

Free at last!

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This is the third in my series of personal story-telling about interesting things which have crossed my path in life, which I believe are worth preserving to forward along to my children and my grandchildren, etc.

These events culminated in 1976, but began in 1972. It was my honor and pleasure to serve as the Director of the Christian Life Conference at the Presbyterian Conference in Montreat, North Carolina. My tenure with that conference went from about 1975 to 1982. It was a four-day conference on the weekend closest to the Fourth of July annual celebrations, with an emphasis on things for families; on evangelism and on Christian growth, development and discipleship to serve where ever the conferees were in their local churches. These things culminated at the conference in 1976.

The background of this story relates to the infamous burglary in 1972 of the National Democratic Party Headquarters on the 6th floor of the Watergate Hotel and Office Building by five men. They were accused of the trespass on behalf of the Re-Election Committee of President Richard M. Nixon. This bold faux pas grabbed worldwide attention, resulting in seven men being indicted for the burglary or being indicted as co-conspirators, and President Nixon becoming the first incumbent President to be an unindicted co-conspirator. Indictment means there is to be a trial, but an unindicted co-conspirator is thought to be responsible in the criminal charges, but a criminal trial is not ordered.

Four of those indicted were convicted and served sentences in Federal Penitentiary. One of them was Charles (Chuck) Colson, who bore nickname on President Nixon's Whitehouse Staff as the Hatchet Man! On behalf of the President, he addressed many issues, which were difficult or unpleasant matters. He was a man whom many people categorized as mean and cunning!

He pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice, without contest of a trial. He was sentenced to one to three years. He served seven months at the

Maxwell Federal Prison near Montgomery, Alabama, and paid a \$5,000 fine. He was released in 1974. He was a different man! In 1973, Chuck Colson had made a commitment to Jesus Christ. Subsequently, his time often was spent reflecting those Christian values with other inmates, with many positive results.

Chuck Colson was *free at last* from those humanistic and political characteristics, which had previously ruled his life and his system of values. It was quite to the contrary. Chuck Colson was a man whose message had an unusual attraction to it. His new life was shared with an amazing number of people, particularly relating to prisoners.

Prison Fellowship was founded in 1976. Chuck's vision was to create a Christian ministry to reach out to incarcerated men and women, so that they might realize the same life-renewing changes he'd had as a born again Christian! It was a non-profit organization, which sought to be funded totally through voluntary gifts.

On the crest of his new notoriety as a Christian witness, there developed an occasion for the Platform Director of our Presbyterian Christian Life Conference in Montreat, Mr. Robert (Bob) G. Fenn, to meet Chuck and to issue an invitation to be one of the six main platform speakers at the conference in July, 1976. We were filled with excitement and appreciation of God's Providence that Chuck accepted the invitation to speak at the conference!

Obviously, his fame and public persona was a dominant presence at the conference, in a very positive way. The evening when he spoke to the audience of almost 2,000 people, most of them were obviously moved by the soul-stirring words of this renewed man's expressions. As he concluded the address, the audience was in almost stunned silence, contemplating the insightful words of Chuck's challenging statements.

Bob Fenn rose to thank Chuck, who quietly took a seat on the front row. Bob, moved with great emotion, explained to the audience that he felt led to allow them to make an offering to his just started Prison Fellowship. Because this conference was financed by conferees paying a fee, there were not provisions to receive offerings. None of the usual offering plates were available.

Bob looked back stage at me, and directed that I find a box to put on the communion table in front of the stage. Bob explained that anyone who wanted to contribute was invited to walk from their seats, down the aisles to the front to deposit gifts in the box. The audience surged forward and crowded the front of the stage! It was exciting. The sort of embarrassing element to me was that the only cardboard box I could find was a toilet tissue box! Well, it just proves that God can use anything and any one!

Quite an amazing pile of bills and checks accumulated in that ignoble box. We carried it over to the conference center's lodging rooms, where about a half dozen of us counted the offering on the floor, including Chuck! When it finally was totaled, it was about \$7,500!

What stunned us when the total was announced was that, Chuck Colson started crying profusely! After a few moments, allowing Chuck to gain his composure, he told us a story.

Just as he was preparing to depart the airport for this speaking engagement, his financial man met him to say that the funding for the newly started Prison Fellowship was floundering so much that they most likely would need close the offices when Chuck returned. It would be a failed ministry! With great glee and joy, Chuck said that, this offering would allow them to continue!

Obviously the offering gave enough financial breathing room to enable the ministry to get onto its feet. Many people know the rest of the story. Chuck Colson's ministry through Prison Ministry is one of the bright stars of effective evangelism in America. It was our honor to be a part of its getting going. Chuck Colson graduated to heaven April 21, 2012. ! Praise be to God!