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John Doty

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Editor

John Doty

Temporary Managing Editor

Steve Brooks

Contributors: Mel White, John Knight, Eric Behrens, Dick Price, Sue Crane, Dan Gallup

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New Year's Eve Revisited

John Doty

I didn't mind the water dripping down my neck, it was almost fun warming that straight-backed chair on Colorado Boulevard. I didn't even get too disturbed that people atop the bank building were showering us with firecrackers. Not even at midnight as the horns were honking, and the tires squealing, when a girl lurched out the door of a nearby tavern, slopping her beer all over the sidewalk and me as she tried to give me a New Year's something-or-other, not even then was I too surprised. But then something happened that caused a drift in the winds of my thinking that was only brought to consciousness upon re-reading Eric Behren's article on racism.

I was bringing some chairs to a spot my church had reserved for parade viewing New Year's day (an action in itself giving me "reservations") when a black guy about my age knocked the chairs out of my grasp. I spun around, brushing his arm away and in my worst Christian manner said sarcastically "thanks a lot." Then in a gesture that I can only speculate was the product of watching too many martial-arts films, he took an offensive Kung-fu like stance, indicating an increasing desire to play "musical chairs." Unfortunately he only looked to me like he was washing windows with both hands at the same time, so I laughed, not wanting to fight but trying hard to hide my fear. He caught me with a knat's-hair cross on the chin before his friend called him off. Apparently he was satisfied. I was frustrated, 'cause in my heart I like to be friends with people, but I knew my sarcasm had probably set him off.

Then just a few minutes later I heard the report that a Chicano gang had slit a man wide open with no apparent provocation. New Year's was somehow seeming old hat. I took a short rest at the church where they had opened the gym to transients like myself, and just lay there thinking all sorts of things about the kind of people "out cruisin'" on New Year's Eve. Never mind that I hated them, never mind that I wanted to bash their brains in as much as I assumed they might bash mine. Total self-centeredness. I couldn't have been able to call even one of them by name, least of all to think that I could judge them. But there I was.

I hope in God's grace that I'll never be "there" again.

I'm thankful that I know persons.

I pray that the irrelavent differences which can cause so much superficial misunderstanding will not be my excuse to not know someone again.

In Jesus' name.
In The Presence of Mine Enemies is the latest film produced by Fuller's Assistant Professor of Communications, Mel White. Many of us have seen his films A Matter of Conscience and Though I Walk Through the Valley, both dealing with very real, yet difficult issues in the Christian life: taking a stand against America's military conscription; and facing death and dying. Now he has made a film about an American pilot shot down over North Vietnam, and how faith in God brought him and his family safely through the ordeal.

The first question to start off with takes us clear back to last Spring when all the P.O.W.'s started coming home. What moved you to make In the Presence of Mine Enemies?

My wife and I were in Palm Springs. I read in the paper about a P.O.W. who came back, and the first thing he did was to go to church. The LA Times correspondent (a rather sophisticated, tongue-in-cheek type) said that he was honestly impressed by what the P.O.W. said at church. At the end of the Southern Baptist service the P.O.W. went forward and joined the church. He had been a church drop out for 20 years. He had no contact with the religious community during that time. During the seven and one half years in prison (5 years in solitary confinement) he decided that by dropping out of church he had cut himself off from probably the best source of strength for his life, and so he decided in the camp that if released he would go back and join the church immediately. When I read this story I immediately tried to phone him to ask if it were really true. I couldn't get through to him so I called his pastor whose name was also in the Times. Fortunately, his pastor had just seen Though I Walk Through the Valley, my film on death and dying, and so he pulled strings and then a chief of Navy chaplains (who also uses my films) pulled strings. Eventually the Pentagon let me see him (They were really guarding both themselves, and being guarded by the Pentagon because there were a lot of other men still in and they feared recriminations).

Now, why did I choose a P.O.W. for a film subject? In mass media we have to be aware of issues that everybody is tuned into. Then, we piggyback those issues. If that's where the people are, if we can possibly, with any kind of integrity, use those issues to get their attention for larger issues, we should. In this contemporary moment people suffer from sensory overload. They tend, for self-preservation to weed out almost everything except what's loudest, what they can't weed out. The P.O.W. issue was big news, whether you thought it was being manipulated by the President or just good news for folks glad that an ordeal was over for them, and almost to be over for all of us.
Everyone was thinking P.G.W. There was no way to weed this issue out. So, I said "Okay, everybody's tuned into the P.G.W. thing, if this man has integrity and his family really was helped by the Christian church, and he really was sustained by his faith, what would be wrong with writing on that issue, especially this dimension of that issue?" The Christian faith dimension. So, that's why I did it.

Do you think that the film succeeded in just those "ifs"? The integrity of the Christian faith?

That's a good question. Since we're talking about three projects, a film, a book, and a funny book, the question has to be answered in three different ways. I started out making the film. With a film, you have pretty much control because you can edit, and cut and splice and be very careful. With a book you have less, plus the focus in a film has to be so, so "tight", right? You only have 30 minutes, and very little can be said in thirty minutes. You can almost be sure that you will have to weed out. For example, I wanted to weed out all the war polemics, the issues of whether the war was right or wrong. I did not want these issues to be a concern there. They couldn't be settled by this particular person in this particular context. It was too early for him to comment on the wider historical issues, in terms of historical perspective. This man first of all wasn't equipped to give historical perspective, and I wasn't interested in historical perspective. At this time I was really looking for a "faith-support" kind of statement, rather than being a polemic statement. I feel like that's another problem, another issue. Communicating today, we have to narrow down the field, and in narrowing it down, you know, as we broaden our base, we thin out our content. And so I have to be really satisfied many times in mass media to say a lot less than I'd like to say, for the sake of being heard on anything. The film, I think, avoids quite well the polemical issues of the war. I have been faulted on this. "Why did you avoid those issues?" "Those issues are the primary issues, you should have talked about how bad the war is, how the prisoners were being manipulated." All these are things people were saying. My whole point was to make a statement of faith to piggyback on a P.G.W. issue that everybody was hearing about in a popular medium. I feel like I succeeded in the film. I succeeded less in the book, although the book is being very successful in terms of the numbers of people reading it.

Why did you avoid the "issues" again?

The subject is not particularly philosophical, or theological, and the man is a doer, an active kind of guy. When I wrote the book, I had to write it as if he were writing it, right? So all the issues that plagued this country, that plagued a lot of us for so long, were not issues to him, and for me to write, on top of where he was, all those issues would have been unfair.
In a lot of ways, three months ago, you seem sort of uptight or defensive about what you had done with the film, like it was really (pause) immoral for you to have made it.

Oh, I didn't mean to infer immorality.

No, I mean..

But uptight I was.

in the sense of untrue to your conscience.

Untrue in the sense that so many things were not said, and I was nervous about that then. I think I feel less nervous about it now. It's funny how when you're reinforced by a lot of people on both sides of the war issue, saying "I can't agree with his position about the war, but I can't deny how God has helped him and his family," and "It was really helpful for me to think that God is still alive." I get that kind of feedback from right and left and center, enough that you say "yee, well the reason he wrote it, or filmed it is working.

How then do you react to criticism?

The guy on the right or the guy on the left can keep pulling me apart as critics, but I tell them, I'm the one who's going to have that film on the screen. So just keep tearin' fellas, but I'm the one who's going to produce. I'm going to hear you on the right, and I'm going to hear you on the left, but in the mean time, every few months, I have to commit, I have to burn the bridges that say I can go back, or that I can go to the left a little more or to the right a little more. I've got to put it out there. Once it's said and done all the criticism you make is fine, but know this: I've produced. And that's a good feeling to say to the pastor or the guy who writes a little article for the Opinion, or for any other periodical. It says basically "I've committed myself." I'm a disposable medium. I'm somebody who'll jog somebody's thoughts for a minute, whether rightly or wrongly, then I'll be thrown away just like something else that's disposable.

In a real sense then you end up being the one who lays his life down, who takes the risk for the truth.

Yes, takes the risk.

Now the integrity issue for me is "should you raise the hard questions every time?" In mass media you can't. So the question boils right down to "What should Mel White do with his time and energies?" Should he be content to do "faith-support" issues? And here I have to say this is a bread and butter project. My best films, my favorite films are bombs. They are not rented. Though I Walk Through the Valley has won the Golden Eagle, the silver medal at the Atlanta Film Festival, the National Council on Family Relations Film Festival, National Evangelical film documentary of the year award. Still, nobody rents it.
I mean last month it was number 24 of Gospel Films total library. It was the twenty-fourth from the top, and I just dare you to look at what goes in between to see what the problem is. Yet even so, what is really exciting is that the secular community is really using Though I Walk Through the Valley; libraries, national and city libraries, universities, medical schools, hospitals, Veteran's Administration hospitals, but few people in churches are renting the film. Now and then I have to do a faith-support film that makes enough income that I can make other kinds of films.

You're a Christian film-maker who has been pastorally trained and I suppose in that sense it would be fair to say a lot of what you're doing is like a pastor leading a flock. How do you (it's hard to make this into a question, but it ties in with "What kinds of questions do you raise?" and "What kind of a congregation do you have?") How far can you go in leading them, and how much do you just accept the fact that they have limitations? Have you come to the point yet where you feel you've stepped out, say like a pastor might in his church, and really take a stand challenging the people?

I don't think that film medium is a place which you can take very many stands. The qualifiers there "very many are very important to me because if I can't take any stands I should get out. But a film costs me 30,000 dollars and up to make. Once you've invested that kind of money in making a stand there's no nobility to it if nobody sees it. You haven't made a stand at all. You've only wasted money. What good is a "good film" that nobody sees?

How do you make a stand in film? You have to make a stand that still is saleable on the marketplace. Take for example a film like Though I Walk Through the Valley. Here's a man that doesn't get healed, and people say "Why didn't they pray more for his healing?" "Why wasn't he healed?" Here's a film where one of the children of the man smokes a cigarette, "Why is that being shown in our church?" Here's a film where the charismatic sees it in terms of a great failure, a non-Christian film. Some people even say there's not any Gospel in it. People say it's worldly because there are people smoking as well as saying these "doubting" things. So the first question I would raise is "What is a stand in the midst of a Christian world with that kind of mix?" For me to come out a make a stand about death and dying would be a very tricky kind of process (right?), and still be heard by them. The pastor who rents the film, goes down and previews it usually wanting a film to fill in on a Sunday night, or whatever. So how do you make a stand?

To me the death film Though I Walk Through the Valley was taking a stand. "You have to be realistic, we're all going to die." "There are a lot of prayers that are not being answered." We have to be realistic, people ask "doubtful" questions. Let's get out there and take a look at death like we've not seen it before, watch a man die, and struggle with those issues. That's a stand. Okay, the film is winning awards, and

cont'd on back leaf
BECAUSE GOD IS WHO HE IS  a film review

John Knight

The Mel White production In the Presence of Mine Enemies is a film which should and will receive many plaudits. The introductory shots immediately interest and involve the viewer. The editing is tight. Every element of the film is included for an effectively achieved purpose. The human interest is warm, touching and yet bland. The unthinking viewer is readily impressed by the reminder that God in Christ Jesus reaches out to every man in every circumstance and will receive any one who will respond to His love. The thinking viewer remembers the now released "Hanoi Hilton" prisoner was shot down while on a mission of death and destruction.

God was not with the American prisoners of war because they were Americans, or because they were tall and white instead of short and yellow, or because they had families who loved them, or because their wives happened to be members of the local Baptist Church, or even because those local congregations prayed for them. God was with the POW's because God is who He is. I am convinced that God was as much with the short yellow, communist, North Vietnamese POW's held in American controlled prisons as He was with those Americans who rained death and destruction from the sky.

He, our Lord will receive any who will respond to His loving outreach and the demand of His sovereignty. The viewer of this film who regards American killer pilots as monsters who God must hate, must be reminded of the truth of the first sentence in this paragraph. At the other extreme, the viewer who regards the American, professional destroyers as "our boys, God love 'em" who God must hold in special esteem must be reminded that, ... God so loved the world that He gave His Son.

When you see this film, as a thinking viewer, you will want to retain pictures in your mind of short yellow men and women working in North Vietnamese factories when suddenly you hear the distinctive shrill roar of an American killer jet overhead. Then picture the murderous rockets firing from the wings of the flying technological weapon as the camera zooms in on the factory. The rockets strike. There are explosions, screams, people running. Some are on fire, and next to you lying on the floor, with her arms and legs twisted at awkward angles like a rag doll, is a young mother who will not return home to her child because she has been disemboweled by a piece of shrapnel. Hold this picture in mind when you hear the pilot in Mel White's film say that the first prayer he had said in 20 years was "Thank you Lord," when he safely ejected from his plane seconds before it exploded over North Vietnam.

I suggest these reminders because anyone viewing this film who responds to the evangelistic invitation at the end must respond to the God of the Universe not to Mom, flags snapping in the breeze, down home Antioch Baptist Church and bland apple pie sentimentality. If we are going to couch the Gospel in current popular human interest, let's be certain that we call people to the real God and not to the creation we make in our image, our God who has our appearance, likes what we like, and hates what we hate.
Some books are such that the reader feels regret upon realizing that he has just finished the last page. The book gripped him, involved him so deeply in its story, that a sense of loneliness and disappointment overtakes him as the book is closed. Such were some of my feelings as I finished Dr. Paul K. Jewett's Annotated Readings in Racial Prejudice.

The readings, most of which are selections from black writers, very effectively cover many aspects of the black experience. The eloquence of Eldridge Cleaver's style, the beauty and power of some of DuBois' writings, and the shocking matter-of-fact reports of white American bestiality against black Americans present an overwhelming picture of almost unparalleled sin. Glimpses into the psyches of blacks ranging from artisans such as Paul Robeson, Sammy Davis Jr., and Richard Wright, to statesmen such as Frederick Douglass, to the little known Ben Chaney (brother of the murdered black civil rights worker James Chaney) often become distressing eye openers to a world filled with fear, self-deprecation, and tragedy.

As I was reading this incredible collection of writings, several soothing thoughts kept bravely struggling for recognition: "these writings are dated," "I've read many studies on prejudice before, this is nothing new," "I'm not contributing to racial prejudice." The last thought was chilled by a statement which I used to dismiss as a radical cliche, but which is too true to ignore comfortable: "he who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it." When my hurt conscience tried to argue that "this isn't happening today, we've come a long way in America" it was rebuffed by the fact that I had recently received a mailing from the Southern Poverty Law Center; some of the contemporary results of prejudice which it depicted were as horrifying, shocking, and appalling as much of what I read in the syllabus. And finally, the fact that what I was reading was nothing "new" was a false consolation: if anything, it showed me how easily one can "desensitize" oneself to some of the more blatant illustrations of the power of sin in the world.

Dr. Jewett's notes on the readings made two very important points: (1) racial prejudice is a sin in that it denies the Biblical teaching that all men are created in the image of God; (2) it is time to stop telling the blacks that all they need do is take advantage of the manifold opportunities America has to offer. As Dr. Jewett puts it, "The answer to America's race problem is not more Negroes who prove themselves superior, but more whites who prove themselves courageous enough to stand against the prejudice of their fellow whites at all costs." (p.205)

To the oft repeated question: "But what can I do?" Dr. Jewett's bulletin offers eleven concrete, specific, practical ideas which are not overwhelmingly difficult to apply. They range from the relatively safe "contribute regularly to an organization, under black leadership, devoted to evangelistic effort" to the more risky "visit black churches better to appreciate their manner of worship." These suggestions are found in the back of the syllabus on yellow sheets with boxes where the student can check off those ideas he plans to implement. Tragically, Dr. Jewett mentioned in class near the end of the course that the response to the "check sheets" has been remarkably low since he first introduced the syllabus. Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, the brilliant black sociologist, once stated: "Of all groups devoted to social uplift, I have least hope in the white Christian minister." I hope he was wrong. From my personal activities and my experience at Fuller, I fear he was right.
In view of the long years of experience and impressive academic credentials of Dr. Orville Walters, I was somewhat hesitant when asked to respond to his lectures. In addition, I wasn't able to attend either the lecture or the discussion given on Thursday so I cannot take what he said there into account. Nevertheless, after Dr. Barker's inspiring chapel talk, I decided to venture an opinion anyway. Here goes.

I want to buy the published form of the lectures when they become available. Dr. Walter's survey of the development of psychoanalytic thought in relation to religion and the response of religious spokesmen to the influence of psychoanalysis was very interesting and seemed to be comprehensive within the allowed limits. He demonstrated a thorough acquaintance with the literature in both areas. One point which I felt he should have made clear, however, is the distinction between healthy and unhealthy religion. In his citing of references, I did not hear this distinction made by Dr. Walters or by the persons quoted. My tendency is to agree with the pastoral psychologist, Wayne Cates, who feels that much of that attacked by Freud and labeled religion should find no place in healthy Christian faith and practice. When I mentioned this point to Dr. Walters after his Wednesday lectures, he replied that Freud made no effort to relate to the true faith or to give it fair consideration and, in failing to do so, placed himself in a position diametrically opposed to religion, both good and bad.

I got the feeling from this personal talk and from the discussion period on Wednesday that the long years of defending his evangelical position against various antagonistic viewpoints had made him rather rigid and generally hostile toward the larger field of psychoanalysis. In a way, I don't blame him at all. I can imagine how much flak he must have caught over the years because of his Christian stance. On the other hand, I had the feeling he was closed to the exploration of integrative possibilities between psychoanalysis and the Christian faith. For example, on Wednesday afternoon, one member of the faculty related his own conversion and stated that he felt the experience had been thrust upon him rather than its having been a conscious decision on his part. Walters objected to this understanding on the basis that it did violence to man's free will.

He and others maintained that the faculty member had exercised a conscious decision process in his interpretation of the experience in a Christian framework and that this decision had been the actual point of conversion. The whole dialogue struck me as a rather rigid rejection of a Calvinistic view of election on the basis of a philosophical presupposition that seemed to have been formed in reaction to the determinism of psychoanalysis.

I hope I have not misrepresented the position of Dr. Walters. I would welcome hearing from anyone who understood him differently. He did seem to be an honest, sincere, and dedicated scholar, physician, and Christian. However, I don't think the presentations he made in the Finch Symposium spoke adequately to the questions concerning the integration of theology and psychoanalysis in my mind or in the minds of several other students who have expressed their opinions to me.
Fifteen thousand people singing "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name."
Eight people studying God's word together and sharing their lives.
Two people talking about their life goals and the possibility of attending seminary. These are the things I enjoyed most about Urbana.

Fifteen thousand Christians listening, singing, worshipping and sharing communion together is impressive in itself. God's presence pervaded the entire conference. It was a memorable experience just to be with a mass of people who had come together to find out more about what it meant for Jesus to be Lord of the universe and Lord of their lives. I was not excited, and sometimes not even interested, by the speakers, but I think that was partly the result of being spoiled by experiences at Fuller.

The people I got to know best were the girls in my Bible study group. Eight of us met each morning for breakfast and each evening for prayer. And we spent time together during the day. We were a diverse group; different ages, different interests, from different parts of the U.S. and Canada, with different needs and goals. God brought us together and used us in each other's lives.

Most of all I enjoyed the time I spent at the Fuller booth. The huge armory was completely filled with booths, books and thousands of people. Many stopped to talk. I really enjoyed discussing their goals, their present ministries and their specific plans for seminary. This time was personally important to me because it was an affirmation of the counseling abilities I believe I have.

The one outstanding impression I kept having at Urbana was that God was doing a lot of things in a lot of people's lives in a lot of different places. He sure is busy! That's what made those four days particularly significant.
HOME FROM URBANA

God spoke to me at Urbana, and I'm deeply grateful for the awesome privilege of being able to go. Unexpectedly, amidst the myriad of situations wherein we were all confronted with possibilities of service abroad, God seemed to be speaking otherwise to me. As I talked with students from across the United States and Canada, I was quite surprised to hear several raise important questions regarding their own (often Inter-Varsity) ministries back home. Again and again the "how to" of ministry was the issue with these students, and they often didn't have any answers. Students were attending a missionary conference without the knowledge to even be ministers here at home.

It was exciting to share many of the ministry principles that I've grown up with, having worked under Chuck Miller at Lake Avenue Congregational Church, and more exciting to see an "aha!" or two in a perplexed collegian as his problem would be put back in a Biblical perspective and in a Biblical framework of ministry. Having with me some of the collegians I know well at Lake Avenue Church, I more looked forward to meal conversations with other delegates, than to any other time. By the end of Urbana I felt more convinced that God had indeed called me to remain in the United States to serve the youth of the American Church; an interesting conviction coming at a missionary convention.

Praise God for foreign missions, several in our group sensed this was God's call for them, and praise God for those to whom America is a field.

Dan Gallup
everybody likes it. My colleagues, a lot of them, like it, but it's a flop. Not really a flop, because enough people are renting it that it will one day pay back what it cost to make. But then along comes a chance to make the P.C.W. film, simply a faith-support film that says "when you're separated and isolated from your family, when your world has collapsed and you find yourself in untenable circumstances, God and the local church can really help you!" To reassure people of that, to underline that seems to me, an evidence of God at work, seems to me a very important kind of stand to take now and then. The only reason I say I shouldn't do that all the time is that there are so many people doing that kind of thing, I really see my role as being more daring than that, especially being at Fuller where truth is dissected and analyzed and people are real and honest.

That's why the next film I'm planning is a film on a Christian couple facing separation, even divorce. A Christian marriage coming apart at the seams. We're hoping to follow a couple as they're working on that. Another film that I'm right now in the scripting stages is a film called Reunion, where we're bringing back a group of fifteen high school students 10 years after their high school graduation from an evangelical church youth group to see what's happened to them through college and out into their careers. Where did their Christian education break down and what happened? But P.C.W. Films are the ones that are going to finance both of those projects, plus the death film. So when you talk about taking a pastoral stand, I feel like a pastor has to choose his stands, take them wisely, sometimes win, sometimes lose, always wondering if he's gone far enough or too far. But in the process getting better and better and hopefully more successful and more efficient in making a stand.

Thank-you.