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Testifying at the Baptist Church

Robert Flynn

Sunday night meant testifying at the Chillicothe Baptist Church and folks who weren't Baptists came to see what their Christian brethren had been up to. Testifying gave a whole new meaning to the expression, "No news is good news." After singing, praying and a short (for him) sermon, Brother Wachel opened the floor to those who wished to bear testimony to what the Lord had done for them.

With a husky voice Butch Trulove testified that his mother's dying words to him were, "Be sure your sin will find you out." After she died, he tried to drown his sorrow in a whiskey bottle. Late one night he left a bar and a piece of paper blew up against his foot. He picked it up and it was a tract with the words, "Be sure your sin will find you out." Butch recognized it as a message his mother had sent from the grave. "And that's why I'm in church tonight," Butch said.

Folks nodded politely but in West Texas sin tracts were as common as cactus. Baptists believed Butch started drowning in a bottle before his mother took sick. Methodists believed turning fifty had cured Butch of more sins than Jesus had.

Ruby Waldrip testified that prayer worked. For years she had prayed for patience and last week God sent her a slow maid. Ruby had prize winning flowers in her garden but her children were weeds.

Next, Brook Swartz took the stand. Her name was Mildred but they called her Brook because she babbled. "I want to apologize to the people of this church for gossiping. That story about George going to Mabel's house when her husband wasn't there and me catching them standing in the kitchen with nothing but a beer bottle between them--Well, it was true, but I shouldn't have told everybody and I ask the Lord and the people of this church to forgive me. And pray that George's wife and Mabel's husband call off the divorces. I also apologize for what I said about Babs Rollover coming to church with too much makeup and big hair. It makes me ashamed of what I said when I think how long it must take her to get ready for church."

Elmer Watkins testified that his house had been broken into and thanks be to God when the burglars found nothing worth stealing, they left a coffee pot they had stolen somewhere else. "Police haven't arrested anybody but I think it was that man that moved here from New Mexico. A lot of folks think he had to leave New Mexico because of the law. But that's just a rumor so don't repeat it." Elmer took family memorabilia to a family reunion and auctioned it off. No one remembered the vase ever being in the family.

Barbie Bradshaw couldn't put her seat belt on because she had just painted her

Trickster's Way Vol 2

nails and they weren't dry and the constable, the one who belonged to the Baptist Church, gave her a ticket anyway. That made her realize how big God was to forgive our sins when a constable couldn't overlook something as small as that. Barbie was generous to a fault as long as it was her fault she was being generous to.

Lester Haynes testified that the men's Brotherhood was sponsoring a Chili Night as a fundraiser. Upon a question from the congregation, Lester testified that yes, the chili was frozen but that Florencio Rio, the one they called Florio, would make fresh tortillas to go with the chili and frijoles. "Don't eat the first six tortillas. After that his hands come pretty clean." Lester had never caught on to dressing himself. Something was always askew, out of date, mismatched or missing.

Helen Mayfield testified that her son sometimes ate things that weren't on the approved list. However, with Brother Wachel's help he had found the Lord and had forsaken his evil ways. "I caught him eating grasshoppers yesterday but he said he was trying to quit. I know what with this drought and all them grasshoppers coming to our irrigated garden he has been tempted beyond what a mortal ought to bear. But with the prayers of you good people, and what with winter coming on, I think he will be able to overcome Satan and his temptations." Helen's hair perfected the drenched-dog- left-outside look.

"I haven't been to church in six years," Lennie Conrad said, "because I didn't want to see Thelma Vaughn after what she did to the dog I gave her, but she died last week and thank God I can come to God's house again." Lennie believed the way to prove yourself better than others was to act like you were better than others.

Lela Mae Brown's granddaughter went back to school to get her I.U.D. and she wanted to praise the Lord for that. Lela Mae was lovely but limited. Pearl Summers just got back from her sister's funeral in Arkansas and the Women's Missionary Union had covered her sister's coffin with a tablecloth and after the funeral they neatly folded it and handed it to her husband. Pearl thought they could do the same thing in Chillicothe. Pearl had never caught on to testifying.

Ila Mae Richardson said that some folks complained at the last church dinner because she put only two ice cubes in a glass. "Well, I'm here to tell you more than two cubes is selfish indulgence and I think it's a sin. Folks don't need to be pampered all the time. They just need to get right with the Lord."

During the winter Ila Mae wore two coats in the house and testified she was saving heating oil for Yankees. Lucille Dunn, the one they called 'Cil, caught her grandchildren playing with sin cards. "These were not the Old Maid kind, these were sin cards, and I knew who taught them how to do it. I walked two blocks hot as it was over to my son-in-law's house and I called him everything but a Christian. He picked me up on a broom stick and carried me back home that way so all the neighbors could see it. I just want you to know what can happen when you let your daughter marry a Methodist." 'Cil, with her hen house ways, had never suffered for doing a good deed.

Trickster's Way Vol 2

Krista Brock was at K-Mart over in Wichita Falls and put Keath's arm in the blood pressure machine while she shopped so that he didn't run all over the store. Someone told the manager and the manager called the police and they accused her of abusing her little boy who wasn't hurt in any way. And his blood pressure was normal for a child. The government was trying to tell her how to be a parent, and that was evil. Krista's mother, hearing the story for the first time, was shocked. "Did you tell them who you was?" she asked. Krista was a brood mare with a high school diploma.

Chloe Campbell testified that what got her through childhood was her red bicycle, her dog Spot, and her friend Betty. Her drunken father ran over her bicycle, killing Spot, and Betty found other friends because she could no longer use the bicycle. "That was when I found God, and I want to thank him for using my drunken father to lead me to Jesus." Her father abstained from alcohol one month every year to give his liver a rest. He chose February because it was the shortest month. The last time Chloe saw him she was required to attend two more sessions of anger management class.

Haskell Howard testified that he had met a Chillicothe newcomer and believed he was going to join the church soon. "He has the same political views we have." To Haskell a liberal was anyone who had an opinion he disagreed with but couldn't dispute.

Joe Don Dixon, who said he was a few months past 60 until you asked how many months and he confessed to 108, thanked the Lord for his wife who had died earlier in the year. Henrietta had been a wonderful cook, gave him four sons, Jerry Don, Billy Don, Bobby Don, Michael Don; made his shirts, brought him water when he was working, canned, sewed, cleaned house, and mowed the lawn. "I sure miss her cooking, but I got a new roof on the house, replaced the soiled carpet in the living room and had a hernia operation." Joe Don also had more teeth than he used to have and they all showed when he smiled. The church had a secret pal program. All Joe Don's pals were secret pals.

Danny Newhouse sat with his elbow on the back of the pew and his head propped on his hand to show that he had broken three fingers in Friday night's football game. He wanted to thank the Lord that God had helped them win their game with Crowell when they were behind twenty points at halftime. "That game should be an inspiration to all of us who believe God can snatch victory out of defeat," Brother Wachel said. "What did coach say to you boys to so lift your spirits?" "Do you want me to leave out the profanity?" Danny asked. "Yes, please." Danny frowned trying to remember the coach's exact words. "He didn't say anything."

"I want to thank the Lord for sending me a colored man to take me home when my car broke down," Maggie Bell said. "I know the Bible says those folks are to be hewers of wood and carriers of water and that I shouldn't ride with strangers but the Lord looked after me. And he had a button down shirt." Maggie used the Bible and the Sear's Catalog to rationalize her prejudices.

"My son is over there flying missions for his country," Druscilla Mays said, "and I just want to say, thank you, thank you, Jesus, every bomb hit its target." Like a good pilot, Druscilla was always looking for a place to land.

Trickster's Way Vol 2

"Them doctors wouldn't give me but fifteen more years but the Lord gave me thirty-three," Bunny Brickfield said. "I want to thank the good Lord for that. Had cataract surgery a while ago and when they took off the bandages and I looked at my plate, I said, 'what are them black specks in my taters?' I hadn't seen pepper in so long I forgot what it was." Bunny's slip ranged from two to six inches below her dress.

"Them folks that knock on your door to talk about religion," Sarah Mayhue said, "they come to see me. They mix a lot of people but they didn't mix me. I quoted the scripture right back at them, two verses for every one of theirs and I followed them out to the car and shouted scripture at them as they drove away." To Sarah the "Blessed Assumption" was assuming that God favored her above all others.

Wanda Cummings testified that she had almost drowned in the swimming pool and she wanted to praise the Lord that he saved her when no one else did. She almost drowned because everyone at the pool knew her and thought she was pretending to be Ester Williams. Besides, it was the shallow end of the pool. Lloyd Kennedy testified that he had gone to that church in Fort Worth, the one that everyone talked about, and he had jumped up three times to open the door for the woman before he realized they let women usher men into the church.

"I just want to thank God that we're still Christian here." Lloyd had always been light in his loafers. Sue Bell Terry wanted to thank the Lord that her children allowed her to drive them to school although they still weren't speaking to her. She wasn't feeling well on Sunday but she got the kids ready and sent them to church promising she would pick them up after church if she could. Feeling better, she drove past the church and parked in the shade until she saw smokers coming out of the church, the first sign that the service was nearing an end. When she tried to turn around she couldn't get the car out of reverse and had to back around the block to get her kids, causing a traffic jam between the Methodist, Baptist and Church of Christ and embarrassing her children as she yelled back at people while backing home. When she turned forty, Sue Bell thought she had made most of her mistakes. She hadn't.

Aunt Sis had to hold on to a pew to stand in her out-of-style shoes but she was determined to speak. "Brother Wachel come to see me last week and asked why he hadn't seen me at church. I told him he hadn't seen me because I hadn't been there. I been kinda bad lately, got to where I can't hardly get around. Can't see good, can't hardly hear at all, can't sleep at night, can't stay awake in the day, and my memory is about as good as the day I was born. I don't remember anything about that day either. I said, 'Brother Pastor, why don't the Lord just call me home.' He said maybe the Lord had something he wanted me to do. I told him, well, I wasn't going to do it. I have done everything for the Lord I intend to do. And that goes double for that grandniece of mine who put a ring in her nose. And other places." The heel of Aunt Sis's hose was on the top of her foot and her ankle looked like it had been caught in a taffy machine.

Before Lithium, Valium, Ritalin, Zantax, Prozac, Paxil, or duct tape, testifying

brought a spell of calm to Chillicothe Baptists, and wonderment and apprehension to the rest of the community.