

Hunter Hills Biographies

Randy Bowman

Introduction

The idea of doing a testimony is a little weird for me. My usual idea of what a testimony is involves some discussion of what my life was like before I became a Christian, how I realized I needed Christ, how I became a Christian, and how Christ has changed my life since.

The problem I have is that I was, for all intents and purposes, raised in the church of Christ. I am at least a 5th generation Christian, and my life didn't really have a dramatic transformation upon becoming a Christian. Instead, what I want to do today is kind of focus on people who mentored and disciplined me and share with you the lessons that I learned from them.

My Grandfather (Mother's Father)

My mom was raised in a non-Sunday School, church of Christ home. I've heard them called "Antis," although that was not a term I heard until I was in college. My grandfather was fervent in his faith. (Interestingly, my grandfather was raised in a church of Christ that had a Sunday School). He knew what he believed and he was committed to it.

My grandpa was a hard working man; working two jobs. First, he owned a bunch of land on which he grew maize and raised cattle. He would get up early in the morning and handle farm chores. He would then go off to his other job as a post hole digger for Texas Power and Light. He would spend all day in the sun operating the machinery that drilled holes to put power line posts in. Then, he would come home and work more farm chores until dinner.

After dinner, he would sit in recliner and read his Bible. No matter what else was going on around him, he would read and study his Bible. His Bible was well worn and marked up. Grandpa was a leader in his church and would take his turn preaching (he was a fiery and passionate speaker) and leading singing. He knew his scripture and loved to talk about and debate finer points of interpretation. He was very conservative in his interpretations and practice of scripture. He was always right, and you were always wrong and he would get very heated about it.

We tend to disparage those who are ultra-conservative because generally we don't see them as gracious and merciful people. And therein lies a paradox that I learned about at a very early age. While my grandfather did not suffer fools and had no mercy (during a discussion) for those who did not interpret scripture the way he did, my grandfather was the most compassionate and gracious man. He loved people. He would give you the shirt off his back and his undershirt if you said you were cold.

If a farmer had had a bad year and didn't have enough seed to plant this year, invariably it was George Neal who would go from farm to farm collecting a half-bag of seed and deliver (anonymously) to the farmer in distress. If a hitchhiker needed a ride, there was room in the back of George Neal's truck. If a man needed a meal, there was room at George Neal's table (even though he had six children to feed himself). If people in the small Texas town needed a fight resolved, they did not go to the courts - they went to the coffee house and laid their case before George Neal. He would give them a fair answer.

From my Grandpa I learned many lessons. First was a passion for scripture. Know what you believe and know why you believe it. The only way you are going to know it that well is to invest the time in it. Secondly, I learned from him was not let your doctrine get in the way of people. He believed that to be like Jesus, you had to love people like Jesus did, warts and all. We must be careful when judging somebody based on their beliefs (head knowledge). Their actions (heart knowledge) are more important. I learned to have lots of grace for people I don't agree with, because I had to. I loved my grandpa and his beliefs were different than mine...only through grace could we bridge our hearts.

My Dad

My dad was raised Lutheran in Detroit. His family went to church (but not devoutly) until the church leaders informed my grandfather, a mid-level executive for GM, that he was not contributing enough. My grandfather's response was "see how much I contribute now that I don't come." My dad grew up in a family that was distrustful of organized religion and disenchanted with the hypocrisy of people.

My dad graduated from HS, joined the Air Force and went to Vietnam as a communication specialist. There he met my great Uncle. After Vietnam he was stationed in Texas with my great Uncle who invited him out to farm for a family gathering. My dad went, met my mom...they fell in love...yadda-yadda-yadda. Mom and dad were married in 1971 and were immediately transferred to Hahn AFB in Germany.

Since Dad was not going to church and there really wasn't a church in Germany, Mom stopped going as well. I was born while they were in Germany.

We then moved to Nebraska and my brother was born. While in Nebraska one of my dad's co-workers (Jim Mittenbrink) asked if the church bus could pick me up and take me to Sunday School on Sunday Mornings (yes, I was a bus kid). Mom and dad jumped at the chance to get a little time away from an inquisitive 4 year old. Jim and dad also started studying the Bible over lunch together. My dad knew that there was something missing in his life and he was pursuing. This pursuit for truth becomes an underlying theme in my dad's life. After sometime of studying my dad chose to commit his life to Jesus and be baptized. From then on we were DEVOUT. We never missed a service.

After Nebraska, Dad was assigned to Thule, Greenland on a remote assignment for one year. My Mom, my brother and I lived with my grandparents in Texas for that year. This was a year that could make or break my dad. He was a new Christian and away from his family and influences. During that year, though, he made a concentrated effort to surround himself with other Christians and studied intently to grow his faith.

After that Uncle Sam sent us to Coca Beach, FL. While we were there, the church we attended became involved in the Crossroads (aka Boston) Movement. This was a touch spot for our family because my dad sensed that there was something wrong with the practices, but we had so many friends and connections there. While dad had chosen some people to be spiritually mentor him before the church started using the Crossroads methods, he found the authoritarian nature to be a departure of the kind of disciplining he saw in Scripture. He spent many hours pursuing the truth.

Before having to confront the leadership, Dad was transferred to Scott AFB in IL. While at Scott we attended a very small, rural church in Mascoutah, IL. This church was a small, rural church of maybe 70-80 people. The minister lived in a trailer behind the church building. This is where I remember my Dad becoming actively involved and taking a leadership role in the church. I remember him teaching the High School class. I mention this because of one class he taught them.

At ten years old I had been thoroughly taught by many Sunday School teachers the tenants of the church of Christ doctrine. One Sunday Dad was teaching on the concept of Grace and had asked his teens the question, "If you die before you confess any known sins, does grace cover you?" From the backseat I overheard him talking to Mom about his class and I piped up, "Oh that's easy," (after all...I was well taught), "of course you are not saved." My dad knowingly replied, "How do you know that?" For the rest of the car ride home and through lunch our family chewed over the topic. Dad firmly felt that grace covered you and made me, at ten years old, prove otherwise (I lost).

Dad had been taught the same things I had, but his continual search for truth had led him to a different conclusion. I learned there to always question what you think you already know.

Miscellaneous Teachers and Preachers

From Scott AFB, we moved back to Germany. Dad was stationed at Kapaun AFB, just outside of Ramstein AFB. While there we attended the Kaiserslautern Church of Christ. It was at the K-Town CoC that I was baptized. The practice at K-Town when we were there was to get young boys involved in church by the public reading of Scripture right before the sermon. As part of the preparation to read publically, the preacher there (whose name I have long since forgotten) held a training workshop on Sunday nights. Besides teaching us young men the skills of public reading like speaking clearly and projecting your voice, he also taught us how to prepare to read. You always knew a week ahead of time what passage you would be reading on Sunday and he fully expected you to practice. He emphasized that scripture was alive, and when we read it, we needed to bring it to life. From him, I learned to treat the public reading and sharing of scripture with respect.

It was also at K-Town that I preached my first sermon, a five minute talk on the Narrow Road (Matthew 7:13, 14). I still have my outline from that sermon. It humors me now that a 13 year old boy was allowed to address a congregation. But it was part of a specific plan to teach young men how to be involved.

In 1987, as I entered into High School, we were transferred back to Scott AFB. I was molded and shaped by far too many men at the Fairview Heights Church of Christ to list. One that stands out, though, is the minister, R.C. Thompson. R.C. had a passion for training young men in ministry. To that end, every summer he would hold two sessions that lasted four days (Sun. Night through Wed. Night) where 12 young men would become full-

time preachers. R.C. had a whole mess of grandkids, so he turned his basement into a dormitory. The boys who were attending his Timothy Camp slept in the dormitory. The days were filled with classes on how to preach and teach, from specific skills like how to stand and project to different methods to apply to scripture to wring out a message. We were given some time each day to prepare a five minute sermon and R.C. would guide us step-by-step. We would present the sermon to him and the other participants, be critiqued, and then go back and re-work it. He taught us skills like how to do a hospital visit. We went to a funeral home and learned a little about dealing with grief. The camp would end on Wed. Night with each boy presenting the lesson he had worked on.

To this day I cannot stand in front of a pulpit without thinking about R.C.'s lessons on how to address the pulpit. If there was one lesson he pushed over-and-over again it was be prepared. I still live by his axiom that for every minute you plan to spend talking, make sure you have spent an hour in preparation.

It was during this time that camp became a big part of my spiritual life. I had begun attending Christian camp at nine years old, going to Camp Ne-o-tez. While we were stationed in Germany, I attended Camp Gemunden. During my High School years, though, my brother, my best friend and I would spend weeks at Camp, as either a camper, counselor, and even, dishwasher, if that is the job that needed to be done. Those weeks as a counselor helped hone a sense of spiritual responsibility. I remember sitting outside of the cabin steps with a twelve year old little boy as he wrestled with his decision to commit his life to Christ.

Gary Hundley

While in college I met Erin and we fell in love. OK...Actually I fell in love with her. It took quite some time for me to convince her that she loved me. Through Erin I met Gary (of course) and started to hear the best preaching that I had ever heard in my life. Gary was fantastic. During visits to Erin's parent's house I watched him minister. Those brief visits probably taught me more than anyone else. Gary had an amazing preaching style; it was deep, yet understandable. His sermons were personal and full of stories. Gary was an exegetical preacher whose sermons were relevant and applicable.

While he made it look easy, he was frank that it took a lot of work and a lot time to prepare sermons that way. I consumed his lessons and decided to model my preaching style after his. I often think that R.C. taught me how to build a cake, but Gary taught me how to frost it. Gary was passionate about the Word, but he was more passionate about making sure he communicated God's Word in an understandable and personal way. Gary taught me that people are the most important priority of God.

Mission Work

While in college (Harding University), I drifted aimlessly from big church to big church, never really finding a place. It wasn't until a friend of mine invited Erin and me to go with him to a small country church. The church was comprised of 4 people (two husband and wife pairs) about 35 minutes down some dirt roads outside of Searcy, AR. Besides the locals, the church swelled to 30 with all the college students who came. The locals loved to have us come. We taught class, preached the sermon, led the singing, and shared the communion

thought. The locals didn't really get too caught up in doctrine; they just loved the fellowship and loved to give us young people a place to hone our skills.

It was out of this experience of building up a small church that Erin and I decided to build a mission team to go strengthen churches. Harding had a program where some guy came and spoke about the need for strong Christians to move to the Northwest (Washington, Oregon) area and help churches. We liked the idea, so we got a group of our friends and started investigating the possibility. Our team was made up of 3 couples and 3 single people, for a total of 9 people.

During the Spring Break of 1995 the team wrote a letter to send to churches in the Northwest. We were all going to be vocational ministers, so we had selected churches around big cities (we needed big cities so we could find jobs). Using an atlas and the "Churches of Christ in the United States" book, we picked churches we thought we could come to and help them grow. We said in our letter that we wanted to come. We made it clear that we wouldn't want or expect any kind of financial support, but we might need some places to stay during job hunting and housing searching trips. On a whim, I suggested we expand our area to cover the entire North Central US (Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin). We mailed about 50 letters on a Wednesday.

The following Monday I received a call from one Pete Nutak in Duluth, MN. He was so excited. He said, "You are not going to believe this, but we just had a meeting yesterday and we prayed to God that he send us some help and today, your letter arrived in the mail." Pete told me that he and Danny Jacobs had founded the church about 10 years ago (it was their second church plant in MN, they had planted one in St. Cloud that was growing strong). The church had grown to about 100 people, but only Danny and Pete and one other guy, Brett Osborne, were "mature" Christians. Danny, Pete, and Brett were doing the best they could, but they were tired and needed help. It sounded like a perfect match to me.

The rest of the team was not nearly as excited and did not nearly see the hand of God working the way I did (this should have been a red flag). We never heard from a single, solitary other church. Members of the team were so set on Washington that they called all the churches we had sent letters to trying to get a response. They never got one. I made impassioned pleas that focused on the Macedonian man and finally convinced the team that God was not leading us to Washington, but to Minnesota.

About this time Erin's dad called and told us about one of his good friends, Don Truitt. Don had just accepted a job at the East Hill Church of Christ in York, Nebraska. An anonymous Sojourner had donated \$1 million to East Hill Church of Christ to fund a project (called N.E.T.) with the specific purpose of equipping 5 mission teams to plant 5 churches in the North Central US in 10 years.

We contacted Don and he came down to Harding to meet with us. After meeting with us, he said that if we changed the focus of our mission from strengthening to church planting, he would be able to help with training and funds. We were excited. This was more than we had ever dreamed of. Don was familiar with the church in East Duluth and with the work of Pete and Danny. In his mind this was going to be an outstanding partnership. We would start a church in Superior, WI while working to strengthen the East Duluth Church. In return, besides

being able to rely on Don and his church planting experience, we would have access to Pete and Danny who were on their second church plant.

When we all graduated from college in 1996, we moved to York, Nebraska for two months of intense training. We took frequent trips to Superior for job hunting, house hunting, and analyzing the mission field. We also used that summer to work with a small, rural church in Holdrege, Nebraska. During the training Erin and I had numerous conflicts with our team about purpose and mission. It felt as if at each step we were pulling the rest of the team down a path we clearly saw God laying. The team was not excited about church planting; they wanted to focus on church strengthening (another red flag should have been heeded).

While other members of the team found jobs and places to live, Erin and I met roadblock after roadblock. About that time Erin received a call from Alabama Christian Academy offering her a job. We had one more trip scheduled to Duluth, so we told them we would get back to them and drove to Duluth. We looked and looked for a place to live. We looked and looked for jobs. We found neither.

Discouraged we sat outside of the Pete's house in our car wondering if God had really called us to the mission field. Should we take the job in Montgomery, AL or take a step of faith and move to Superior anyway? We talked about it. We cried about it. Then, we prayed about it. We asked God to give us a clear answer and then we cast lots. The lot came up to go to WI. Erin didn't believe it, so we did it again. The lot came up to go to WI. Ten times in a row we cast lots and ten times in a row it came up to move to WI. Taking a step of faith, we called ACA and declined the job offer.

We moved to Superior without a job and with no place to live. During our first week in Superior Erin found a job teaching Spanish for two rural schools. She taught at one in the morning, drove 20 miles, and taught at the other one. We found a house for rent. I did not find a job.

From August until December I worked a multitude of temporary jobs. When I wasn't working temp jobs, I was working for the church. In December using money provided by NET, the team decided to hire me to be the full-time minister.

Looking back on my life I see that God had been preparing me for that job. Everybody in my life had added specific skills that would allow me to be a minister and teacher. My grandfather taught me to love the Word of God, my Dad taught me to pursue the truth, and my father-in-law taught me how to present it.

After several years in Superior our team crumbled and our church planting died. I became despondent. I took a job as an Assistant Manager of Hardees. I worked most Sundays, so for about a year Erin and I didn't have a church home. Erin lost her job at the school at the end of the school year. About that time God provided another job for her at ACA. We moved down to Montgomery in 1999.

Journey to Hunter Hills

Within two months of being in Montgomery Gary was fired from Carriage Hills. This became a tumultuous time for our family it was evident that God had brought us to Montgomery for that event. Then about two or three months later, Gary and Hope were ordered to take care of Erin's two oldest nieces for several months because

they were being tangled up in an ugly custody battle. We became even more assured that we had been moved back down by God to assist the family in this crisis. It wasn't long after the girls had been returned to their mother that Gary was diagnosed with prostate cancer, once again revealing God's hand in ensuring that we were needed to be close to family.

While all of this was going on, Erin and I attended Landmark. Erin joined the praise team, but I couldn't find a place for me. We enjoyed the worship and Buddy Bell is a good speaker, but there was something missing. We couldn't connect with anyone. We couldn't get involved. We tried. We joined a small group, only to be told by the small group leader that we didn't really "fit in with the rest of the group." Thankfully, God provided Paul and Marla Evans' small group for us to move into. We found some healing there, but still seemed to be out of place at Landmark.

One Sunday I decided to try Hunter Hills. Erin was sick. I wasn't happy at Landmark, so I drove past it and drove out to Prattville. I felt at home. John was leading worship and I connected with it. Don preached and I was impressed. After services I was immediately surrounded by people welcoming me and inviting me to join them for lunch. After close to three of years of feeling alone, I felt loved.

I went home and told Erin she had to come next week. We returned the next week and Daryl Greer invited us out their Small Group. We immediately felt loved and appreciated there. As we visited the over the next few weeks, Erin was invited to join the praise team and Steve Wynn had learned that I had some experience running a sound board. Since "The Star" was being practiced for, he asked me to run sound for it. We hadn't even placed membership and were being asked to participate and get involved. So we did...and we placed membership in 2001.

Even though I am not a minister here, nor do I ever expect to go back into full-time ministry, God has been working in my life all along by placing me in the paths of people ready to mentor and teach and I think he has brought me to Hunter Hills to become a mentor and teacher. I always wanted to help a small church grow and flourish, and God has used me in a very small way to assist Don, John and the Shepherds in growing this church.

Infertility

Before we left Superior Erin and I had decided that it was time for us to have children. Children were very important to us and we knew that we wanted to be parents. For the first couple of years, we just didn't use anything to stop us from having children. We weren't stressed about it and had decided to just let God work in his timing.

After a few years, though, we started to realize that we weren't going to get pregnant on our own, so we sought professional, medical advice. People who have never experienced infertility have a hard time understanding the faith walk that it is. Deep inside us is a God-given desire to be fruitful and multiply. This was one of God's first commands to mankind and I believe that He etched that command onto our souls.

The problem with that command is that fulfilling it is truly outside of our control. Sure, there are things you can do to try and keep the command, but even doing all the right things does not result in a child. It is God, not man, who opens and closes wombs. And therein lies one of the great paradoxes of God: He has commanded us

to do something that only He can control. So, one feels like a failure and there is nothing one can do. One calls out to God for Him to do His part and month after month, He is silent. We begin to feel neglected. We begin to feel abandoned. We begin to feel alone.

One night while, while walking Juliet (our Brittany Spaniel) around the apartment complex I was praying fervently to God. I began to sing to myself, praising God for who he is. Suddenly, a Voice resonated in my head. "Fear not. You shall have a son and you shall name him Hezekiah for I will be your Strength." (Hezekiah means "strength of God.") Calmness overwhelmed me and I knew that we would be parents.

During fertility treatments we ran the gamut of tests and procedures. The doctors never really had a good medical reason as to why we weren't getting pregnant. The speculated it had something to do with Erin's cervical mucus being a hostile environment during the time it is supposed to be "friendly." Treating this required inseminations because the sperm could be placed past the hostile environment.

The first insemination was successful, but we lost the baby. This was devastating to us. After trying so hard and having our hope restored only to have it ripped out of our hands again was crushing. We continued to try inseminations, but when the doctors suggested in In-Vitro Fertilization, we declined. Why spend \$13,000 on a chance when that \$13,000 could go a long way to an almost guaranteed adoption.

Adoption – Mihaela

Adoption was something that Erin and I knew we wanted to do. Even when we were dating, we had talked about adopting. Erin's dream was to adopt a little girl from Honduras or some other South-Central American country.

We decided in December 2003 to forgo infertility treatment and start focusing on adoption. My parents told us that Christian Family Services in St. Louis had just spoken at their church and had mentioned they had a backlog of minority children needing to be adopted. We were told if we could get a home study completed in Alabama, then CFS would talk to us about adoption very quickly.

We called AGAPE and scheduled a home study for the beginning of February with the intent to use it to adopt through CFS. AGAPE suggested that we get on both waiting lists and we agreed. One Friday in the middle of February 2004 AGAPE called and asked us for our Portfolio. A portfolio is a collection of letters, pictures, and essays that people seeking to adopt assemble that is given to birth parents to help them decide to whom they wish to give the child to for adoption. AGAPE asked if we could bring it by Monday because they had a family for which they thought we would be a match. Erin and I spent the entire weekend rushing to put the portfolio together.

We turned in our portfolio on that Monday and then we waited. We didn't hear back from AGAPE. I called once to check and was told that AGAPE's policy was not let us know anything until a family had chosen us. We figured we hadn't been chosen and went back to waiting.

One Wednesday in the middle of March of 2004 Erin called me at work. She said she had something very, very important to talk to me about and needed to speak with me right away. I told her to come on over. I became

very agitated and worried. Was I in trouble for some unknown reason? Had Erin been fired? She came to my office and shut the door. She then asked me if I was ready to be a daddy. My eyes welled up. AGAPE had come and told her that the family had chosen us, but that they had to wait 30 days before they could tell us. We would be able to pick up the baby on Friday

This was all God's hand working. Nobody ever goes from deciding to adopt to having a baby in under 3 months, let alone the 6 weeks it took us. Only through the power and direction of God, can something like this happen. I'm convinced that God always intended for us to adopt and knew that if we had children first, we would never be motivated (or have had the time) to pursue adoption.

Adoption – Noah

On a Sunday night in May 2005 I was leading my Small Group. We were going through the book of Revelation, specifically studying Revelation 12. Revelation 12:17 describes a time of great persecution of Christians. As the small group discussed this particular verse, we talked about the benefits of persecution and how we (as Christian living in the Buckle of the Bible Belt) do not really experience persecution. We ended that night praying for God to send us tests so that our faith may grow stronger.

The following morning I was sick, so I stayed home from work; this is quite unlike me. Around lunch time Buddy Renahan from AGAPE called Erin and asked if we could do him a favor (this is a mere 14 months after bringing Mihaela home). He said he was holding our son and needed us to say that we would take him home (pretty big favor, in my opinion). Erin and I said that we would. We met with Noah's birth mom and assured her that he would be loved. We had to wait 10 days before we could meet him and take him home.

We went from having no children to 2 adopted in 15 months. Certainly the hand of God was upon us. We named him Noah because Noah was a man of great faith and we had prayed for our faith to be tested. Noah certainly did that as a baby. His acid reflux and other medical problems gave us little rest and peace (in Hebrew Noah means "rest").

Gary's Cancer and Death

A Challenge

My life is testimony of God working through others to shape me. I have recently been being prompted to become more focused on who I disciple. I've found some people being discipled by me by accident. All of us influence others. I would challenge you and myself to make sure that we training others in the skills they need to make it through this life. We need to make sure we are giving young Christians opportunities to grow and stretch by creating safe environments where they can try new things under the careful observation of someone who's been there. We need to ensure that our influence is directed.

Another thought that comes forth is that I have travelled quite a bit. I've attended and been a member at churches of Christ all across the spectrum. There is hint of good in that because by getting to intimately know people from every doctrinal backgrounds, always reminds me that, deep-down inside, we're so much more

similar than we are different. We are all sinners in need of God's grace. We are all pilgrims trying to make our way home. It's something we should all strive to remember every day.