

Will Campbell

Rumor has it that a certain editor of *The Other Side* received a "smart ass" refusal just for asking Will D. Campbell for an interview. Campbell does not *do* interviews. The chastised editor failed to warn me before I made a similar request.

Campbell turned me down too, but he did offer to visit. So when he came to Chicago this past May to address a seminary alumni gathering, he and I visited between sessions. We found ourselves getting acquainted in a children's playground, on wobbly chairs in a dark and tacky bar, beside my picnic table at home, and zooming down Chicago expressways in a Volkswagon Rabbit. We discussed children, child care, playground swings, farming, gardening, birds, music, and—very occasionally— theology.

Will Campbell was trying to tell me something. He is leery of journalists who use people to make a point. Moreover, he is not keen on any formalized relationships—whether it's journalist/interviewee, teacher/student, minister/parishioner, or leader/follower. When he saw my tape recorder, he lamented, "Even Mennonites use those things!" He later approvingly cited Ivan Illich's assertion that "the Holy Spirit does not come down a wire."

In other words, Campbell was glad to be a friend, but he refuses to be a subject or even a teacher. "I am not a theologian, and I intend to prove that."

Will D. Campbell is in his early sixties. His oval, bespectacled face is gentle and friendly. His thin hair is turning gray, while the top of his balding head is freckled and brown from farming his forty acres in Tennessee.

When he puts on his broad-brimmed Amish hat and picks up his hand-carved cane, his slightly hunched frame seems strikingly familiar. I couldn't help but remark: "You look like the Reverend Will B. Dunn!" Campbell retorted, "You mean that rumor has gotten all the way up here?" He then quickly denied any connection with the cartoon televangelist. Yes, there are superficial

IN THE GREAT COMPANY OF GOD'S GRACE

resemblances: irreverent wit, tobacco chewing, black hat, and walking stick. As a matter of fact, Campbell is a friend of Dunn's creator, Doug Marlette. (Marlette and his wife were married by Campbell.) But all that is "just a coincidence," Campbell assured me. "Dunn puts the bow of his hat on the right and I put mine on the left," he explained, gingerly putting his hand up to feel if indeed the bow of his hat was on the left. It wasn't.

I recall a counseling session Rev. Will B. Dunn had with perpetually perplexed Kudzu, who asked, "Being a minister must be really hard, huh, preacher? I mean, living for others, leading an exemplary life! That's a lot of responsibility! The pressures must be tremendous! Having to set a good example! People watching, waiting for one false move, one sign of human frailty they can jump on! I don't know how you handle it!" Dunn paused a moment, then explained, "I stay home a lot."

I wondered: is it also "just a coincidence" Campbell dislikes interviews?

Will Campbell is a pastor without a steeple, bootleg preacher, free-lance civil-rights activist, author, sculptor, songwriter, and country-music fan. He grows corn and vegetables in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, and ministers just about everywhere.

Campbell recounts his life and involvements in *Brother to a Dragonfly* (which won several awards) and in his latest book, *Forty Acres and a Goat*. In person, he is a masterful and humorous storyteller—a fact reflected by the absorbing tales which fill his books.

Born and raised in Amite County, Mississippi, Campbell comes from a family of poor Southern farmers who experienced the hardships of the Depression. At seventeen, his local congrega-

tion ordained him to be a preacher.

A graduate of the Yale Divinity School, Campbell briefly pastored a congregation before becoming the director of religious life at the University of Mississippi. Owing to his strong civil-rights stance, Will did not last there. He was hired by the National Council of Churches as a Southern field representative on race relations. He participated in and witnessed many of the key historical events in the civil-rights movement, often collaborating with its leaders, both famed and unfamed.

The NCC, though, was unsettled by Will Campbell's honesty, and this fine, liberal body asked him to submit all speeches and articles for clearance. This was a greater infringement than even the University of Mississippi—a bastion of bigotry—dared to attempt. Campbell quit. He and some friends formed the Committee of Southern Churchmen (now named the Committee to Release the Captives), for which he still serves as director. Among other things, this amorphous group edits the periodical *Katallagete*.

Campbell's sour institutional experiences led him to suspect all organized bodies. (He is fond of quoting an old uncle: "I don't know nuthin', but I suspect a lot of things.") "Institutions institute inhumanity," he believes. "All institutions, every last one of them, no matter the claim or purpose or stated goals, exist for their own selves. All of them look out for their own interest first, are self-loving, self-concerned, self-regarding, self-preserving, and thus are inherently evil."

Along the way, though, Campbell has attained some important conclusions about humanity and God's relationship to us. Campbell often refers to an incident which is described in *Brother to a Dragonfly*. A deputy sheriff, Thomas Coleman, coldbloodedly gunned down a young white seminarian who was working for civil rights. Campbell, who once summarized the gospel as "we are all bastards, but God loves



“I must raise some questions if Caesar is going to get into this business of being born again.”

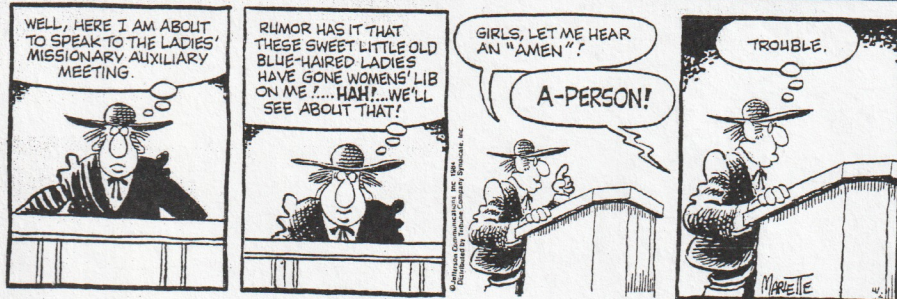
not be his, but they are no less heinous. Perhaps I have been too close to this man. Perhaps if I had not heard his anguished cry when the rains didn't come in time to save his cotton; if I had not looked upon his agony on Christmas Eve while I, his six-year-old feigning sleep, waited for a Santa who would never come; if I had not been one of him through these gales of tragedy, I would be able to condemn without hesitation.”

The good news is that God has already reconciled all of us . . . to each other and to God. Throughout his writing, Campbell keeps echoing Paul's appeal: “In Christ's name, we implore you, be reconciled (*katallagete*) to God!” (2 Cor. 5:20).

The church fails whenever it overlooks this good news. By dividing ourselves on the basis of race, we Christians refuse God's gracious gift of reconciliation. “Here is an issue which should never have been an issue in the life of the church,” Campbell writes. “It was settled at Pentecost when members of every race and nation and tongue were ‘altogether, in one place (integrated), hearing the mighty works of God.’”

Will Campbell realized that even “liberal” Christians like himself, who were concerned about civil rights, missed the point: they all allowed others to define the problems, the crises, and the agenda. Nowhere did the established church simply live out God's accomplished reconciliation.

Preacher Will preaches grace already accomplished—not by us but by God. “I learned it was the *faithfulness* of God



us anyway,” was pressed by an agnostic friend on who is the bigger bastard, Coleman or the seminarian. Campbell hated what Coleman did and stands for, but the incident sparked in him a new and unsettling realization: we are all sinners and God loves everyone. God's mercy is just as great for Coleman as it is for the murdered seminarian—or for Will Campbell or anyone else, for that matter.

Ku Klux Klan members, Brother Will admitted, are like black sharecroppers in one crucial respect: they are both poor victims of institutional oppression and injustice. So, as part of his civil-rights work, he began to meet with

them. He neither approved of nor overlooked their violence, but he knew God's grace is freely and indiscriminately offered to everyone—KKKers not excluded.

Soon he was ministering not just to poor blacks (which is, after all, a form of patronizing oppression) but among his own people too, the white bigots. In 1962, he wrote: “I have seen and known the resentment of the racist, his hostility, his frustration, his need for someone upon whom to lay blame and to punish. I know he is mistaken, misguided, and willfully disobedient, but somehow I am not able to distinguish between him and myself. My sins may

and not my faith that saved me." Some fear that Campbell preaches license. (The apostle Paul faced the same accusation.) "Nobody can tell me that to abide in grace—that is, to live in acceptance of this gift of reconciliation—isn't far more radical a Christianity than to abide by the law." This means to live not by programs and institutionalized agendas but to live life "as a parable, a thanks-

"Both men died within a short span of time," Campbell recounts. "By not mentioning the one man's Klan interests and by not mentioning that Mr. Jenkins killed his wife, I was able to use the same identical eulogies for both of them.

"The Klan man on his deathbed had sent for me. He left word that I was to do the eulogy. He knew what I

to the man.

"I'm not sure why he trusted me. He knew what I believed. Knew that a great deal of my work was promoting the cause of racial integration and that most of his was in opposition to it. I had befriended him because when Isaiah and Jesus said that they had come to proclaim release to prisoners, they said nothing of the prisoner's crime." The night before Jones went to prison, friends held a party for him, and Campbell was invited. He celebrated eucharist in that hot bed of the Ku Klux Klan.

Campbell contacted Black Muslim inmate friends who promised that Jones would be protected while he served his sentence. When Jones finished his term in prison, he still would not betray his friends. But he had more friends now—including Black Muslims. He resigned his hood, denounced the Vietnam War, and began a new life.

Preacher Will B. Dunn once began a sermon, "Brothers and sisters! Friends and neighbors! Heathens and hypocrites! Have I left anyone out?" It may be another coincidence, but Brother Campbell believes that no one should be left out of God's reconciliation.

When people ask Will Campbell who he is or what he does, he often responds, "I'm just a preacher." Indeed, although he does not give advice, he is a walking sermon. He preaches the

"In my judgment—and I reserve the right to be wrong about anything—religion is what Jesus came to deliver us from."

giving for what God has done for us in Christ."

Campbell tells the story of two funerals he presided over. One of the deceased men "headed up what I called the Maoist wing of the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina." The other man was a black neighbor who farmed the land adjoining Campbell's.

Once, when the black neighbor was complaining about young people today, Will asked, "Have you ever been in trouble, Mr. Jenkins?"

"No. I'm almost ninety years old. Never been in any trouble. Except the time I killed my wife. I wouldn't have done that except she needed it."

believed. He knew what our differences were. He also knew that I didn't consider him dirt. Because, as I've said more than one place, we are a nation of Klansmen, we are a nation founded on violence. Likewise, Mr. Jenkins knew that I did not approve of killing people, whether they need it or not. There was a bond of neighborliness, of nonjudgmental acceptance of people as human beings."

Some years ago, the Grand Dragon of the North Carolina Ku Klux Klan, J. R. "Bob" Jones was indicted by the House Un-American Activities Committee for refusing to turn over KKK membership lists. Campbell reached out

When school began in Nashville, we watched with fear and sorrow. Rioters gathered each day at the schools where the nine black children were enrolled. Hundreds of screaming, irrational, sometimes-armed men and women, on one occasion pulling cobblestones from the sidewalk and hurling them at the building. One school was destroyed by a dynamite blast in a nocturnal act of defiance. Nine days after the first black child crossed its portal.

One of the children was the daughter of Pastor Kelly Miller Smith. Late one night I sat with him in his study, peeking often through the window in a vigil against threats to the building. After a long period of comfortable silence, I asked, "Kelly, what if something happens to little Joy?" He moved the candle, the only light we had risked, closer to him and opened his study Bible and began to read about Abraham being told by the Lord to take his only little boy up on a mountain, tie him on a pile of wood, cut his throat, and burn him. He read a sentence and then talked about it.

Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou

lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

"You see, my brother, we don't even get to choose the mountain," he said. "God chooses the mountain. All we're asked to do is obey."

And Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

I thought he was going to cry as he half-closed the book. Instead he began to laugh.

"Will, we're talking about some hard sayings. We're talking about faithfulness to Almighty God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of my black mamma

The Altar

gospel in the most unlikely places, but generally not on Sundays or under steeples. Mention "church" and he asks, "Church? What's that?" (We call that building with its sanctuary, offices, classrooms, and parking lot "church," but Campbell refers to it as "steeple.")

Campbell's Amish hat is itself a sermon representing his affirmation of Anabaptists. These left-wingers of the Reformation believed that Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli had not gone nearly far enough. In order to be biblically faithful, they practiced adult baptism, accountability, and mutual aid. They defied the state by refusing to serve on juries, fight in wars, or take oaths.

"I think Anabaptists were on to something," Will draws slowly, whistling each s. Anabaptists did not let the state interfere with their faith. "The state has a right to exist but not to impose its will on us."

Will Campbell believes that the state—like each and every institution—aspire to be God. "All institutions are after our souls." Thus he views with alarm those Christians who call for Caesar to intervene in matters of faith. "I am disquieted when I hear 'born again' as a criterion for citizenship or public leadership. I must raise some questions if Caesar is going to get into this business of being born again. I can trust God with that. But I do not and cannot trust Caesar with it."

So Campbell is not just joking when he suggests about a certain born-again presidential candidate that "his time could be better utilized in redirecting hurricanes."

Institutions may even call themselves "churches," but, Campbell insists, they alienate and oppress rather than reconcile and heal. "In my judgment—and I reserve the right to be wrong about anything—religion is what Jesus came to deliver us from."

"What are Falwell and Robertson trying to do that Calvin and Luther didn't try to do? What is the difference between the First Mainline Church-by-the-Bank and the 700 Club? The price can be traced to the backs of the poor. Great fortunes do not fall out of the heavens but are made from men and women and children going into mines and fields and mills."

The true purpose of a Christ-based church should be service. But, according to Campbell, Christendom propagates doctrines and creeds, gathering wealth and property, to protect itself. "Somebody once said that any church truly of Jesus would be an instrument literally and constantly being used up in his service—that is, service to those not even in it. But just like every other institution, the church perpetuates itself by the trick of identifying its own perpetuation with the survival and advancement of Christ's gospel. That's the

really unforgivable blasphemy of it."

The church is so addicted to respectability that it cannot afford the gospel. "The enemy has made us rich, powerful, and good, knowing that when there was a racial crisis or a Vietnam War, the best we would risk would be debates and resolutions and petitions."

Hard words all. Campbell's critiques are directed especially at himself and his own involvements. *Forty Acres and a Goat*, while containing marvelously funny and moving stories, is also a mournful reflection on whether the civil-rights movement was misdirected and finally a failure. The movement, he notes, was just one more weapon to further divide and alienate two groups of poor people. "Were we demanding of the patricians that they force the plebeians of all colors to eat together while they remained unaffected behind the dividing wall of affluence?"

Obviously, Preacher Will is not about to launch any kind of mass movement with such searching critiques. He continues to pursue his probing questions, challenging us to examine ourselves. Today, among other things, he seeks to connect the three "most important life issues today: nuclear warfare, abortion, and the death penalty." Abortion, he observed to me, is the great untouchable topic these days. He has

faithfulness

and daddy in Mississippi and your white mamma and daddy in Mississippi. If that God says we've got to do it, well, we've got to do it."

I sat silent, a little sorry I had asked the question but grateful for the preaching. He put the Bible down, cast a quick glance out the window, then looked straight at me and quoted the rest of the Scripture from memory:

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked and beheld behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns.

He leaned back, shoved the candle between us, and bent his head in prayer. "Lord, make the thicket tight. And the ram's horns long. Amen."

It was well past midnight when a young couple came to relieve us in the vigil. The picture of little Joy, walking through the angry mob, her hand thrust trustingly and

lovingly in the hand of her father, would not go away as I drove home. What are we doing to the children? The dear, sweet, innocent little children?

I don't know about your thickets and rams' horns, Kelly. We both came out of Mississippi, but you brought something out with you that I don't have. Are you sure you would sacrifice your child on the altar of integration, the altar of black and white together? My God, Kelly! I know white people. I've lived with us all my life. Are you sure this is the right altar?

No, Will. Not the altar of integration. The altar of faithfulness.

I went directly to the children's room when I got home. I stood for a long time, looking down at our sleeping six-year-old. I felt like I wanted to pray and started to kneel down beside her bed. When I realized what the prayer already forming on my lips would be, I straightened up quickly and self-consciously and left the room.

Lord, I am thankful that my little girl is white.

—From *Forty Acres and a Goat*
by Will D. Campbell (Peachtree Publishers, 1986).

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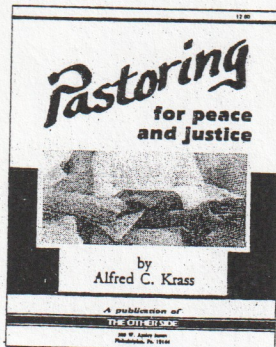
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Pastoring

In 1985, Al Krass wrote a series of columns for *The Other Side* focusing on how to nurture a justice commitment in the local church. Now these columns have been published in booklet form. In *Pastoring for Peace and Justice*, Al suggests "pastoral ways" that clergy and socially active lay leaders can work for justice in their own congregations. Copies are \$2 each, \$1 each if ordering ten or more. Price includes shipping.



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Gettin' Our Goats

Born and bred a Baptist in the deep South, Will Campbell isn't one to often question Scripture. But in his latest book, *Forty Acres and a Goat*, he confesses to one major stumbling block in the Gospels. "Jesus," he writes, "what was it with you and goats?"

Our Lord saw in goats a symbol of selfish neglect and evil. Goats are those doomed to the eternal fire.

Campbell, though, sees something quite different in his beloved goat—Jackson A'Goat by nomenclature, bearing a crucial historical affinity with Andrew, Mahalia, Jesse, Reggie, Michael; shamefully gelded by Georgia fraternity boys; brought in a perilous journey by Mercedes-Benz from Georgia to Tennessee; befriended by a mare and a few old dogs. Jackson was a dear friend, a member of the curious family of this bootleg preacher—and, in Campbell's rich literary work, a symbol of that tempestuous decade, the sixties.

Will Campbell, civil-rights activist, grass-roots theologian, and author of *Brother to a Dragonfly*, is a first-rate story teller and a masterful writer. That alone makes *Forty Acres* worth reading.

Far more importantly, though, he chronicles the deeply human struggle of civil rights and the long, slow pilgrimage toward human reconciliation. Along the way, he weaves delightful anecdotes about churches and preachers, draft dodgers and intellectuals, and, of course, goats and other four-legged creatures. We also get some of the best low-key theology around.

Near the end of his book, Campbell's mood is one of melancholy—a sense of the demise of that historical miracle, nonviolent resistance, the movement toward a beloved community. He is insightful in seeing through the illusions of white liberals (himself included) about race relations. Through his somewhat allegorical friendship with the black country preacher T. J. Eaves, he depicts the need for a constant conversion of love and painfully earned understanding.

Yet Campbell also sees the working of grace and the stubborn virtue of hope in human persons with all their sublimity and absurdity. *Forty Acres and a Goat* is itself a story of grace that can inspire a much-needed hope in all of us.

—William O'Brien

been receiving hate mail ever since his outspoken involvement in civil rights. The subject of abortion, however, has earned him more vehemently virulent letters than ever—but now they contain better grammar and spelling.

Campbell's walking stick, it turns out, is also a sermon. "Some asked me if I need this walking cane, and the answer is I don't and I do. It's pretty. It's made out of a piece of barn lumber that a friend of mine—who was what we would call illiterate—tore down. And you know what old barns collect over the years because you know what animals stay there.

"But he could see something beautiful through all that. When he was old, he had put these timbers aside. They were wild cherry. He made this lovely piece of sculpture, which is also functional. It's downright pretty. This man—he's dead now—was a wise old man and had something to say to people."

"We live in an age of bigger barns (Luke 12:16–21), an age of consumerism, accumulation, national security, and technology that is rapidly outstripping our limited morality. But we are not left only with the accumulated manure. No, the cane is a reminder of redemption. God looks past all our false and harmful edifices and divisions and makes us all one, a community of friends and neighbors.

Thanks for reminding us of the good news, Neighbor Will. —Arthur Boers

Forty Acres and a Goat, Will D. Campbell's biographical memoir of the civil-rights movement, is available from *The Other Side's* Book Service (item #5089, \$14.95, cloth). Use the order form elsewhere in this issue.