



The Great Chuck Colson

by Jonathan Aitken

*The evil that men do lives after them
The good is oft interred with their bones
—Julius Caesar, act 3, scene 2*

THESE SHAKESPEAREAN LINES are applicable to Charles W. Colson, whose recent obituaries filled much space but shed too little light on one of the most transformed lives of the 20th century.

The problem was that secular journalists found it difficult to reconcile the hatchet man of Watergate with the humble—indeed, holy—man of prison ministry. The connection between these two Colsons was for most of the obituarists a bridge too far, which could be crossed only with skepticism. Yet to his Christian friends and associates, Chuck Col-

son's spiritual journey was an authentic modern parable of God's grace.

The paradox of the two Colsons is worth exploring because it focuses on a contemporary problem: the secular perception of spiritual reality. Colson himself never pretended to be anything other than what he really was. In the first half of his life, he was a ruthless political operator. In the second half, he was a servant of Jesus Christ. Between the two came the shattering experiences of failure, brokenness, and repentance. The stories of all three phases have been reported in the media, though usually rather superficially. What they deserve is deeper understanding.

As a political operator, Chuck Colson was nothing like the Satanic or sinister figure that some have painted. The opening line of the Associated Press's obituary described him as an "evil genius." Codswallop. He performed a handful of dirty tricks on the campaign trail, but so did plenty of other colorful characters in the '68 and '72 presidential elections—both Democrats and Republicans. "Chuck's got the balls of a brass monkey," said Nixon, who admired Colson's energy, chutzpah, and can-do spirit. His machinations look rather mild four decades later. The worst of them involved funding false committees, such as "Democrats for Muskie and Busing." Or getting Ted Kennedy photographed in a Paris nightclub dancing cheek to cheek with a starlet. As for the serious accusations against Colson—that he masterminded the Watergate break-in or planned to bomb the Brookings Institution—they were simply untrue.

Where Colson did go wrong was that by encouraging Nixon's darker instincts, he contributed to the unsavory moral climate of the White House in the 1968–72 period. The tapes of his conversations with the president in the Oval Office sounded tawdry, but not criminal. This presented the Watergate



prosecutors a problem. They suspected that Colson was the chief villain of the scandal, yet they could find no hard evidence against him.

While the criminal investigations were grinding away, Colson embarked on a spiritual journey. He started from a low base. As he often admitted, he 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 were.

The turning point in Colson’s life came soon after he 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.

At first, Colson thought his host’s religious views were “pure Pollyanna.” But “The Great Sin,” the chapter on pride in Lewis’ book, 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.”

At the instigation of Phillips, Colson was mentored by Doug Coe, an unorthodox but effective Washington pastor who led the Fellowship, a ministry for influential movers and shakers. Few of them wanted to touch Colson with a barge pole. Nevertheless, Coe twisted some arms and formed a prayer group to support the Watergate sinner. These prayer partners (they included the liberal Democratic Senator Harold Hughes, the nine-term Republican Congressman Al Quie from Minnesota, and former Democratic Congressman Graham Purcell from Texas) became Colson’s lifeline of spiritual support. 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 to “Love thy neighbour” 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 that Chuck Colson had become a man of prayer, cynicism poured over him by the

bucketful. But his repentance was genuine. 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 Watergate-related crimes. 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.

IN PRISON, HE BECAME the living embodiment of Martin Luther’s dictum: “It is in our pain and in our brokenness that we come closest to Christ.” When he was paroled after seven months, he wrote his best seller *Born Again* and founded Prison Fellowship, the Christian ministry that today offers prayerful and practical support to prisoners in more than 150 countries around the world.

Although Colson’s achievements as a Christian leader have been remarkable, still more important is his example. Back in Watergate times, his secular opponents hated his spiritual prominence and longed for him to stumble and fall. But by the time he passed away in April at the age of 80, he had confounded most of his critics, even if he still baffled some of his obituarists.

It matters little if the secular and spiritual perceptions of Chuck Colson are wide apart. He no longer has to worry what the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* say about him. But to his friends and fellow believers left behind on this earth, his story is utterly convincing—not because of him but because of the way the Lord used him.

In the earthquake of Watergate, Colson 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 will say about him, “God changed Charles Colson” and “God used him for good.” What an epitaph! ✠

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