

John Sherrill: My Friend, The Bible

I felt vaguely uneasy that Sunday morning several years ago as I looked around the bare, echoing room where my hostess was arranging child-sized chairs in a semicircle around her desk. I was visiting friends in a west Texas town. My hostess had asked me to attend the Bible class which she was teaching, and even before the class began I suspected that these men and women were going to know a lot more about Scripture than I did.

For as we had come into church a few moments earlier it seemed that every single person was carrying a Bible. It's just a cultural phenomenon, I said to myself. Back home in New York, in our own Episcopal church, if you brought a Bible with you on Sunday it meant you'd been asked to read the Epistle during the communion service. But this was not an Episcopal church in New York, this was a Baptist church in west Texas. And there were Bibles everywhere.

The classroom began to fill up. It was an old man who finally noticed that I was not carrying a Bible. I remember that he had a freshly scrubbed and sunbaked face, and that he carried two Bibles. He put them down on a miniature chair, took his coat off, hung it carefully on a wall peg, and sat down. Then he spoke to me.

"Here, young fellow," he said, handing me one of his Bibles. I was gratified that someone could still call me young, since I was well past forty, at the time of that Texas visit, and what was left of my hair was already beginning to gray.

The old man couldn't let me have his real Bible, the large, black, leather-bound and dog-eared one. But he did hand me The Living Bible and I felt grateful. Not only for the loan, but

because he had given me this particular version: I was one of those people who, in spite of the fact that I had been a Christian for several years, had read the Bible through eagerly shortly after my conversion, and had been an editor on an inter-faith magazine for years, still did not feel really comfortable with the Scripture. I couldn't seem to get a handle on the book. The Living Bible, though, in its green binding, seemed enough like any other book to put me at ease.

My hostess was handing out mimeographed sheets. When mine reached me I noticed with a shudder that it contained a list of Bible references. As surely as I sat in that kindergarten chair we would shortly be going around the circle, looking up passages and reading them aloud.

My eyes scanned the list. I wouldn't have trouble with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Psalms, the Gospels, some of the Letters. But there were those other names on the list, the ones I could never find. Did Habakkuk come before or after Haggai? And for that matter, where was Haggai?

And then, sure enough, my hostess began at the far right. "Charles, would you please read our Philemon?"

Charles flipped to Philemon.

Quickly I counted the number of chairs between me and Mr. Philemon, and found that I was Second Samuel. Not bad, I riffled the pages of The Living Bible and found Second Samuel.

By now it was the next person's turn: she had an easy reference in Acts.

But to my horror my hostess asked Mrs. Acts to read another passage too, which threw my count off. I was no longer Second Samuel. If my count were not thrown off again, I would be Titus. But if one other person should read two passages, I would be –Habakkuk!

I was hoping against hope that the Lord was not in a playful mood when an out occurred to me. Maybe this Bible had an index!

While everyone was paying attention to Mr. Lamentations, I turned to the front of my Living Bible and sure enough, there was an index. Surreptitiously I held the book open to that page and waited. Mr. Lamentations finished. Mrs. Ezekiel read a short passage and then, as I had feared, another. I was next – I was Habakkuk! Even as my hostess was saying, “John, would you read the next passage?” my eyes were scanning the index. Sure enough, there it was. With the smugness of a schoolboy who has been asked the one question he knows how to answer, I turned right to Habukkuk and started reading.

Just as I finished, a merciful bell rang and the class was over.

And then the first of two fragile events occurred, events which were separated by a few weeks of time but which were prophetic for me in the sense that in them I heard God speaking.

The first of these two statements came from the lips of the old man who had lent me his Bible. When it came time for me to give the Bible back to him, he asked the usual polite question.

“You here for long, fellow?” But then, without transition, the old man with the shining chin added the words which I know now came straight from God. He stroked his Bible and said, “This is where you find the answers to your problems.”

That was all. The old man turned away.

But that afternoon as I was packing for the trip home I came across my own Bible. I took it out of my briefcase and in my mind compared its crisp pages with the much-fingered Bible the old man had brought with him. Why wasn't I using my Bible the

way these people were? This is where you find the answers to your problems the old man had said. Was I missing something vital? Had these people discovered in their Bibles a quality I never dreamed of? In spite of that first eager reading after my conversion, the Bible remained for me a formidable book, the province of scholars and preachers and grandmothers, a book about God and about people who lived thousands of years ago. It just didn't occur to me that this was also a book about me.

It wasn't until another day, weeks later, that God spoke to me again about my relationship to the Bible.

And as so often happens, He spoke through the casual remark of a friend.

Back in 1959 I had had a second bout with cancer. Out of that fear filled experience had come a direct, personal encounter with Jesus in a hospital room in New York. With it came a healing, and later a stunning, second personal encounter with the Holy Spirit, all of which I've described in a book titled *They Speak With Other Tongues*.

And that's where the trouble began. Because a book that is even partially autobiographical always captures its author at a point in time. A person frozen on the pages of a book is different from the person who goes on living, changing, sometimes growing, sometimes regressing. People who met me in the pages of *They Speak With Other Tongues*, were not meeting the me of 1966 or 1971. Those first days after my conversion had been utterly joyful and strangely problem-free. But as time passed I began to recognize the shadow of old habit patterns. The sequence had a familiar ring because I had lived through it in my marriage to Tib. During the first blush of our love affair, our joy in finding each other was so great that we just didn't have time for problems. But the honeymoon experience of conversion is what life with Jesus was all about. Bit by bit the Lord began to bring me down to earth, where real growth in

Him must take place.

Oh, I didn't understand at the time that Jesus was involved in this reemergence of problems. Quite the contrary. Jealousy, anger, overindulgence, sex-fantasies, fear – if I were the sort of person who had these problems, where was the victory Jesus had won for me! I tried my best to push down these ugly aspects of myself. When they wouldn't stay there, I felt more and more guilty.

And it was in the middle of this drift into guilty living that I found myself in west Texas, hearing an old man say that the Bible held the answer to our problems.

Just a few weeks later, because I am spiritually deaf and need to be shouted at, the Lord spoke to me a second time about the Bible.

Guideposts magazine, where Tib and I worked, was holding a writer's workshop in Holland. Between classes Tib and I sampled Dutch life. Ignoring the care she usually puts into her trim figure, Tib joined me in Holland's famous chocolate and pastry. Then, in reaction, we switched to raw herring and bicycled for miles along the canals. The little hotel where we were staying was all tile and thatched roof. Our room was on the third floor which you achieved by way of a series of ladders – the Dutch called them stairs.

Late one night after Tib had gone to bed I sat up talking with an old friend who was also one of the workshop teachers, Jamie Buckingham.

"I've been meaning to ask you, John," Jamie said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his hands behind his head, "how is your spiritual health?"

"Spiritual health?"

"Yes. You were talking at the workshop today about building

scenes. Let's do just that. Here you are in Holland where you and Tib wrote God's Smuggler. Let's imagine that Brother Andrew has just driven up to this hotel from another of his Bible smuggling trips behind the Curtain. He hops out of his van and throws his arms around you, Dutch style, and starts to tell you about a narrow escape he had at a border search. He's having a praise service tonight to thank God for his safe return and he wants you to come. Now here comes the tension you're always telling writers to look for. Because on this same evening you also have a chance to spend time with some old drinking buddies. Which would you prefer?"

Silence.

"Maybe that's unfair. I know you don't care much for meetings. Let's try another scene. You're at home now. It's Sunday, and church time rolls around. Would you rather get your tomato plants out? Or, you and Tib have to make a decision. Is your first impulse to talk the issues through, or pray them through? In other words, what's your spiritual condition?"

And I had to admit the truth. Jamie was sensing something. My spiritual health was shaky and getting worse. I guess it showed. I never had been much of an actor.

So that night, into the small hours, Jamie and I talked about the ebb and flow of spiritual vitality. Jamie called this time the beginning of my Walk in the Spirit. The Leap, he said, launched us into the Christian dimension. The Walk was for life. It was on The Walk that each of us came to grips with his own nature.

And then, just as he was yawning and standing up to leave, Jamie asked that question.

He asked it casually. "How close are you staying to the Word, John?"

"Do you mean the Bible? Well ... I hear Scripture read each

Sunday.”

“That’s a start. But do you read the Bible every day, by yourself?”

“No.”

“Then start at once, John. Did you know that most vitamins have to be replenished daily? So does rest. So does muscle tone; your muscles start to deteriorate in three days without exercise.

“Your spirit’s health follows the same law. If you don’t stay close to the Bible, you’ll get spiritually flabby within three days. Then if a problem crops up, you’ll have no spiritual power to meet it with.”

Jamie left. But I was thinking hard. Twice now I had heard the Lord speak about the Bible. Twice He linked His book to the problems I was facing.

I found that I could not forget that visit to Texas or that midnight scene in a small Dutch hotel. It was as if the Lord were saying: The time is here for a new kind of relationship between you and Me. Roll up your sleeves and get to work. He seemed to be urging me to begin by developing a new way of reading the Bible, not the breathless, can’t-lay-it-down experience I had known before, but a more disciplined, day-in, day-out approach.

All right. I would try it.