

# Colson's Religious Experience:

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When Charles W. Colson left the Federal Courthouse here Friday after being sentenced to prison for his part in the Watergate scandals, he looked, with his furrowed brow and slightly disheveled hair, like a little boy about to cry. He also looked, with his horn-rimmed glasses and sober expression, a little like an owl.

When he said, "I've committed my life to Jesus Christ," many of those who heard him were not sure whether they were listening to a guileless, childlike believer or a wise old bird who might be putting them on. Was it reality or a high-class con job?

Their confusion was deepened two sentences later when he said, "What happened today was the Lord's will and the Court's will, and, of course, I accept that fully." Still alive in their memories was Mr. Colson's reputation as the White House tough guy who would "walk over my own grandmother" to re-elect President Nixon.

## Unreal-Sounding Words

To the large segment of society that has just about snapped free of the religious roots that once went deep in American life, the words Friday sounded unreal. To the 40 million evangelical, or Bible-oriented Christians in the country, however—even those still uncertain as to the validity of Mr. Colson's experience—the words were a playback of one of their most familiar Scriptures:

"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (II Corinthians, v. 17.)

Mr. Colson, closely supported by a small but active prayer group in Washington that includes Senator Harold E. Hughes, Democrat of Iowa, and Republican Albert H. Quie, Republican of Minnesota, has for several months proclaimed this as his experience.

## Statement by Hughes

Only yesterday in an address to Presbyterian evangelists in Louisville, Ky., Senator Hughes was quoted by United Press International as saying, "I want to say to any of you that if there is a question in your mind that Mr. Colson does not believe in the word of God and Jesus Christ and that he is not willing to lay down his life for it, he is dead wrong."

Meanwhile, however, an increasingly skeptical world, in-

cluding many among those identifying themselves as Christians, has found it difficult to believe in such change.

The issue, of course, is thousands of years old, and men have argued, and warred, over it.

The evangelical Christian believes that man is separated from God by sin and is spiritually dead. According to this belief, man can be reconciled with God only through acceptance of and trust in the death upon the cross of Jesus Christ, recognized as the Son of God sent for this purpose. Forgiveness of sins and reconciliation, to the evangelical, is a free gift of God that cannot be earned.

## Forgiveness of Sins

Numerous passages of the Bible are cited as support for this belief. Among the best known is John iii, 16-17: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved."

Further, and driving directly to the Colson case, the evangelical Christian believes that when a person accepts Jesus Christ as his Saviour—that is, asks for and receives forgiveness of his sins—that person embarks on a new life as his spirit is touched and made alive by the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity or godhead along with the Father and the Son.

This is the essence of the evangelical belief, based in large part on the account in chapter 3 of the gospel according to John of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. In that account, Jesus said, "I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

This rebirth, the evangelical believes, results in the life of Christ being lived in every believer through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer.

This conviction was the motivation for a comment by one of Mr. Colson's closest Christian friends, Mr. Quie, after the sentencing Friday. "He has Christ in him" and he will be all right, Mr. Quie said to reporters.

As for the future, Christian

and secular communities alike are waiting to see if the reported change in Mr. Colson's life is revealed in his conduct and work.

Many of the nation's evangelical Christians are still smarting from what they felt was a betrayal through Watergate by some in the Nixon Administration, including the President himself. The President and some of his colleagues were given to the use of "God words" in speeches and remarks; many were also frequent churchgoers; the President himself befriended such leaders as the Rev. Billy Graham, the evangelist. This had

caused many Christians, many in Middle America, to rally to Mr. Nixon and his Administration, as sort of the church's representative.

The release of the White House transcripts of Presidential conversations caused many of them to rethink this loyalty and large numbers backed away, at least to a position of neutrality, from what they perceived to be a lack of fruit in a professed believer's life ("He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit"—John xv, 5). Therefore, they are anxious about what will unfold in the Colson story.

They know that the Bible, which most of them take to be the inspired word of God, calls for total truthfulness and honesty on the part of the followers of Jesus. They place great stock in the 51st Psalm, in which David repents of his adultery with Bathsheba and says in the sixth verse, "Behold; thou desirest truth in the inward parts."

What will this mean to the Watergate case? This is the central question to the average American who may be giving little thought to the condition of individual souls. Will he who seemed to figure so

prominently at so many critical junctures in the twisting Watergate road tell all?

In fact, Mr. Colson summarized the gleeful thoughts of many Presidential critics when he said Friday, "I'm sure there are guys in the White House sweating."

## 'Speaking Every Man Truth'

The evangelical position in this situation seems to be exemplified in these two passages from the bible:

"Lying lips are abomination to the Lord: But they that deal truly are his delight"—proverbs xii, 22.

"Wherefore putting away ly-

ing, speak every man truth with his neighbor"—Ephesians iv, 25.

To the evangelical, then, it would appear that Mr. Colson must respond truthfully to every question asked of him. He himself said it this way Friday:

"I do not intend to be an advocate. I'm not going to try to frame a case. I'm sure there are guys in the White House sweating, but I'm not going to testify that way. I've made a commitment to Christ and I really believe the only commandment I have to follow is to tell truth. I will tell the truth."

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## Significance

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for Evangelicals