

DR. GARY STREIT - TESTIMONY

I used to testify a lot. In fact, when I was a teenager in a small Southern Nazarene Church, I testified every Wednesday night. This had nothing to do, mind you, with my being overly spiritual, but had everything to do with peer pressure. Everybody testified every prayer meeting night! If you didn't, you go looks and glances from all quarters and immediately got added to at least 5 different prayer lists! That's what you call accountability.

The power of a testimony is great. In Scripture we read that "They overcame him (Satan) by the Blood of the Lamb and by the words of their testimony."

Unlike many of you, I did not grow up in a Christian home. My father was killed when I was 2 and I, along with 3 older brothers, went to live with our grandmother. She was quite skeptical of the church, but as she often said, "Leaned toward the Methodist." We were never encouraged to attend church, although I sometimes tagged along with a friend to VBS where I learned the Lord's Prayer, John 3:16, and the 23rd Psalm.

I always thrived in school, both academically and socially. I was a joiner – participated in everything and by my junior year in high school I had a plan! I, along with several of my good friends, was going to finish high school in a blaze of glory and head to the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg to seek, not only our education, but our fortunes as well.

That plan was short-lived.! What happened to change so many things for me?

In the fall of that year, I was introduced to a small group of people who, in turn, introduced me to a Person who changed my life.

A cousin of mine invited me to go with her to what she called a Young People's Meeting at a church in town to which she had been invited just a few months earlier.

I was more than mildly shocked when we arrived at what was not a church building at all, but rather the annex to Jones' Funeral Home. My cousin quickly explained that this was just a temporary arrangement and that these people had plans to build a real church. No stained glass, no carpet, no organ, no choir, no S.S. rooms – just a plain open area with crude benches and a handful of friendly people. This was my introduction to the Church of the Nazarene.

I was immediately stuck with the obvious concern for others that I saw modeled in the lives of this small congregation. Not only was everybody there each time a service was held, but it seemed as if each one brought a car load of boys and girls along.

A fine young pastor family served this church, having come from Nazarene Theological Seminary several years earlier with the promise that he would stay as pastor until this home mission effort was established and had a church building in a permanent location. I suspect that he had no idea that this commitment would keep him there 9 years to not

only pastor and build a church, but also to teach school in order to support his wife and two young sons.

I learned later that this energetic, promising pastor had gotten numerous calls during these years to pastor well-established congregations. He and his wife took a special interest in me, and on my 3rd Sunday night visit to the church, I responded to the invitation while singing “Where He Leads Me, I Will Follow,” to come forward to kneel at a make-shift altar to invite Jesus Christ into my life.

It seemed as if everyone in the church followed me down the short aisle that night to help me “pray through.”

One dear lady, Sister Myrtle Miller, hovered right up close to me and began some serious praying. Suddenly, in a determined tone of voice she yelled, “Save him, Lord, and send him to Africa!”

I must confess that at that point I had my doubts about these people. Africa – that sounded like a long way from Winchester, Virginia.

Fortunately for me, this wise pastor explained to me, as he drove me home from church, that actually this wonderful lady was wishing and praying for me what she considered to be God’s very best, his highest call – a call to full time missionary service. By the way, there was one other seeker at the altar that night in the Jones Funeral Home annex – a 6-year-old boy. I’ll tell you about him in just a bit.

From that night on, I, along with the few other teenagers were thoroughly disciplined by this pastor and his wife. Youth rallies, regional activities, revivals, and youth camps served to strengthen my ties to the Church and to the Kingdom. They often talked about the importance of a Nazarene college as being the only acceptable choice for Nazarene young people to consider. They took us to hear the college’s traveling choirs and ministry teams, and even drove 5 of us, at their own expense, 650 miles to visit the Nazarene college that the Virginia District supported at that time.

Imagine my disappointment to discover that this school was not only not in Williamsburg, but it was not very big and certainly not well known. Remember, my plans had been different – The Ivy League for me!

I am convinced that the direction my life has taken is, in large part, the result of the love and concern shown to me and the prayers offered on my behalf by this Godly pastor family during the two years following my conversion.

Yes, I decided to go to that Nazarene college, and because of that decision, I met a young woman from North Carolina who was to become my wife. Christ became, not only my Savior, but also Lord of my life during my time on that Nazarene college campus. During those college days, I was really impressed with the ministry of the faculty and administration there who made such an impact on the lives of students. The seeds, of course, were being planted for my own involvement in Christian Higher Education.

I marvel at the goodness of the Lord in my life and have been aware of His definite leadership and guidance. I thank Him for those who obeyed Christ's call to plant the Church of the Nazarene in my city where years later I would be confronted with the claims of the Gospel under the guidance of yet another obedient servant.

For thirty years, my life has gone a different direction because of a decision made on that Sunday night at a make-shift altar in a highly unlikely rented building with just a handful of wonderful Christian people. Robert Frost captured this truth when he wrote,

" Two roads diverged in a wood

I took the one less traveled by and

That has made all the difference."

By the way, you remember I mentioned that there was another seeker at the altar that night, a 6 year-old boy. Well he happened to be the preacher's younger son, Jimmy. As was the custom in that church, each seeker stood up from the altar and gave a testimony on the spot as to what the Lord had done for him or her. I, a 16 year old, stood and said that I had asked Jesus into my life. Six-year-old Jimmy stood and confidently said that Jesus had saved him and called him to be a missionary doctor. Well, everyone smiled, and I remember hearing Sister Miller's voice say right out loud, "Lord, make it so!"

Imagine the emotion that I felt just a few years ago when this little boy, Jimmy, now Dr. James Radcliffe, Director of Medical Missions in Papua New Guinea was interviewed live from his mission station by Bryan Gumbel of the *Today Show*. All of America was introduced that morning to this skilled surgeon who, along with me, felt God's call that brisk October night at a make-shift altar in a home mission church meeting in the annex of Jones' Funeral Home.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am a debtor! A debtor to Christ who changed my life – a debtor to the Church for providing a ministry which introduced me to the Gospel and provided supportive programming to promote my spiritual growth and development – a debtor to a good and Godly couple who gave themselves to God's call to serve and minister – a debtor to Christian Higher Education for providing me with an excellent education which has well equipped me to earn a living, but more importantly, to live a life. A debtor – to give as I have received!

And so you see, my call to Nazarene Bible College began a long time ago when I put first things first and said the big "yes" to Christ.

As I walk around this beautiful campus, I am reminded that we all drink today from wells that we did not dig here in this place. Just as G.B. and Audrey Williamson obeyed the Lord in founding this work, we all continue in their train of obedience.