



A Man

How Charles Colson, Nixon's hatchet man, became a major figure in evangelicalism. By Jonathan Aitken

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HE TRUMPETS WILL BE SOUNDING ON the other side for Charles W. Colson—not only for what he achieved as a Christian leader but also for how much his character changed. His life story is one of the most outstanding and best-known modern examples of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Colson's early career in secular politics was successful, leading him to the White House as a senior presidential aide. But that ended in spectacular failure during Watergate. In those dark days, he was the most vilified figure in Washington after Richard Nixon. Some of the obloquy heaped upon Colson was undeserved: for example, it is a journalistic myth that he attempted to order the bombing of the Brookings Institute. But in the role he gleefully relished as "Nixon's hatchet man," he connived in many dirty tricks.

When the scandal broke, the press and the prosecutors had Colson in their sights. They knew he was a major contributor to the unsavory moral climate inside the White House. He first hit the headlines in 1972, when he wrote an internal memo with the line, "I would walk over my grandmother

conversation about faith during his political career ended with Colson telling his first Christian interlocutor, Fred Rhodes, "Oh, I think religion is fine, provided one has as little of it as possible."

A CONVERSION GREETED WITH CYNICISM

Colson's turning toward the search for spiritual meaning came soon after he had left the White House under a cloud and was attempting to rebuild his career as a lawyer. He called on Tom Phillips, the chief executive of Raytheon, who had recently come to the Lord at a Billy Graham rally. Colson was hoping to land some of Raytheon's legal business. Instead, Phillips talked with passion about his newfound faith and read aloud some passages from *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis.

Colson first thought his host's religious views were "pure Pollyanna." But the reading from the chapter on pride in Lewis's book ("The Great Sin") struck home. So did the prayer Phillips said at the end of the evening, asking Jesus Christ "to open Chuck's heart and show him the light and the way." Later that night, Colson broke down in tears at

Transformed

for Richard Nixon." That symbolized his end-justifies-the-means ruthlessness as a political operator. It was no surprise that he became a prime suspect for architecting Watergate.

As he was later to admit, Colson had no moral compass for the first 41 years of his life. In that period he occasionally described himself as "a nominal Episcopalian." This was a considerable stretch of the word *nominal*. He was so unchurched that he had no idea who the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son was. The only recorded example of a

the wheel of his car and offered a prayer of his own. As he climbed into bed, he told his wife, Patty, that he thought he'd had a conversion experience—but he did not know what the term meant.

At the instigation of Phillips, Colson was mentored by Doug Coe, an unorthodox but effective Washington pastor. Coe ran the National Prayer Breakfast and led the Fellowship, a ministry to influential movers and shakers. Few of them wanted anything to do with Colson. Nevertheless,

Coe twisted some arms and formed a prayer group to support the Watergate sinner. These prayerful brothers became Colson's lifeline of spiritual support (they included liberal Democratic senator Harold Hughes, the nine-term Republican congressman Al Quie from Minnesota, and a former Democratic congressman from Texas, Graham Purcell). Under Coe's leadership, their theology was fuzzy but their love was great. Although the word *Christian* was not allowed to be mentioned, the brothers lived out Jesus' commandment "Love thy neighbor" with exemplary commitment. Colson was a mixed-up soul in torment at the time, but his new brothers sustained him as he began his journey from self-centeredness and self-justification to Christ-centeredness and justification by faith.

Once it leaked out that Colson had become a man of prayer, cynicism erupted everywhere. The media's mockery was vicious and damaged whatever chances he might have had of evading the clutches of the prosecutors. So he was indicted—but on what charge? The evidence against him was slim. He apparently knew nothing about the Watergate break-in. Nor had he broken any easily identifiable criminal law, whatever might be said about his political amorality. The old Colson would have played every trick in the book to beat the rap. But a different Colson was emerging. In addition to his regular meetings with his prayer group, he was applying his first-class mind to reading Scripture, to studying Christian authors, and to taking his first stumbling steps in theology. His was learning and changing—although this process was neither quick nor easy.

Painful though it was, Colson's repentance was authentic. The most dramatic sign of this was that he became so convicted of sin that, against the advice of his own lawyer, he decided to plead guilty. To do this he had to find a unique section of the criminal code (18 USC Section 1503), under which he admitted "disseminating information whose probable consequences would be to influence, obstruct, and impede the conduct and outcome of the criminal prosecution of Daniel Ellsberg." Since Ellsberg, the leaker of the Pentagon papers, was never prosecuted, this plea was (to put it mildly) a legal oddity. But in the fevered atmosphere of Watergate, a judge accepted it and sentenced Colson to a one- to three-year prison term.

During the time he spent in jail, Colson had to learn many lessons in humility and penitence. Blows rained in on him. He failed to gain the presidential pardon that he had been expecting after the clemency granted to Nixon. He was disbarred from practicing law. His father died. His son was arrested for narcotics possession. But Colson gradually began surrendering to God's will. He immersed himself in Bible reading, started a prayer group with fellow prisoners, and completed the *Design for Discipleship* course published by the Navigators.

Yet his spiritual steps forward seemed to be accompanied by practical reverses. What he found particularly hard to bear was having his parole application denied after other Watergate prisoners, notably John Dean and Jeb Magruder, were freed. But Colson prayed on and was unexpectedly given parole in July 1975 after serving seven months of his sentence.

BORN-AGAIN CELEBRITY

He did not settle easily into the world of freedom. There were continuing struggles between the old and the new man in him. But God's plan gradually became clear. Colson came up with the idea of starting a discipleship program for prisoners furloughed out to a Christian retreat house. The head of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Norman Carlson, listened to Colson's presentation of his scheme and gave it the go-ahead on an experimental basis. This was the genesis of what was to develop into the worldwide ministry of Prison Fellowship (PF).

While he was working out his vocation for discipling prisoners, Colson wrote a book that became a worldwide bestseller. This was *Born Again*. The phrase was little known outside evangelical circles in 1976. But Colson's title and his emotionally searing narrative about his journey and his conversion changed that. It also helped when an emerging candidate for the presidency, Jimmy Carter, described himself as a Christian who had been "born again." The whole world started to ask what these two words meant. Colson, via Nicodemus and John 3:1–8, provided an answer.

Born Again sold three million copies worldwide and catapulted Colson into the stratosphere of Christian celebrity. But by now he was sufficiently steeped in his faith to know that the label was a dangerous oxymoron,

contradicting the humility that should lie at the heart of godly witness. Colson was also blessed by spiritually wise friends who kept his feet on the ground. One of them, his young research aide Michael Cromartie, guided him toward eminent theologians who satisfied both his intellectual and spiritual hunger for the knowledge that would nourish the roots of his faith.

Such theologians initially included Nicholas Wolterstorff, R. C. Sproul, Carl Henry, Francis Schaeffer, and Richard Lovelace. Their importance in Colson's life was that they broadened his spiritual horizons. Narrow evangelicalism, he discovered, was not enough. He did his share of one-on-one ministry in the prisons, but he knew he must also participate in the public arena of action and debate. Inspired by the example of William Wilberforce, Colson came to believe that he must strive to understand and implement a comprehensive Christian worldview regarding life and society.

The quest for a Christian worldview shaped the direction of the fast-growing ministry of PF. With his formidable energy, Colson led it to extraordinary achievements. With no small assistance from trusted associates like Gordon Loux, Tom Pratt, Ron Nikkel, Mark Earley, and Michael Timmis, the ministry expanded globally into Prison Fellowship International, flourishing today in over 120 countries.

Within the United States, PF launched programs like Justice Fellowship (which pioneered the Restorative Justice movement); Angel Tree (which organizes 300,000 Christmas gifts a year to the children of prisoners); and the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (which has spawned at least 15 Christian-run prisons or prison units around the world; studies have indicated such facilities see significantly lower reoffending rates than secular penal institutions).

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These Colson initiatives completely changed the face of prison ministry. It used to be an unfashionable, underrated, and largely localized Christian activity with no national or international leadership. It is still too far down the pecking order of most churches' priorities. But Colson gave it a profile and a passion worthy of the exhortation in Hebrews 13:3: "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison."

AN EVANGELICAL ELDER STATESMAN

Colson's own profile stretched into many areas above and beyond the prison walls. He continued to be a notable author, publishing over 20 books since *Born Again*. His most successful titles include *Loving God, How Now Shall We Live?*, and *Kingdoms in Conflict*. He has been a prolific broadcaster on his own weekly radio program *BreakPoint*. He was a columnist for *Christianity Today* from 1985 until his death. He has received numerous awards recognizing his achievements as a Christian leader and apologist, of which the most lucrative was the 1993 Templeton Prize for Religion. He donated the \$1 million award to charity.

Colson's legacy thus extends far beyond the community of prisoners, although prison ministry has been his primary calling. In his contribution to changing the church, he crossed many denominational boundaries. He started a bold initiative called Evangelicals and Catholics Together, which caused controversy but also achieved

theological understanding between the two wings of the faith. In recent years he had dedicated much of his time to the Centurion educational program. It raises up 100 church leaders each year through an intensive teaching course which he led.

Although Colson's achievements were remarkable, his example is more important. Back in Watergate times, his secular opponents loathed his spiritual journey and longed for him to stumble and fall. Almost four decades later, he confounded his critics and often won their admiration. This is because he walked his talk.

Colson's personal life was exemplary from the time he entered into a relationship with his Lord. He made considerable sacrifices in financial matters. He battled, successfully, against the petty vices of smoking and drinking and against various forms of the pride described in Lewis's "Great Sin" that tempted him toward the limelight of being too dominant and controlling in his ministry. But these struggles made his journey all the more authentic and effective.

BACK TO THE WHITE HOUSE

In the early years of the 21st century, Colson's journey took him back to the White House. He became something of a confidant of George W. Bush on issues relating to the rehabilitation and reemployment of prisoners. Their conversations resulted in some important executive and legislative initiatives in this field. But Colson's influence went further. On October 26, 2003, the lead story on the front page of *The New York Times* carried the headline "Evangelicals Sway White House on Human Rights

Issues Abroad." The first name mentioned in the article was Charles W. Colson. It was reported that he and others had persuaded the White House to take political initiatives toward ending the war in Sudan, halting sex trafficking, and preventing the global spread of HIV/AIDS.

Such achievements represented an ironic full circle in Colson's life story. As a young aide to the 37th President, Colson in the 1970s steered the White House toward activities that were the antithesis of Christian morality. By the early 2000s, the older Colson was having a considerable influence in a wholly Christian direction on several of the decisions and policies of the 43rd President.

These and other examples of Colson's legacy in politics, culture, the church, and Christian ministry have only been possible because amid the earthquake of Watergate, he heard the still small voice of God's call. He obeyed it and stayed faithful to it. As a result he has become a shining example of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and the redemptive blessings of God's grace. As many of his fellow Christians have said about him, God changed Charles Colson and used him for good. ✚

Jonathan Aitken is the author of *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed*. A reporter, writer, broadcaster, and campaigner for prison reform, Aitken spent 23 years as a member of British Parliament before pleading guilty to charges of perjury and serving a seven-month prison sentence. He is now a director of Prison Fellowship International and president of Christian Solidarity Worldwide.