance of the local congregation nor a sense of the importance of the larger body of Christ which exists in the world and, in time, through the centuries. We go again and again to the Christian community to be renewed in our pursuit of guidance and help to get through our weekly tasks. That service of worship, whether it’s a local informal group like ours in the Chapel Hill Church of Christ, or the Chicago Temple of the United Methodist Church in Chicago, or St. Thomas Episcopal in New York City, has sustained me in many a weary hours, both with ALA and other work, and I thank God for all of them. And when I respond positively to a worship service and congregations far different from my own heritage, I recognize that were I to be a regular communicant in these large churches the problems would not be far different from my own.

In his little book, The Incendiary Fellowship, Elton Trueblood discusses both the importance and the inadequacy of the church.

The hardest problem of Christianity is the problem of the church. We cannot live without it, and we cannot live with it. In practice the local congregation is nearly always a disappointment. The annual conferences of the denominations usually meet in large halls, but such space is seldom needed, because at most sessions there are so many empty seats. One reason for the empty seats is the nearly uniform dullness of the proceedings ... Sometimes the self-seeking is truly shocking, the leaders seeming to be more concerned for power than for principles. That this is no new phenomenon is easily seen by a careful study of Paul’s Letters, especially the Letters to the Corinthians. The failure of the church has been going on from the earliest days of its history. (p. 77)

Yet Trueblood later says that he rarely passes a small church, knowing how inadequately it serves its members, without a sense of reverence and uttering a short prayer of thanksgiving. He says, “In my youth I was impressed by seeing devout Roman Catholics tip their hats, as the street cars passed the doors of their church buildings. I m tempted to do the same whenever I pass a

place in which the love of Christ has been consciously nourished and where I know simple men have prayed.” (p.84)

One of the problems of organized Christianity, of course, is that we tend either to be too rigid with our prescriptions and thus drive people away, or too tolerant of their lack of competence, and frustrate the general work of all. Let me illustrate. When I was a deacon in a large church in Houston a number of years ago, I had real difficulty with the elder who was Superintendent of Sunday School. In one of those periodic explosions to which I am sometimes given, I was complaining vigorously to one of my kindly elderly friends. “But Ed,” he said, “he’s so sincere.” With some asperity I remarked that I would trade a bushel of sincerity for some fundamental competence. In my opinion, misplaced sentimentality in churches often leads to the most complacent attitude toward incompetence, which most of us would not tolerate in our daily work activities. It is certainly no unkindness to suggest that church organization be at least as effective as we can make it.

Perhaps our problem, though, is that we expect everybody to be a saint and, while sainthood as commonly understood is a noble and worthy goal, most of our Christian associates are rarely candidates for such honors. There’s a happy phrase in one of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s books which points out that the church is the only organization in the world that deliberately advertises itself as a company of sinners. Or as the dean of my undergraduate college once noted, “The church is not a museum for the exhibition of perfect saints but a school for the training of imperfect sinners.” Perhaps because of such recognition, and the fact that we need not despair because we are saved by the grace of God, we can share both our weaknesses and our strengths in the Christian community.

In mentioning both Trueblood and Fosdick, I have already given a clue to two individuals whose influence on my thinking has been profound. Fosdick I discovered after I went away to graduate school in the early fifties; Trueblood about twenty years ago. When I read both I often have had the feeling that they speak to some real needs which I have, and I find myself going back to their writings again and again. The same is true, though probably to a lesser extent, with C.S. Lewis, that mainstay of Christian intellectuals, who made Christianity respectable again for many sophisticated people.

Books which I have found less helpful, or indeed have exerted a negative impact upon me, are those which purport to do what you asked me to do this morning: relate faith to work. Although a number of close friends, including my wife, are much taken with Keith Miller, I find that he turns me off completely. Moreover, I have a fair amount of skepticism of people who abandon their so-called secular work, where they might have an impact, for what seems to me the easier and less demanding task of full-time religious work. Doubtless that’s a personal prejudice of mine, but the point I’m making is that I haven’t learned much from such individuals. The same

goes for the notable political figures, for example books like Mark Hatfield's Conflict and Conscience, or John B. Anderson's Vision and Betrayal in America.

One real disappointment in my contact with other persons in public life, whose Christian commitment is well known, was a meeting with Senator Mark Hatfield from Oregon. As one of the ALA representatives who had gone to the Capitol to testify against the nomination of Daniel Boorstin as Librarian of Congress, I was well aware that the battle had already been fought and was over. That was made even clearer to me when Speaker of the House, Carl Albert, escorted Dr. Boorstin into the room, introduced him to the committee, and talked about how his pappy knew Dan's pappy back in Oklahoma. No matter, the ALA representatives, in the absence of superior librarian candidates for that post, were making a record for the future. But Senator Hatfield especially disappointed me that morning when he began his remarks by saying that he hadn't made up his mind, which he clearly had, for immediately after lunch he launched into a speech of praise for the candidate which could scarcely have been the product of any persuasive rhetoric of the morning. Why did he lie? It was unnecessary and certainly was obvious to most of us, even my teen-age children who had accompanied me to the hearings and got a marvelous lesson in the American political process. I can understand why a politician must sometimes remain quiet, or not tell all of the truth, or perhaps, in critical cases, even dissemble, but that particular lie was totally unnecessary. The net result is that I won't be very impressed by anything that Senator Hatfield writes on Christianity and the political process.

This matter of Christian reading is a major activity for most of us and certainly fundamental for the Christian librarian. Yet even here I would not be prescriptive. The easiest way to turn me off is to insist that I read something because it's good for me. Probably because of my individualistic outlook, I want to be the judge of what's good for me. This seems to me only to recognize reality. What are my spiritual needs at a given time many not be someone else's. And just because I discovered a writer whose approach is particularly meaningful doesn't mean that someone else, whose spiritual growth may be quite different, will find it similarly stimulating. The problem of sharing with other Christians, without being overbearing and thus smothering them, is not an easy one to solve. And let me confess that I have been as guilty of imposing my views on others as many of my colleagues have tried to do on me.

About ten years ago I first discovered, really discovered, the Old Testament prophets. A friend of mine and I then taught one Sunday School class or another on the prophetic literature for about three years running. It was an exciting, challenging, stimulating time for us. It was also a lot of hard work, for the Old Testament record is not easily understood without knowing the context and how the books were put together. For a few of us it was a revelation. For a number, I'm sure it was something else. That we saw Solomon for the tyrannical king he was did not set well with those whose stories of Solomon's kingship reflected the few facets of his personality they had learned as children in Sunday School. The fact that Jeremiah, the most human and

unlovely of prophets, could pray that his enemies would get what they so richly deserved was upsetting for some, encouraging for other. Yet how often did we exclaim again and again at the rewards of studying this part of the Biblical record, how meaningfully it spoke to the society of our day, how true-to-life the situations about which we read. And that magnificent poetry! Years later the works of Deutero-Isaiah remain one of my watchwords when I am tired, and irritable, and weary of my daily tasks:

Even youths shall faint and be weary,
And young men shall fall exhausted;
But they who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings
like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:30-31)

My friend, who is an employee of a major oil company, is also a good calligrapher. As a Christmas present, he had framed for my office two of our favorite quotations from the so-called minor prophets, Amos and Micah (minor only in the sense their books are short – certainly not because of their message!):

Let justice roll down like water
And righteousness as an ever flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

You know well enough, Man,
What is good!
For what does the Lord
require from you,
But to be just,
to love mercy,
And to walk humbly
with your God? (Micah 6:8)

These many years later the framed quotations are the object of considerable interest by those who visit my office. They also remind me that an attempt to be a helpful dean should encompass such qualities of justice, and humility, and mercy – and that a belief in such principles is a part of my faith which should be translated into practice in dealing with our students, faculty, staff, and other university administrators.

Perhaps here is also the place to share with you my view of library administration in the context of my Christian principles. As many of you know, the so-called human relations school in management, given impetus by Douglas McGregor's Human Side of Enterprise, has had a significant influence on library management through such programs as MRAP, ALDP, etc. A

librarian who strongly supports the McGregor, Likert, Harzberg approach to management is Mike Marchant, whose book on participative management in libraries has been both influential and controversial. When Mike was serving as a visiting faculty member at Chapel Hill several years ago, we had quite a few discussions on this topic. As one point I remarked that I thought participative management in libraries has been both influential and controversial. When Mike was serving as a visiting faculty member at Chapel Hill several years ago, we had quite a few discussions on this topic. At one point I remarked that I thought participative management was more theology than science. Mike admitted that this was probably true.

For what are we attempting to do in management these days but try to permit individuals to have a hand in setting their own work environment, enabling them to participate in major decisions affecting their work, and encouraging them to reach their full potential as human beings? That seems to be very much in line with our basic Christian principles. True, a behavioristic approach to management can turn out to be mere manipulation, a troublesome ethical question for many of us, and yet one not unknown in organized Christianity. But manipulation is not a necessary concomitant of good human relations nor is it the answer for those who wish to treat their colleagues with dignity, respect, and occasionally a sense of humor.

Recently when Jim Govan and I were discussing the problems of library directors and their staffs, with some emphasis upon the directors who've been dismissed during the previous six months, he said, "You know, I've always tried to remember the point you made in your article in Wilson Library Bulletin about having respect for your staff." Jim was referring to my encounter with a reference librarian on one of my CLR Fellowship visits who responded to my question about library management in unexpectedly harsh tones:

Nothing is going to change the ways libraries are managed until head librarians cease having contempt for their staffs. You can have any kind of organization you want, you can draw nice charts, but until head librarians respect their staffs, it won't make any difference. (Wilson Library Bulletin, Spring 1973)

More than one library director has needed to learn that lesson in recent year. Yet one would assume that it's so fundamental you wonder how they could have missed it. Let me also add that staffs have often repaid contempt with contempt and have made life unnecessarily difficult for their leaders. There are sins to be confessed on both sides.

Bringing a Christian perspective to bear on one's relationships with his or her colleagues would seem to me in the best interest of everybody. For what are the major problems of assuring minority rights, or women's rights, or staff rights except an application of the Biblical injunction to do unto others as you would have them do unto you? What we aim for is to treat everyone with fairness – not only the Black male but the White male; not

only the White female but the Black female. And a little Christian humility in admitting that we haven't always done this as well as we should wouldn't hurt any either.

Finally, I suggest that Christians stick to their principles, even when the pressures to do otherwise may be exceedingly strong. Our society and librarianship in general, is afflicted with a view that every battle is Armageddon. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are a few fundamental principles worth fighting for, but one must target his or her efforts to be sure that they are crucial. For a few principles I would resign my deanship tomorrow. But they are not principles I came to lightly or considered casually. They were the result of study and prayer, and deep conviction.

In the Christian's two callings, to use Mather's phrase, we need to be able to see both oars, our vocation in the world and our Christian vocation, as important and having a direct relationship to us in the boat. Or, to quote from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, we need to remember that "God is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13). That will of God, always expressed imperfectly in our daily activities, is nonetheless crucial to the way we approach our tasks and other people with whom we deal. And though we will sometime fail, and though our results cannot always be assured, we have faith that, whatever happens, the grace of Christ will save us from our own mistakes – and those of others.

Speech for the Fellowship of Evangelical Librarians
American Library Association
Dallas, Texas – June 26, 1979

Edward G. Holley, Dean
School of Library Science
The University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill