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Colson, 'Mr. Tough Guy,' Finds Christ

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CHARLES W. COLSON
... a prayer for skeptics

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In some ways, the story is as startling as any of the other startling revelations which have come out of Watergate.

Charles W. Colson, who was "Mr. Tough Guy" in the Nixon White House, has found Christ.

"I have found in my own life the relationship with Christ," Colson explained.

"I think I realize now," he said, "that your abilities as an individual are much more limited than I believed them to be before and, if you have a relationship with God, that enables you to call upon him for the strength that you otherwise try to summon out of one miserable body . . ."

From an intense religious experience, he now feels "a great inner serenity, a great relief in a sense, really a new life that, in a way, changes your whole attitude about why you're here and what you're doing while you're here. And it's a great thrill."

Colson can practically hear them laughing all over Washington. The skeptics

remember his famous campaign promise to his White House staff: "I would walk over my grandmother if necessary."

This is the same guy, they recall, who was dreaming up nasty political tactics for his President, the same who was scared a few months ago by the possibility of indictment by the Watergate grand jury, who is still under that cloud.

Cynics ask: Who is he trying to kid? Chuck Colson, evenly and without any malice in his voice, promises to pray for them.

"Someone asked me last week," he said, "whether people wouldn't say I was hiding behind God to escape from the Watergate. My answer to them was, if someone wants to say that, I'll pray for them. That's all I can say."

One Christian who does not doubt the sincerity of Colson's new religious commitment is Sen. Harold Hughes, the liberal Democrat from Iowa, who intends to leave public office next year for full-time service as a religious lay worker.

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Hughes was skeptical himself when he first heard about Colson from a colleague in the prayer group movement. "I frankly said I don't believe it, in all honesty," the senator recalled.

Now Hughes and Colson are brothers in Christian love. They pray together and counsel one another.

"The very fact that Chuck Colson and myself, who represent opposite ends of the political spectrum, have established this bond in Christ," Hughes said, "is, I think, the miracle of Christ itself. It has altered both our lives."

When Colson was first suggested as an added member of their small prayer group, Hughes and the other members questioned him closely, measuring the depth of his new commitment. He passed their scrutiny.

"Cynics can say anything about a man's religious experience," Hughes remarked. "They said it about me. They'll say it about him. That doesn't change the fact that it's real. It happens to men and women in the best of times and it happens to them in the worst of times. But, whenever it happens, it alters their way of life. Chuck Colson is a new man in Jesus Christ. That's all there is to it."

These recent months of Watergate have not been the best of times for Colson. When he left the White House last winter after four years as a top presidential adviser, the prospects for his new law firm seemed very bright. But as the scandals of Watergate gathered steam, Colson spent more and more time fencing with bad headlines and investigators. In August, he was notified that he was a target in the grand jury investigation of the Ellsberg psychiatrist burglary. The outcome is still unknown.

Colson will not discuss Watergate directly or his own legal problems, partly because he thinks any remarks would sound self-serving. He did not seek public attention for his religious experience and he speaks guardedly about it. It came to notice two weeks ago when reporters spotted him entering the White House.

Why was he there? they demanded to know. Was he seeing the President? Was he lobbying for the Teamsters union? No, said the press office, Colson was attending the prayer breakfast.

"I consider it personal and private," he said at the outset of an interview. "On the other hand, I'm not ashamed to talk about it."

The traumatic events which have dogged him in recent months have, doubtless, contributed to his new religious focus. He acknowledges as much.

"Anytime you're in a serious personal crisis," he said, "you are bound to take a good look at yourself and take stock of things, to think about your values and what's important in life. I hope it doesn't mean that to find a spiritual relationship someone has to endure a terrible crisis. That happens to be the case, I think, with Harold Hughes. It's probably the case with myself. But it isn't the case with others."

Colson is 42 years old now, a bit thinner than in his White House days, perhaps because he is smoking cigarettes again (though they are rationed by his secretary). His law office, a block from the White House, has a lean, modern look.

Whatever explains it, his religious search started back in March, well before there was any public suggestion that Colson was in trouble. "It was before Watergate became the issue it be-

came," he said. "I suppose that anticipates some of the cynical reaction."

Colson was visiting an old friend in Boston, Tom Phillips, president of Raytheon Co., which is a Colson & Shapiro client. Like Colson, Phillips is a man who scrambled up the career ladder and satisfied an enormous ambition, only to find something missing at the top.

"When I met him this spring," Colson said, "he was just a totally different human being than I had known before. We got talking and Tom told me of his own experiences and I was terribly interested in them."

In particular, Phillips read aloud from a book by the British philosopher C. S. Lewis entitled, "Mere Christianity." It is an intellectual's testament of faith, an argument against all the obstacles of modern skepticism. Colson and his wife, Patty, went off for a week on the Maine coast and he read the book over and over.

Among other things, the book speaks of "the greatest sin" of egotism, letting personal ambition dominate your life. A year ago, Colson expressed that self-absorbed pride when he told an interviewer:

"I've always known all my life exactly what I wanted to accomplish. Just about everything I've ever set out to do, I've done."

By his own words, he was a bright young hot-shot on the make. Now he sees himself differently—a much smaller person in the grand scheme of things:

"You can't really follow Christ and the teachings of Christ if you put yourself in the position where your own pride, your own ego, is driving you to do things to prove how great you are."

He and his friend talked a lot about it and prayed together. Colson underwent a personal revelation, too personal he feels to describe publicly. But Hughes likened Colson's experience to the conversion of Saul, the tax collector, on the road to Damascus.

"It's a matter of coming to a point of acceptance and, once you do, it's a very simple thing," Colson said. "But it's a very difficult thing in our society because, first of all, we tend to pooh-poooh people who talk about religion. It isn't necessarily the most fashionable thing in the world. I think there are a lot of people who are embarrassed about their own feelings and also intellectually we create all sorts of obstacles in our society to people finding a relationship with Christ."

Colson speaks tentatively on the subject, but clearly he believes, like Hughes, that he is now in harmony with a greater power that guides the world. Since his experience, his life has been filled with mysterious coincidences, too strong to be coincidences, he believes.

Old friends—even old drinking buddies and political combatants—have approached him and quoted Scriptures, revealing religious bonds which none of them realized were there. Colson has visited the White House frequently, yet it was not until the morning of the prayer breakfast that reporters picked it up and questioned him.

"I really believe God works through people in ways each of us do not realize and cannot comprehend," he explained.

His new life involves a new perspective on the power of government, where he served off and on for 18 years:

"If you accept the fact that each individual lives forever, that there is a life hereafter and the individual lives forever, then you recognize that states and even civilizations last at best for a few generations or maybe several centuries, then you realize that the state, whether it's the government or the ruling political forces, is nothing compared to one individual."

But what about himself and his own role in political combat? Or his reputation as the impresario of "dirty tricks"?

"One of my really very skeptical questions," Colson said, "was: you can't possibly survive in politics because, when the other guy hits you, you've got to hit him back. Tom said, 'No, if you put your faith in God, your cause will prevail if it should prevail.'"

"And you've got to put your trust in other things than simply retaliating when you're hit. The game of politics is fight and fight back, but maybe the game of politics is better played if one trusts in the rightness of his cause, if indeed your cause is right. If you have a faith in a higher power, then you're going to realize that you can't necessarily win that particular combat with your own hands."

That represents an enormous change of view from the Colson who used to bombard his White House colleagues with memos on how to get political enemies. Some of those old enemies are probably unconvinced.

"I don't really think the label of being the White House tough guy was a fair one, but I accept it," Colson said. "You know, I don't believe any human being is beyond personal redemption if he has the will for it, even assuming the given of being a tough guy."

As for his past activities and the potential for legal troubles, Colson said he is stoic about both, unable to change them.

"I don't want to get into it other than to say that it (his religious experience) probably would have changed my values and, therefore, things that I did or didn't do while in government," Colson said. "I don't want to get into the business of second-guessing how I might have been. If we weren't in the environment we're in right now in Washington, I'd probably get into it, but it would look self-serving."

Colson's spiritual awakening may not remedy any of his problems with the Watergate grand jury. But it does satisfy one group, the four men who meet with him regularly for prayer at Harold Hughes' home.