

BOOK IV

THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION - THE SAINT

There was at least one saint in my childhood and youth. There may have been more, but of this one I am most certain. Uncle Alvin, uncle by marriage to Dad's sister Fanny (we all called her Auntie), was a faithful member of his Southern Baptist Church till the end of his days. He had been a carpenter and he had farmed. But somewhere through the years he came into the employ of a Jewish dry goods merchant who owned stores in Northwest Tennessee and Southwest Kentucky. When I was very young he was transferred from a store in Hickman, Kentucky to the only dry goods store in his (and my) West Tennessee hometown of Kenton and that is the setting in which my memories of him stand out most vividly. His job was not strenuous, but it was tedious and boring, with long hours. As the store's only sales person for men's furnishings, he also was assigned the task of opening in the morning and closing at night, six days a week. Since his health was very good (I never knew him to be ill) he seldom if ever missed work for that reason, so the store was his life during the week, day after day, year after year.

The years of the depression thirties were tough and I seldom warranted new garb. Maybe once a year, at the start of school, Dad took me to Schatz's Dry Goods Store where Uncle Alvin fitted me with, maybe, a pair of shoes or a shirt or, maybe, a pair of new denim overalls to wear in the fields. Once I even got a three-piece suit for Sunday School and church! "Maybe," mind you, for nothing was assured. Curiosity always drew my eyes to the rear of the store where his employer maintained his business office and was usually seen sitting at an elevated desk. He could survey his domain from there including, of course, Uncle Alvin and his activities.

Dad transferred me from the rural Lonoak Elementary School to Kenton Elementary School in 1938. That started a new wintertime pattern because the rudimentary school bus was unable to negotiate the often-muddy road on which we lived. So, to avoid the muddy trek to the bus in bad winter weather, I stayed with Auntie and Uncle Alvin in their Kenton apartment Monday through Thursday nights. They never owned their home and my impression was that, in spite of Auntie's uppity posturing, they were very poor. That's when I got to know them well, both of them, and became very fond of them.

They never owned a car, so Uncle Alvin walked the few blocks to work and back, rain or shine. On those winter evenings he would arrive home long after dark and we sat around the table enjoying the dinner Auntie had prepared for us. Afterwards I might finish my homework while Uncle Alvin prepared his Sunday School lesson or attended to church business, or perhaps read the Bible or a newspaper. He was both a deacon and a Sunday School Teacher in the First Baptist Church. Sometimes, we gathered around the table and played Chinese checkers while I sensed that I was extremely welcome in that home – perhaps I filled a void left by the deaths of two infants, a daughter and a son. And perhaps Auntie, with her meticulously groomed, bouffant and silvery white hair helped to fill a void in me – one left by the death of my mother not long before.

She was highfalutin' and most unhappy. She was disappointed – in her life, in her circumstances, in her husband and in their station in life. She put on airs. She liked to talk to me about her congressman or senator, to show her respect for them and to boast of them – what fine men they

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were. I didn't know it at the time, but that was her way of encouraging me to aspire to high stations in this life (at this she failed miserably). And their pastor! Oh, he was surely one of the finest men who ever lived! She was strangely silent about her husband. Indeed, to the best of my memory, she said little about him. They did little communicating when they were together. There were neither quarrels nor displays of affection in my presence, although that was not unusual in their generation.

Uncle Alvin was a small man, slight of build but ramrod straight. His features were sharp, including a beaked nose, but his eyes were soft and gentle behind thin rimmed glasses. His head was covered with thinning gray hair, which was always well groomed. He was quiet and spoke softly. Never did I hear him raise his voice to anyone and never was he opinionated, judgmental or quarrelsome. There was not a dishonest atom in his body. He dressed for work as impeccably as his circumstances allowed – trousers freshly pressed by Auntie, starched shirt, tie, suit and well worn but shining shoes.

He didn't talk about his religion; he lived it so faithfully that I always saw Jesus in him. He never "preached" to me and never pressured me to convert. Only once did he encourage me to consider becoming a Christian. It was 1944 and I was leaving for the Navy and stopped at the store to tell him good-bye. As I was about to go, he came with me to the door and said, "Let me walk with you to the bus," so we went together down Main Street to the nearby bus stop. I don't remember his exact words, but I could sense his genuine concern for my welfare, both physically and spiritually. Since I was going off to train for war, he was thinking that he might never see me alive again and he could not bear to see me go without telling me of the Lord's love and urging me to commit my life to his Jesus. I thanked him, told him good bye, and got on the bus. Thereafter I saw him only briefly, during short trips home, when I always stopped in at the store to say hello.

Seven years later, in 1951, I was married and, together with Nellie, studying for the ministry at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. One day I came home to sad news – a phone call had informed us that Uncle Alvin was dead – an old man, tired and weary, still working, still walking to work. That evening, on the way home to Auntie, he had collapsed on the sidewalk and in that moment he went, instead, to heaven – that quiet, simple, meek and unpretentious child of the Father who, without knowing it, was a powerful influence in my young life and in my decision to become a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. Uncle Alvin, I love you. This is my tribute to you.

Patient reader, you are wondering why I am telling you all about Uncle Alvin in an essay set to discuss the church? Because I want you to know where I stand on the subject. I want you to know that I love the church with all its Aunties and Uncle Alvins. I want you to know that I understand that there are many such persons in the church, and that through them the church has been and is a powerful influence for all kinds of good in this world. I want you to sense how much I hurt because I can't be a part of it. I want you to know and understand why one of the three most unhappy days in my life was the day a church told me I could no longer serve as its pastor and cast me out.

But mostly, I want you to know that, strange as it may seem to you, I came out of the church because I was following the Lord. He led me out; I still follow him and I cannot go back unless he leads me, which seems very unlikely. He has called me to bear testimony before the church, which I must do from outside. Besides, if I accept your invitation and go to church with you next Sunday, one of the first events will be the offering up of a public prayer to the Lord – the same Lord, mind you, who has commanded us, when we pray, to enter into our closets, shut the door, and pray in secret! And worse yet, it will probably be the so-called "Lords Prayer" with its petition, thy Kingdom come, that was long ago granted as we learn if only, like his sheep, we hear his voice.

PAUL: THE STRANGER

I beg of you, I earnestly implore you – listen to him! Please! Take seriously that commandment directly from the Father that was spoken to Peter, James and John on the mount of transfiguration: This is my beloved son; HEAR YE HIM! This is my urgent plea to the churchmen: HEAR YE HIM (Mark 9:7)!