5-29-1970

Correspondence between Chalk & Harold Straughn (4 letters)

Harold Straughn
May 29, 1970

Mr. Harold Straughn
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Dear Harold:

Your letter of May 12 was a masterpiece in insight and personal faith. I have read and re-read it and can't even begin yet to express my personal reactions to it. It came at a time when I badly needed it and the temptation was to interpret it in two directions, allowing it to be the basic support for my decision to go to Calif.

On Wednesday, the 13th, I notified Norvel Young that I would be coming to Pepperdine as Provost of the School of Law. I immediately began to have serious misgivings. I continued to wrestle with these misgivings, bouncing from yes to no almost with every passing hour. I began to get conflicting advice from friends, some of whom offered advice on both sides of the question (according to what my position at the moment happened to be). It became a very confused time and a very spiritually agonizing time.

Your "boundary situation" approach meant a great deal to me. I almost allowed it to be the justification for a bad decision, as I now see it. Upon reflection, however, I saw that it also offered a way for me to continue working here and, in fact, it probably best described how I have operated emotionally and personally here at Highland.

I, therefore, came to the conclusion on Wednesday, May 20, that I had made a bad decision and so notified Norvel Young. He had a beautiful attitude about it and seemed to understand completely. I explained to him that I simply had not been here long enough and there was still a very clear mission for me here. He accepted this decision graciously and indicated his continuing interest in the possibility down the road of my working with Pepperdine. I went to the Highland elders that same Wednesday and had a very positive meeting with them. I described the Pepperdine offer, my reasons for considering it, why I had decided to recommit myself to
this work for the next twelve months, and what I believe would be some of the priorities for these months.

I sense an increasing rush into denominationalism on the part of churches of Christ in America. A recent front-page article in Gospel Advocate by Guy N. Woods took the Elk City, Oklahoma creed that our elders were stampeded into signing two years ago by Frank Cawyer and urged that the creed be adopted and used for all sorts of interrogation for Bible teachers and preachers. The Lectureship topic for Freed-Hardeman College next year is one in which the church in all its denominational hardness will be presented. The need to preach the free Biblical word in an institutional church is paramount. That freedom I have here at Highland, provided I can continue to do the kind of depth study and homework for that kind of preaching. I felt, therefore, to move away from this particular podium at this particular moment in the history of our fellowship could be a misuse of the stewardship of my gift of the ministry of the word.

I want us to proceed full steam ahead with the proposed television series. I am very interested in it and will do everything in my power to be a responsible part of whatever may develop. You may know by now of the leaving of Wyman Wilkerson and David Fry. Wyman left under some pressure and David voluntarily decided to move to Oklahoma City and work with the Waugh brothers. This means that all of the film work for the future may be in an uncertain position. You, however, should proceed according to your own best judgment in preparing the case statement and the proposal.

Thank you for the help your last letter provided. It was deeply appreciated by both Sue and me. We send our love and prayers for this period in the lives of all of you to be rich and enlightening.

Your brother,
May 12, 1970

Dear John,

I'll grab a minute and set down some things in response to your letter that expresses some openness to the proposal I recently made.

You and I seem to approach the idea of your participation in a television series. I share your apprehensions, sighs of despair, angry attacks—self-inflicted as well as others-inflicted. I might be bold enough to say I think my apprehensions go even deeper than yours, and deeper than many, perhaps you included, might think. Were I to make a long and specific list of the sources of this alienation and apprehension, I would only be dropping back into a sophomoric past, in which the hours of most of the days of several years have been spent. I would like to think that any more time spent mining that vein for me at least would indicate no more than a good memory, and not a particularly clear indication of prophetic insight.

As you and I mull over our respective vocational consciousness (you know, "What do I call myself?"), I feel that the only difference between us is one of space. I don't mean distance, of course. I mean the space around you and the space around me. The space around you is filled with cries of ignorance, spiritual poverty, the loss of a sense of the times, and you struggle to answer the cries as best you can. The space around me is filled with cries of a different order, so that my answers have to vary accordingly. You may find only a stifling...
of the intellect, of spirit, of history. I do not. I find myself in but not of the church, where you perhaps find yourself in (not so much as you'd like to) but not of the world. I'm willing to tolerate a great deal from people whose backgrounds and values I can't control, both in the church and the agency, asking only to be tolerated myself as we make common cause for whatever variety of reasons we are drawn together. Surely nobody doubts that NBC, Batzell Barrett Baxter, local TV viewers all over America, fundamentalist old ladies, purveyors and consumers of vaginal odor sprays, and many others, as well as myself, station managers, FCC regulators, Joan, Nichols, and Louie Smith, to name some examples—nobody doubts that the motives that bring us in contact with each other are mixed motives, to say the least. To the extent that any of us find satisfaction, to that extent miracles have not ceased. I do believe there are some who can comprehend, and creatively and responsibly guide, this entangling alliance better than others. There are some who can identify and identify with the backgrounds of the diverse elements. The who do their best, win. I am no more alienated from the Highland elders or my agency colleagues than I am from any of the elements of the "universal community in microcosm" that produces the TV program. I say microcosm because if all these competing and mutually exclusive elements can work together, then maybe it's a sign the rest of the world can too. It's not the only such microcosm of
generation of students. And so my personal space has to include both, even though I am aware of the shortcoming. I couldn't really write better scripts if I lived in Abilene, though some people think I could. I couldn't really write a better dissertation if I'd just jink my background, though there are pressures to do so.

This all is meaningful to you only because you described a similar feeling of helplessness over the situation of living in Abilene, ideally, by being there on the spot, you ought to be able to help things better than I can halfway around the world. But if you are drained and discouraged, you'd just as well be someplace else better off, if that someplace else offered you the opportunity to find your resources again, and you'd be better off freely to choose to leave than to have the body reject you violently as foreign matter.

I'd like to ask whether you think you could attempt the kind of service you envision while still living in Abilene. Ignore for the moment the staff, elder, agency problems and isolate your own case. Could you? I'm asking myself that question on the basis of its debilitating effect on you. Maybe you could do it better, if at all, by seeking your own in-but-not-of situation. I don't know. Maybe that TV communicative thing of the NCC in Atlanta-I've seen some good stuff off theirs here, Or California, Or Timbuktu.
The pressures are mounting on me from both sides and I've got to make a decision on how far to commit myself, how many risks to take. I'd be willing to make a much deeper commitment, to take more risks, knowing you would be prepared to do so. There are no insurmountable obstacles, no irreplaceable elements in this network of juggernauts, the name of one side of which is "Herald of Truth." In fact, the centrifugal force is greater than the centripetal, and the difficult job is keeping things together, not knocking off things. If you think any particular person in the agency is indispensable, or that the agency itself is indispensable, or the Highland Church, or its elders, or any eldership, or brotherhood support, or any of the other elements are indispensable, then you haven't probed or dreamed enough. You know, what if it got so good that the agency couldn't handle it, the elders couldn't oversee it, the brotherhood couldn't support it—what if it got so good that the networks finally had to buy it and air it as public affairs? Or what if it got so self-centered and self-righteous that the agency could crow, the elders could approve, the brotherhood could pour its money and love into every word and picture—what if it got so popular in this two-tree forest of ours that nobody else cared? Do you think that network standards or station acceptance are indispensable? If you do, you've not thought about World Radio....

Because of feeling in but not of, I feel able to tolerate that which I cannot change and I feel able to change.
in an infinite number of them. But only some are
conscious of this. The rest are manipulated by them.
Of course all of us are manipulated by forces over which
we have, or cannot take time to control. The choices we
have to make are about which forces to submit to
(For example, the climate in Abilene) and which ones to
attempt to control (injustice and ignorance among people
we care about).

I made a somewhat fundamental decision about which forces
to attempt to control when I decided on a vocation that allows
me to be in a religious community of my upbringing and
later, of my voluntary choice, and also in an academic
community. By choosing such a "boundary" situation,
I have to realize that I'm not as valuable to either one
as I would be if I quit the other. But I believe I'm most
valuable in both situations by being in but not of. If I were
to stake everything on the religious community, say by staying
in Abilene or some similar place, I would see as many
things to frustrate me, as many things I would feel called
on to change, that eventually I would be worn down
and run completely out of spiritual resources, to become
one of the helpless instead of one of those who can serve.
In the same way, I feel that permanent allegiance to the
Government could be equally disastrous for me personally,
with curbs on my freedom and implications in situations
over which I have no control, the knowledge establishment
that always comes as a shock to each new
many things that are intolerable. The wisdom to tell the difference? Well, that depends a lot on you, for one thing. What can be changed and what must be tolerated? You can help answer the question.

I'm ready to decide to continue as long as I can, if I see possibilities becoming realities. I think you would be more able to tolerate things and more able to change them, if you had a better place to stand. But who knows, maybe you'll suddenly catch your second wind (a secular term for sanctification by the Holy Spirit as a second work of grace) right where you are.

So, I'd be willing to try it if you'd be willing to try it, and I'd be willing to risk if you'd be willing to risk, but probably not otherwise. If we really committed ourselves to it, I believe we could put together a corps that could (to quote myself, p. 2) “comprehend, and creatively and responsibly guide,” and could “identify with the backgrounds of the diverse elements.”

Something will change. It'll change my creativity and spiritual outlet, or I'll change the outlet. You'll be helping me make up my mind. I hope I can help you while you make up yours.

Your brother,

[Signature]
May 6, 1970

Mr. Harold Straughn
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Dear Harold:

Your letter of April 16 came as quite a surprise. I had not thought at all in terms of the things you said. I obviously like the idea and would be glad to work with it in whatever way I could.

I have not read "The Bridge" script as yet. I also understand that James has a proposal floating around over here for me to appear in some kind of television series that is in some way connected with his New York activities. At this point, no one in the Herald of Truth organization has mentioned a word of it to me. I feel at times as if I am being systematically excluded from planning and discussion sessions. However, I know that Clois and others are doing everything they can to keep from putting more and more things on my schedule. This means that I have to live with the frustrated sense of not knowing any part of the things going on. I do have some real questions about the viability of the Herald of Truth organization. I really don't see anyone outside yourself, including the men in television in Dallas and Don Cusenberry, in whom I have a lot of confidence regarding their creativity. I strongly believe any move of mine into television would require the best possible creative talent working with me to make it decently effective.

This also applies to the 60 minute specials being contemplated. I frankly do not see the men on the scene who can pull off a moving television special. I must be very honest and say that I'm deeply pessimistic about both the amount of money involved and the effectiveness of any end product.
April 16

Dear John,

Ever since you and I talked in Abilene in March, I've been formulating an idea that involves you. I haven't discussed it with anyone else.

If you haven't had a chance to do so yet, I hope you will obtain a copy of my script 9466, "The Bridge" (not Don's screenplay, but my script, which are two rather different things). If you feel you need a reason for seeing it, just let Bob or his secretary know that I've asked you to look at it. It's very possible of course that you've kept right up with our plans to let Humphrey and Eliza Bellsell (and the rest of White Christian America) through the Baltimore ghetto surrounding the Pilsner Soul Church. You may already know all about the plan not to adhere to a script, but to make it more spontaneous. Bellsell and Humphrey familiarize themselves with the material I have written, not so much to repeat the words as to cover the topics I have covered. Then the film would be put together at the editing stage. But would be glad to fill you in on all this in case you've been left behind.

In discussions with Alman, Bellsell, Bob, and Claire, it's becoming increasingly clear that plans for next year will be considerably different from the past. It looks like we're thinking about 13 films instead of 30, with the extra time and money going for a 30 or 60-minute
prime-time special, along with 5-minute radio commentaries and 1-minute TV spots. This summer I hope to lay out a proposal on all this. The 13 films would replace 13 of the ones now in the Search for Happiness series that includes 30 written by Dan Kaske and 30 by me. The idea is to make 13 new ones and drop 13 old ones every year so that we always have 60 titles in use, with a virtually complete turnover every four years.

Now the idea that I've kept to myself is simply that I wish you could be the man to do the 13 films each year, continuing the more spontaneous, live-action, loosely scripted format that we're experimenting with on "The Bridge.

Your role would be somewhat more that of an interviewer than that of a commentator as Batzell has been in the last 30 shows. By asking the right questions of the right people, you would elicit the right answers to the right issues, or at least more powerfully than posing as one who knows all the questions and all the answers yourself.

Perhaps you have doubts about TV. I believe the more spontaneous format suits you far better than the lecture format of the 600 series, and furthermore you would be free to say the things you believe should be said instead of being fed distasteful lines.
According to this plan I would write 13 scripts much like "The Bridge" in format. They would be attempts for you to reveal the stories of Christians on the cutting edge: men and women who are involved in ministering to the campus, in the factories, to businessmen, etc., as well as people who see a way to express their faith creatively as politicians, housewives, laborers, students, professors, millionaires, salesmen. I think of people like Ray Osborne and Prentice Hester, Fred Gray, Louise Welch, Pat Boone, Kenneth Hahn, and many others as possibilities. Each has a story to tell and it would be my responsibility as well as yours to help bring it to the surface in just the right way appropriate to the particular personality. The challenge would be to show the various ministries as models to follow, as incarnate examples of Christ's work being done in the world, admirable but more important, practical enough for the ordinary viewer to gain something.

If you can see the possibilities in this, and can see yourself taking a part in it, consider what I have in mind for the following year, after 13 films featuring members of the Church of Christ, we stretch out and give you confrontations with non-members, and not only that but Christianity hostile people. Some might have legitimate reasons for hostility, others perhaps not carrying a sympathetic following. But your challenge would be to listen, to reflect, and to reply. (Five minutes will be allowed for you to baptize the person at the end if it is needed.)
In this series I have in mind the Eldridge Cleaver, the Bette Hoffmanns, the Matelina Murays, the Mark Fashettas, the Timothying Learys, the George Wallaces and Robert Shettens of the day. This idea is remote in time and appears even more remote in possibility, so we need not go into much further detail on it.

What I'd like you to do is to think about the idea as it's roughly sketched here, decide whether you're interested in trying pursuing it further, and to point out specific problems, changes, and objectives you have to the way it looks now.

One obvious question mark is whether Patell will continue with the filming and if so for how long. I'd like to see him continue on radio a while and to climax his TV career by co-hosting the TV special with you. The special, tentatively called "Celebration of New Life," would be a documentary/variety format with segments long and short of people from every economic, educational, social, and cultural background telling how the new life in Christ has changed things. I don't intend either to rush or to appear to dictate Patell's decision, but I think it's being responsible to begin to form some possibilities and not leave it all to chance.

Give me the benefit of some of your reactions in the near future.