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Autobiography



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In our society the unbending social consensus, the pervasive conviction, is that, in order to grow up right, during their first 24 years, people need to be incarcerated in little square rooms and battered over the head with books full of facts irrelevant at that age. Now if you subtract those lost years, 24, from my present age, 78 you get 54 years. That is, these last 54 years are the main productive period of my life.

I early caught on to the fact that I could learn more, learn faster and retain longer by directly concerning myself with the concerns of God for His Kingdom and for His righteousness. That is to say, I was an early believer. The will of God in this imperfect world was central early in my thinking. Thus, during those early typically unprofitable years I did think of a maze of things that ought to happen, and I worked in my spare time to make some of them become real.

For example, the Navy did me a favor by paying for some of my education, helping me finish Caltech debt free. It then gave me some very practical training in Pre-flight school to become a fighter pilot on an aircraft carrier. However, the war ended just before I finished Pre-flight school and so I never got out of California during those two and a half years in the Navy.

An example of something I did out of school hours was when I was 23 and still in school at Princeton Seminary. I initiated a stream of tentmakers going to Afghanistan to teach English. Meanwhile I was using up the last of my wartime GI Bill tuition to acquire a Ph.D. in linguistics in order to go to Afghanistan myself. By this time I was married and we both were eager to do this, even though our finally going did not quite work out. Recently my wife and I attended the annual "Kabul Reunion" at which about 50 veterans of this long-standing effort in Afghanistan gathered to fellowship together.

I had accepted Christ when a "chalk talk" evangelist somehow got into the Sunday School of a fairly liberal Presbyterian church in Highland Park. As an early teen I confirmed that decision at a huge "Christian Endeavor" conference held in the Long Beach Civic Auditorium. Bob Munger, a young pastor at that time, led the decision service. Later, when I was 15 my parents felt they had to move from a denomination that had formally given up the highly Evangelical Christian Endeavor movement to a church that embraced that movement. Little did they know that Lake Ave Church would not long after hire a full time youth pastor who had to stand up in front of the group instead of letting young people lead the meeting, and so the incredible, ecumenical Christian Endeavor movement was phased out at the Lake Avenue Church, too. In any case, by this time my whole family was already at Lake Avenue and really liked it. My father soon became a trustee and was one of those opposed going into debt for the removal of the "Corner Church" and the building of the present "Chapel."

[He was not against doing it, he was just against going into debt to do it. At that moment in Lake Avenue history the church moved from where 50% of the budget was going to missions down to 33% for missions. When the current sanctuary was built, again with even more massive debt, our mission budget declined to 18%, and now it is even lower.]

A major new element in my life began at Lake Avenue where I first encountered Dawson Trotman and Charles E. Fuller. My life was turned around into an intense commitment, which involved and was then fueled by memorizing 500 verses in the Bible during a period both before and after enlistment in the Navy.

Back in those days just after the war Lake Avenue was in a rather hazy relation to any denomination and so after teaching and studying at Westmont (on top of a Caltech degree earned during the war), and studying both at Princeton Seminary and Fuller Seminary, and getting my Ph.D. (at Cornell, combining cultural anthropology, linguistics and mathematical statistics), my wife and I went back to Princeton Seminary to finish up and be ordained as a Presbyterian missionary.

Some years before, when I was at Princeton Seminary along with Dan Fuller and Bill Bright, all three of us decided to transfer to the about-to-be-opened Fuller Theological Seminary when that seminary opened in Pasadena, California, the following year. Neither Bill Bright nor I finished at Fuller. We thought we had more pressing things to do. He started Campus Crusade and held to that vision for the next 50 some years. I had felt led to be a full time missionary rather than a tent-maker in Afghanistan. While in transition to that more complex calling I conceived a radically new method for learning a foreign language and earned a Ph.D. in linguistics to forward that idea. I thought this new approach would benefit all missionaries. Incidentally Bill and I formed a friendship which lasted until the day he died. Our project in Pasadena would never have succeeded without his help. He and Vonette invited me and my new wife to lunch at his home in Orlando just a few months before his death.

Finally, I was finishing up at Princeton planning to be a standard missionary. At that time there were still some conservative-Evangelical Presbyterian mission countries, and Roberta and I and our then two children were recruited for one of the Board's Evangelical fields, Guatemala, to work in the Western highlands with a Mayan Indian tribe called the Mam. Work had been going on there for many years, even

Bible translation. This is the precise place, we were told, that Cameron Townsend was persuaded that it was of little use distributing Bible portions in Spanish to people whose mother tongue was radically different. A minority of the missionaries already believed this. It was not Townsend's creative idea. But he was the young man later called affectionately "Uncle Cam," who actually did something about that idea that became a major contribution, that is, he established today's marvelous Wycliffe Bible Translators.

During ten years in Guatemala, like Townsend, I became involved in a plan conceived by others. It was the idea of reaching out to assist the real local church leaders (for the first time including Indians). These local church leaders were laymen—most of the 200 churches were run by ordained elders. Those of us involved in this scheme reasoned that these elders could be taught and ordained as full fledged ministers without relocating themselves and their families for years to the capital city to attend "seminary."

The plan was to work with these existing leaders rather than untried younger students, and for the educational process to fit into their life cycle rather than, as with younger students, extracting them out of society into the life cycle of a school in a different place and a different culture. This idea caught on with our people and with other missions and in other countries and soon I was invited to be the Executive Director of a Theological Education association that covered the 17 Latin American countries north of the Equator. A year later the one-year-old School of World Mission at Fuller wanted another professor. They were so impressed by this training system that I was invited to join the faculty, the first faculty member added after the founding. I was then deeply involved in the calling of all of the additional professors and deans of the School of World Mission during the next ten years.

Not long after joining the faculty at Fuller this new "theological education by extension" idea became a movement. Its growth was due in part to global trips by myself and others promoting the idea which were sponsored by the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association. Soon this idea encompassed 500 mission programs around the world and enlisted 100,000 local leaders training for ordination. Some have cast me as the creator of this movement. I simply got the idea from a missionary (James Emery) who had been in Guatemala longer than I. Like Townsend I helped to implement an idea I did not conceive.

In any case, the movement was running by itself, and although I was called to Fuller to promote this new idea, I only continued to teach one course in that area and soon transitioned into a first love, with a teaching focus on the historical growth factors of the Christian movement in the last 2,000 years as my main teaching duty. This involvement was immeasurably enlightening. I discovered that a great deal that I had been taught at seminary about theological developments in Christian history, both at Fuller and at Princeton, were not quite the whole story or perhaps dead wrong. But that is another story.

[A recent book entitled *For the Glory of God*, published by Princeton University Press, written by a sociologist, Rodney Stark, does the same thing. It is a devastating critique of historians and sociologists in general and Christian historians and theologians in particular. A fabulous 80 pages are devoted to the rise of science under Christian influence. I have written for permission to print that chapter as a separate book with our publishing imprint (the William Carey International University Press). Christian students and non-Christian students at Caltech will be flabbergasted.]

Even more important, at Fuller those ten years I had a thousand missionaries go through my classes and write masters or doctoral theses about their field work and experience. For me this was a glorious introduction into the global phenomenon of Christianity and it led to some disturbing conclusions. I began to write and promote insight into the idea that thousands of minority groups were still walled off from missions by the tendency of many missions to assume that the churches they established could easily bridge the many ethnic differences which make most countries into a linguistic mosaic. Realizing that this perspective was an overlooked dimension that affected the strategies in virtually all fields, it became serious enough so that, it seemed to me, something, someone would have to stop teaching and begin actively promoting outreach to these additional totally pioneer fields that were invisible to anyone with American melting pot assumptions.

The entire mission faculty at Fuller was involved in a discussion over a period of two years concerning the need for a vast "implementation annex" to the Fuller School of World Mission. Ed Dayton from World Vision was involved. The Fuller provost, Glenn Barker was involved in these discussions. I still have a little diary where I recorded who came to the meetings (which I convened) and what we discussed. Gradually a major new enterprise, intended to be a harmonious and supportive extension of Fuller, was brought into focus. Fuller's president, David Hubbard, tried hard to think how all this could be an elaboration of the existing School of World Mission (which, incidentally, would not have been ideal since many missions already refused to send any of their missionaries to Fuller due to ambiguities over in the Fuller theology faculty about statements of Biblical inspiration). We knew that for theologically political reasons it had to be a project that was legally separate from Fuller.

Meanwhile I continued to explore the possibilities of some current mission leader being recruitable to set up this kind of large informal annex. I tried in vain to persuade a number of leaders. It finally became clear that I was the only one who was willing and able to walk out of their present job and attempt a project as huge and risky as this was. Later I realized that since we obviously began with a huge fund-raising need, many more were deterred by that grim reality alone.

(In fact, once the property was paid off, we had many takers.)

So, in the fall of 1976, I took a two-year leave of absence from Fuller. I continued to teach some, but my main task was to establish this new center. I was 51 at that time. I had engineering training, a Ph.D. and M.Div. plus mission field experience and teaching at Fuller behind me. I could always go back to Fuller, where I am to this day still listed as a faculty member (a "Distinguished Missiologist in Residence"). What did I have to lose? My wife and my whole family of four unmarried daughters were completely unanimous that this was what God wanted us to do.

I did not push into this very eagerly. At no time in my life before or after have I to the extent I did then, sense that God was forcing me to choose a much harder row to hoe. And on the other hand, after we made the decision to leave Fuller we did not at any point in the next thirteen years, during which we paid off the campus, feel that God had promised us success. We only felt that the value of the goal was sufficient justification to go all out, sink or swim. I coined the phrase, "You do not evaluate a risk by the probability of success but by the worthiness of the goal." We were willing to fail because the goal we

sensed was so urgent and strategic.

I said I was 51 at that time. That is exactly the half way point between the age of 24 and my present 78 years. The second half of my productive life has been even more exciting than the first half. Suffice it to say we started without backers, no denomination, not even a single congregation, no mailing list, and only about \$100 in cash. It would seem that if we went from that to a \$40 million dollar set of properties that are free and clear this would be a fascinating, almost unbelievable story. My first wife's book in its latest revision is called *I Will Do a New Thing*, tells that story in detail. We became self-sufficient not needing or wanting to go out for funds in the name of our institution. We now in our university enroll in various programs over 6,000 new students a year, drawing upon over 900 teachers/professors all over the country, teaching in over 130 places in the U.S. alone, are active in many languages with half of our staff either at regional centers in the USA or in similar activities around the world. Our basic institution is a community of missionaries whose support comes in directly as is the case with most missionaries. The basic corporation's legal name is the Frontier Mission Fellowship. Its two main closely cooperating projects are the U.S. Center for World Mission, which is on the north side of Elizabeth and the university which is on the south side. The Frontier Mission Fellowship, of which I am still the active General Director was incorporated late in 1976. Paul Cedar spoke at our 25th anniversary celebration in 2002. Some years ago he withdrew from all boards except ours. We have greatly appreciated Lake Avenue Church. All four of my daughters are full-time missionaries and both they and their 14 children and my own support comes in part from Lake Avenue. Bill Bright was another major supporter from the very first days all through our 27 years of involvement following the Fuller teaching period.

But, as I say, the second half of my "productive" 54 years will need to be pursued another time.

PART II

I will now head into the period of my life during which I served in the development of the college campus in Northeast Pasadena. Our 25th Anniversary booklet tells a good deal of that story. My first wife's book, *I Will Do a New Thing* tells even more.

But I have decided that I cannot push on into that radical, tumultuous period from 1976 until the present (that is, from the my age of 51 to my age of 79), without describing a bit more of what led up to so radical a break with a much safer past.

Why did I not continue to teach at Fuller, in the world's largest school of missions? Long before I even went to Fuller I had been almost continually caught up in things which you cannot do in the classroom. I will mention eight.

I first caught McGavran's attention because of a brief article I had written entitled, "Gimickitis" which portrayed local accountable fellowships on the mission field to be the most central goal. Later, his invitation to join him at Fuller also built on his interest in the fact that I had been involved in a radically new approach to the development of pastor leadership. These were the main reasons I was invited to teach at Fuller. But let me go back even further.

I finished my Caltech studies during the 2nd World War while still 19. A year later when I was still 20 the war abruptly ended my pilot training and took me to Westmont. Dr. Hutchins, pastor of Lake Ave Church actually drove me up to Westmont in the fall of 1945 and made sure I got a job teaching that would exactly pay for my studies in the Bible, church history and Greek.

A series of "antecedents" that help explain that significant departure from teaching at Fuller are mentioned in the next chapter.