



# GROWING UP CHRISTIAN

*Searching for a Reasonable Faith  
in the Heartland of America*

*by*

*Stanley D. Williams, Ph.D.*

*with Observations and a Post-Script*

*by*

*Pamela S. Williams*



# Foreword

**S**TAN WILLIAMS, AGE three, opens his memoir moping around the house, restless, bored with feeding the lazy, fat squirrels in his backyard. Even then, he knew this was not the way things ought to be: “Adventure” was already calling.

So he lifted the latch on the gate, stepped out of his yard and onto the sidewalk. His three year old legs began an exodus to the promised land of the Detroit Zoo. Only 9 blocks away, through city traffic, past merchant stands, storefronts and hundreds of hurrying bi-peds, awaited sleek leopards, lumbering elephants and shiny cobras. Pumping his stubby little legs, Stanley put the fat squirrels behind and pressed on to the higher call of face to face communion with animal glory.

The quest started without incidence. But after turning a corner or two, he stepped off the curb and was startled when an alert motorist slammed his brakes. The well-meaning motorist gathered up the lad, placed him on the sidewalk where he then had to choose whether to help the tyke adventure on to the glorious Detroit Zoo or return to the home of the fat squirrels. The squirrels won out.

Thwarted in this initial quest, Stan’s (and, later his wife Pam’s) longing for adventure, for spiritual reality, resembles the three year old’s zoo quest. Time and again, they dared to step out in faith, confident that God was guiding. Time and again, they’d be thwarted by visionless church leaders, depressed by congregational indifference, angered by twisted denominational priorities and tempered in their enthusiasm by their own musing about the will of God.



When the church he sought to serve had nothing to offer, Stan's talents were recognized by major corporations and his professional career flourished. His occupation would change; his vocation, not at all. His call to strengthen the plausibility of the Christian faith remained strong.

Stan Williams and I met in late 1978 when I began managing a Logos Christian bookstore on the corner of Telegraph and Eureka in Taylor, Michigan. Stan was one of those customers who would rather talk than buy. I was one of those managers who wanted the store to be an outpost filled with those kinds of customers. We were in the same age cohort, both low church, evangelical, Bible-only Protestants. Much of our conversation centered on the sad state of evangelical churches.

Stan wasn't subtle in his complaints: mopey worship services, unwelcoming congregations, mediocre music, boring, humorless, culturally irrelevant sermons, inane financial priorities, and a few lazy, fat ushers squirreling away nuts from the collection so Pastor Wannabebig could erect super church warehouses that were supposed to impress and attract the people whom he had failed to reach with his mopey services, mediocre music, etc.

Stan had seen a lot. At times, he resembled a highly discriminating suitor poring over his ecclesiastical dance card. He'd look down at the card to comment on all the fellowships and churches with whom he had tangoed, waltzed and rumbaed. Sometimes he seemed to prefer talking about churches to joining one.

But I didn't mind commiserating. After all, I was so dissatisfied that a few friends and I started a house church that we closed in about two years because we remained dissatisfied. And, though I attended church regularly, I had never actually signed up as a member of one until I was asked to pastor one years later.

I think I can say that we both thought the right church needed to be invented not discovered. Neither of us, I suspect, thought there was a divinely established Church to be discovered. So we had to adapt one as we went along sharing the gospel. Of course, inventors fail more often than they succeed. They are always fidgeting with one thing or another. Stan was no different.



Stan's restlessness was creative, a divine discontent. His expectations were not extravagant. They were legitimate because they were formed by his deep love of Scripture and his personal acquaintance with the God who promises the new wine of renewal and revival. Stan knew the reality of the wine; his problem was with wineskins.

- How do you sustain and distribute those moments of grace?
- How do you fashion a church structure that reliably transmits the Faith to the next generation without inflexible indoctrination?
- How do you fashion a church that meets the challenges of the changing culture by so fearing compromise that one separates from the world or by so lusting for relevance that one accommodates the faith so the church ends up indistinguishable from the world?
- How do you create a church that preserves the awe-inspiring, almost traumatizing, sense of the sacred and yet maintains the warmth of a family gathered for Thanksgiving meal?

**T**HIS WAS STAN'S problem of wineskins. If wine isn't your spirit of choice then how about fire? How long can you keep the fire safely ablaze, serving hearth and home, without a functioning fireplace? How can the work of the Spirit achieve its goal if God's divinely ordained structure is ignored? These are the questions fermenting in Stan's soul and bubbling up through the pages of this book. .

Watching friends live out their experiments in faith can be a source of great joy or sorrow. This memoir shows the drama of wagering on one's experiment in living. Christian faith is never blind faith in the sense of being irrational. But it often has to operate blind, i.e., we don't know what God is doing and yet we must act faithfully. Stan and Pam more than once put their life and careers on the line in pursuit of what they believed, rightly or wrongly, was God's will.

Stan and I never spent a lot of social time together. Years could go by without a word. That's the way it was in late 1998 when I received a postcard out of the blue from Stan informing me that he and Pam had come into full communion with the Catholic Church. My first thought



was, “Great. Welcome.” My second was, “Uh oh.” A band of gypsies had just decided to work for IBM or some other Fortune 500. Culture clash. I’d predict pain. Stan’s restlessness, creativity, high expectations seemed a bad fit. Then there was his demand that church leaders should be quickly responsive to human need and cultural change. Yes, I predicted pain.

**B**UT STAN WAS not the man I met in 1978 or grew to know in 1982. Christ had been working his salvation in Stan through those years. Stan had remained faithful and growing. He had remained faithful in marriage, fathering and had already worked the Fortune 500 routine. The trajectory toward Rome was set long before I met him, wired by his intense hunger for the Church Jesus prayed for and his unwillingness to settle for imitations. *Growing Up Christian* tells the story.

— Al Kresta



# Prologue: Raising a Red Flag

**I**T WAS 1960, and a hot, sweltering summer night. I was 13, in the midst of adolescence and attending an event that would be a sea change in my peculiar journey of faith.

Mom had me in a white shirt, tie, and creased, wool trousers. I matched Dad's getup except for the tie—his was wider and more colorful. Dad always wore his Sunday best...even to cut the lawn or take out the garbage. Not to be outdone, Mom was arrayed in her best flower-print, polyester dress and velvet hat with a fake flower pinned to the side and a fishnet veil pulled over her eyes.

We weren't in a fancy place, however. We were in a sawdust revival tent, and my goal was to get through another evening of fist-pounding, foot-stomping, hell-fire preaching without my Mom cuffing me for not being the ideal Christian kid.

I sat next to my 8-year old sister, Hope Ellen, her blonde locks in a curl hanging over her fancy Easter Sunday dress. She had learned, through my mistaken exploits, how to sit still, look pretty, and get Mom to beam at her.

The evangelist's lean face was red with emotion and wet from perspiration. After mopping his brow and neck with his white handkerchief, he'd wave it at his audience—trying both to air dry it in the humid August heat, and reinforce the point of his sermon: Our surrender to Communism if we elected John Fitzgerald Kennedy, a Catholic, to the U.S. presidency.



**W**E WERE SPENDING several weeks of vacation at our small cabin on the Free Methodist Church campgrounds, hidden in the woods just East of Jackson, Michigan. The campgrounds consisted of about 40-acres of woods on which were located several hundred lots organized along dirt roads and paths. Some lots contained small cabins--I recall helping my dad build ours--and on other lots trailers were parked, or tents erected. In the middle of camp was a large barn-like "tabernacle" that seated perhaps a 1,000 people on unfinished pine pews below bare hanging light bulbs pulsing with the beat of a hidden diesel generator. Meals were taken in a large WWII military surplus Quonset hut<sup>1</sup> dining hall, with food served up on compartmentalized metal mess trays. Each day of Family Camp was filled with Bible studies, youth meetings, prayer meetings, and swimming via a bus ride to nearby Gilletts Lake. The days concluded with a two-hour singing and preaching service in the tabernacle.

On a few particular nights in 1960, however, there was competition a few miles outside the camp on Jackson Road, near the Dome Ice Cream parlor. There, a traveling evangelist, Dr. Harvey H. Springer, had dumped a pile of sawdust next to the main road into Jackson, erected a modest tent over it, put up a canvas sign, and was preaching--not about God or Christ--but against Catholicism.

Historically (I'm old enough to feel the need to explain my childhood in such terms), General Dwight D. Eisenhower was completing his second term as President, and the Cold War was hot. Senator Joseph McCarthy<sup>2</sup> had died several years before, but McCarthyism's "Red" fear was very much alive, thanks to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's rhetorical threat to take over the United States.

Khrushchev was reported to have said, "We will bury you." To which my very Christian, evangelical, Bible teaching, daughter-of-missionaries, mother would passionately respond, "I'd rather be dead than red."

She'd say this, and then ask if I didn't agree with her. I never did

---

1 A Quonset hut is a corrugated galvanized steel building where the cross section forms a semicircle.

2 Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957) was a Wisconsin Senator from 1947 until his death. He became infamous for his demagogic tactics of hunting down Communist sympathizers through the public Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954. His destruction of lives, companies and careers through public insinuation and his inability to substantiate his claims resulted in his censure by the United States Senate that same year.



know how to answer. Since she was the one that first taught me about Jeremiah's prophecies to the Judean king, Zedekiah, that it would be better to be alive and a slave in Nineveh, than dead and a snack for vultures in Judah. Yeah, yeah, yeah! I knew a lot about the Bible back then. But you have to remember, I was raised an Evangelical, not a Catholic... and Evangelicals go to Sunday School, every Sunday, all year long, their whole lives. We learned all about the stories and their meaning in the Old and New Testament. Hezekiah! We could even recite the books of the Bible—backwards.

It was the beginning of the 1960's—a sea change for American culture. The Kennedy-Nixon campaign of 1960 occurred during the pontificate of John XXIII, and, here in America, Catholics were busy having large families. We lived near the Divine Child parish in Dearborn, Michigan, and it seemed that every other household in the neighborhood was Catholic with 6-12 kids.

Some Protestants (like my mother) were afraid that Catholicism would take over America--not by killing people (like the Communists had threatened) but by having babies who would eventually allow Catholics to dominate the democratic process. She had not yet heard of the contraceptive pill, which would be made widely available to the public in a few years. Nor did she know that Catholic women would swarm to use the pill against the Church's prohibition. Mom might have been delighted had she known what the future held.

**B**ACK IN THE sawdust revival tent, the perspiring Dr. Harvey Springer was waving his white handkerchief, and preparing yet another, but larger prop. I'll never forget the image or the "logic."

He had been railing, ranting, and raging for some time against Catholicism and Communism. The parallels were unmistakable (to him): (a) both institutions started with the letter "C" and ended in "ism"—suffixes that, by the standards of the English language, identified evil ideologies; (b) both Moscow and the Vatican were determined to take over the world, one by death, the other by having babies; and (c) both were in league with the devil--Communism outlawed God (neat trick), and Catholicism was the sinister front for the anti-Christ. Americans should fear both, he told us. "The facts spoke for themselves..." and my Mom, bless her rather-dead-than-red heart, joined the ever-louder "Amen!" chorus.



Then, it came time for the big climax, the coup-de-grace, the clincher. Springer selected two, good-looking pre-teen children from the audience, and led them onto the small wooden platform on which he stomped back and forth. The kids looked like shills—they were dressed, brushed, and combed for the part. Yes, in addition to knowing lots about the Bible, I was a cynic. I recall the girl was wearing a pretty white dress, with a bow in her curled blonde hair, like she had just posed for a shampoo ad. I really don't remember the boy. Hormones were in the process of permanently altering my interests.

Springer had the kids stand next to each other facing the audience, hands at their sides, idealistic smiles distorting their faces (they had done this before). Then with great pathos he intoned: "Men and women of America. I am warning you with God as my witness. If you elect John Fitzgerald Kennedy to the Presidency this is what will happen." And suddenly out of nowhere (okay, so I was distracted) he produced a HUGE red communist flag, and, standing behind the kids, draped it over their shoulders like a warm blanket on a cold night, pulling it tight around their necks, leaving only their faces staring sadly (as if on cue) at the audience like a mad Normal Rockwell painting.

The image was complete. The memory indelible.

My mother acquired one of the Harvey H. Springer, D.D., Th.D. pamphlets, CATHOLICISM IN AMERICA (see the on-line picture gallery), wrote my name on it and slipped it into my Memories Chest. I found it after I got married when she gave me the chest full of (her) memories from my childhood. The cover, under my name in my Mom's handwriting, pictures two dark clouds overshadowing a map of the United States. One cloud is labeled "COMMUNISM" and the other contains a crude drawing of John Kennedy with the label "CATHOLICISM" written across it. Inside, many paragraphs are underlined in pencil, and noted in my mother's handwriting are directions to "READ," and "Modern Day Persecution" detailing how the Catholic Church in Columbia, Latin America, in cooperation with the government was killing Protestant missionaries, putting nuns in public schools in Ohio, and how Kennedy was taking orders from the Vatican.

Springer died at age 60, six years after my exposure to him. He was known as the "cowboy" preacher and was a former Communist before his late conversion to Christianity. I do not know if he is related to the infamous TV rebel rouser, Jerry Springer, but there was a similarity in



their style and affinity for the sensational.

At 13, my mind wasn't on theological inconsistencies or political tyranny. Springer's stage theater did hold my attention, but I found Springer's pomposity and manipulation disgusting. Thankfully, I hid my feelings, because my head still ached from the last slap to the head I had sustained. Besides, Russia didn't sound like a good place to ask for asylum.

While I didn't believe Springer for a moment, my parents did and so it seemed did the rest of the audience—there were gleeful cheers, and boisterous affirmations while the stomping raised tiny clouds of sawdust. My mother indeed, much of her life afterward, would proclaim out of the blue: "I'd rather be dead than red."

Mom, the oldest child of adventurous American Missionaries, was born in India, the land of elephants, leopards, and cobras. She frowned on my own adventures as a kid, but I must have been born with her parents' persevering, damn-the-elephants-leopards-and-cobras spirit. And as she wrote in my babybook, I was "good natured, quick tempered, and a plunger."