

HISTORY 13

It was January 1977. I was a 41-year-old 727 captain with a beautiful wife, eight- and nine-year-old daughters in private school, a nice home in Buckhead, two cars, a country club membership, and money in the bank. Deregulation had not yet come to the airline industry, I had recovered from the real estate crunch of 1974, and my shopping center business was prospering. I was bee-bopping through life living the great American dream. As I drove home on that winter evening, I had no idea I was about to have an encounter with the living God.

My testimony was published by the Fellowship of Christian Airline Personnel in their "Trim Tab" in May 1981. It would be redundant to quote the whole article, because much of the experiences have been covered in earlier installments. But I will give you an excerpt, starting with trying to fill a void in my life that C.S. Lewis described as "a God-shaped vacuum":

"(I) started to collect boats, cars, airplanes, and all the material possessions that I thought would fill this void. . . . I became convinced that the key to happiness was in having just a few more possessions and just a little more wealth. My marriage had started to deteriorate because I was neglecting my family almost completely. I was flying weekend trips and working out of town most of the week. I gave Joan every opportunity to divorce me, but the void in her life had been filled by coming to Christ. She was determined to keep her family together and she joined my mother in a prayer campaign for me that had already been going on for 25 years.

In 1974, with several million dollars of apartment construction underway, I was very impressed with my importance and ability. I seriously considered giving up my job with the airline to concentrate on business activities. Fortunately, Joan was able to convince me otherwise, because shortly thereafter, the great real estate crunch of 1974 and 1975 totally wiped out my business."

In "Trim Tab," I blamed market conditions for wiping me out, but my inexperience also played a very large part. Joan knew that I had not been in business long enough to own the yacht and airplane, and she sensed disaster.

But all that was behind me as I drove down Peachtree away from Lenox Square and turned down Stratford Road at around 8:30 p.m. that January evening. I was very satisfied with myself. With some hard work and good luck, I had recovered from '74. My first couple of strip centers were under my belt, and there were several more in the pipeline.

Growing up, the gospel was pounded into me. But even though I believed it was true, I had long since stopped thinking about God. I didn't need Him. I was not a loser; I was a successful guy with my act together. To put it another way, I was cocky and arrogant. It was quiet in the car. The radio was not on. There was no traffic. So I was alone with my thoughts. I was probably thinking about business. Any thoughts of God or church were far from my mind. In fact, it was convenient for me to fly weekends so Joan and my mom wouldn't pressure me to attend church. Suddenly, the silence was broken by an audible voice calling my name.

"Gene."

Get the picture. I'm driving down Stratford Road in Buckhead, I'm cold sober in a very quiet car, and I hear my name called in an audible voice. Maybe even more supernatural was my answer.

"Yes, Lord," I replied instantly without thinking. I answered as naturally as if I knew He was my passenger and I was expecting a conversation. Then He said:

"You have made promises to me since you were 16 and thought you were going to die, and you have never kept any of those promises."

He paused, and I said nothing. Then God said:

"Tonight is your last chance."

Another short pause, and then:

"You think your recent business success is because you pulled yourself up by your bootstraps. It's only because I let you."

End of conversation. The only thing I said was "Yes, Lord." I was probably home within 15 or 20 minutes after this encounter, and I remember sitting down in the bedroom and telling Joan that her prayers had been answered. I don't remember the details of her reaction, but I knew that my mother would be excited. I called her and her only reaction was a very softly spoken, "Praise God."

Later I learned that her reaction was low key because she had known for years that her boys would be saved. My late father-in-law Omar Clayton Mehl was a radiologist, and I am certain that I have never known anyone with a higher IQ than his. Joan tells the story of him asking my mother if she was not worried about my spiritual condition, and her confident answer was, "Oh, no. I accepted God's promise in Proverbs 22:6. I did my part; I trained him up in the way. God said that if I did that, Gene wouldn't depart from it. I am not the least concerned, because God always keeps his promises." Not to judge Omar, because he was a brilliant Bible student, but I don't believe his faith was as

strong as mom's. Even though she knew God would keep his promise, she still had a prayer team reminding Him on a daily basis for more than 20 years.

My mom always told me that God was owed a tithe, so after my telephone conversation with her I told Joan that we needed to start tithing. My income was in the six figures, but I was not surprised when she told me that we (she) had only given \$700 in 1976.

That first day after my conversion experience is still vivid in my mind. I had grown up a Southern Baptist, and it was not unusual for some complete stranger to walk up to you, and ask, "Have you been saved boy?" When Joan was successful in dragging me to church, it was to the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta. I didn't mind going there much because the building is gorgeous, it was always filled with well-scrubbed, successful people, the coffee was good in the Hall of Bishops, and there were interesting people to talk with. And best of all, I didn't have to worry about someone trying to get me saved.

The next day, my first call was to the Cathedral business office. I increased our pledge to a tithe. To say that I was in a state of shock would be an understatement. I was thinking, if I tell non-Christians about this, they'll think I'm nuts. But I knew I wasn't. What happened was not in my imagination. I had to talk with someone. I had become friends with Judson Child who was a Canon at the Cathedral and a jovial fellow who made friends easily. (He later became the Episcopal Bishop of Atlanta—more about him later.) I called Judson and, trying to be as "cool" as possible, said I wanted to meet with him. Continuing the cool charade, I asked how busy he was that day. He gave me a list of meetings that he would be involved in all day long and asked if I had an emergency. I told him no, so he said tomorrow would be a better time. But when Judson asked what I wanted to talk about, I told him that I had a "road to Damascus experience" the night before. Immediately he said, "Gene, that is an emergency. Come over here right now. Judson was among the ultra liberals in the church, but his advice that day was helpful.

The next day, the Cathedral business manager called me to confirm that I had increased my pledge to five figures. I confirmed that I had, and he thanked me. I thought he seemed overly impressed. It was later when I was chairman of the annual stewardship campaign and I was privy to all members giving that I understood why.

I was having breakfast in a restaurant on East Paces Ferry Road in Buckhead a few months later, and Roy Ludwig was teaching a bible study to a group of about six men at a nearby table. I had never met Roy, but I recognized him because he was very visible in real estate circles. He was a partner in Barton & Ludwig until the name was changed to Coldwell Banker after he and his partner sold the company. Roy was teaching Genesis, and I was such a young, naïve Christian that I thought I didn't need any New Testament teaching. After all, I was in Sunday school, BTU, Wednesday night prayer meeting, and vacation bible school, and Ridgecrest in the summer while I was growing

up. I knew all about the New Testament. I needed to catch up on the Old Testament and asked if I could join. Of course the answer was yes, and it didn't take me long to figure out that I didn't know much about either the left or right side of the Bible. Roy played a great part in the early days of Church of The Apostles in Atlanta. He was a teacher for several years until he passed away from melanoma. The founder of the church, Dr. Michael Youssef, said that Roy's theological knowledge was greater than most seminary graduates.

If you give moderate amounts of money to an Episcopal church, there is a very good chance you will be drafted into leadership. I did and I was. My first assignment was serving as a member of the Every Member Canvass (EMC) committee. This committee was responsible for canvassing the congregation to raise funds to cover the budget for the following year. There was some renewal going on in the Cathedral, and we had two classifications of members. There were the regular Christians and the born-again Christians. The "regulars" tolerated us "born agains" I suppose because we weren't judgmental, we gave, and we were willing to do "church work". I was in a meeting with some of both categories, and someone suggested that the meeting be opened with a prayer. The leader, who was a pillar of the church, said we couldn't because we didn't have a prayer book. An elderly lady, who was also a pillar, immediately said; "Let Gene pray. He can pray without a prayer book." I could and I did. She was the same lady who told me that she was tired of hearing so many of us saying that we were new or recent Christians. "You became Christians when you were baptized as infants." I was eight years old when I was baptized. She was a precious lady, but I was never able to convince her that when I was baptized all I got was wet.

A recent poll showed that more than 50 percent of clergy in mainline churches don't believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven. They are Universalists who basically believe that all religions are equal. David Collins was Dean of the Cathedral. He had renewal going on in his own life, and there was charismatic renewal happening in the church. It was a house divided between the "born agains" and the "regulars."

1979 was my second year working on fund raising. We abandoned the EMC title, and called it stewardship. As part of the program, we held a 24-hour vigil to pray for the church. We signed up for 30-minute sessions, and I put my name on the 4:30 p.m. slot. Or so I thought. I mistakenly signed on for 4:30 a.m. Now this baby Christian, who has probably never prayed more than three minutes at one time, is going to do ten times that much. I enlisted Joan to go with me, marked prayers in the prayer book, wrote some, and still thought it would be difficult to fill the time. The fellow praying before us was involved with the charismatics, and was known as a fanatic. (Someone explained that a fanatic is anyone who loves God more than you do.) As we knelt, he got up as if to leave, and we said hello. But instead of leaving, he knelt and said that he wanted to pray with us. He prayed for about 15 minutes, and as he stood up, the pressure was off.

I knew we had enough material to handle the last 15. We thanked him and said goodbye. But he didn't leave, he stood behind us and said; "God has a word for you, Gene." I was very skeptical, but this man laid hands on me and immediately told me something about myself that I had never told anyone, not even my wife. He went on to say that God was going to honor me, and even though I was a new Christian, He had chosen me to be a leader in the church.

A few months later, after I was elected to the chapter (vestry), Judson Child invited me to lunch to ask how I managed to be elected. He couldn't figure who my "constituency" was.

But that's enough for now.

History 14 will be next and last. If you are not a believer, you probably will not be interested in 14. It is going to be strictly about the ups and downs of my walk with the Lord for the past 33 years. It's about Delta pilot Bob Snelling inviting us to talk about stewardship in the Presbyterian Church and the years participating in Presbyterian renewal. It's about the initial terror and the subsequent blessing of substituting for Ken Boa before a large Cathedral Sunday-school class. It's about Dennis Bennett teaching inner healing prayer, and Dr. Charles Stanley going with us to his class. It's about my knee being torn up on the ski slope because I was following Dr. Paul Walker down a closed black-diamond trail, and the surgeons surprise when I showed up for my scheduled surgery, and it wasn't needed. It's about praying with someone and being surprised by it becoming a deliverance session. It's about God speaking through a donkey (me) to come up with the name for Regent University.

But most of all, it will be about the incredible blessing that our God bestowed upon us when He let us be a part of the planning and founding of Church of The Apostles, and the ministry of Leading The Way. I haven't asked Dr. Youssef yet, but I also want to share a little bit about how God miraculously brought a 19-year-old boy out of Egypt, through Lebanon, then Australia, and finally to Atlanta where he founded the great church that worships in that big, beautiful, cathedral-looking structure that sits on I-75 at West Paces Ferry Road.

There will be some who say that I'm trying to build myself up. Believe me; I am a worthless sinner. I am a broken man. I am saved by grace. My goal is to glorify the One who died for me.