

**I** was six years old when I first met God. My mother was a Sunday school teacher. We were Methodists. It was summer, and I was in my mother's vacation Bible school class. This God guy was all right with me. He gave us coloring books, Kool-Aid and cookies. I liked him immediately.

I loved Sundays, especially in the summer when God provided homemade ice cream and ice-cold watermelons. I helped turn the handles of the ice-cream makers. The churchmen, wearing white shirts and big fat ties, reeked of Aqua Velva after-shave.

Mother had me sprinkled for baptism. I can still see the smiling faces of the congregation as I turned around, and then they clapped.

I knew that Grandpa Walker was a Presbyterian, and Grandma was a dyed-in-the-wool Baptist. I assumed that was how you got Methodists. It was like breeding cattle. A white one bred with a black one produced a spotted one. (I wasn't sure what "bred" meant because grown-ups didn't tell you everything you needed to know).

Pop was a Baptist and Mom a Methodist, so that would make me a what? I didn't know. I would have

to look around. Maybe that's why Mom encouraged me to experience other denominations—so I could find out.

### Cookies and Kool-Aid

I was allowed to go to other Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools when the kids in the neighborhood invited me. The parents of some of my friends wouldn't let them go to mine.

Cookies and Kool-Aid all summer-long—I planned to make the best of it and take my time choosing what I would be. Depending on the goodies, this decision-making process could take awhile.

I went to one friend's Bible school. He was Pentecostal. Nice people. And once I learned to speak in tongues I had it made with them.

We were led into the church and knelt at the altar. The ladies told us to pray for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At first it was scary, and the other kids were talking in a different language.

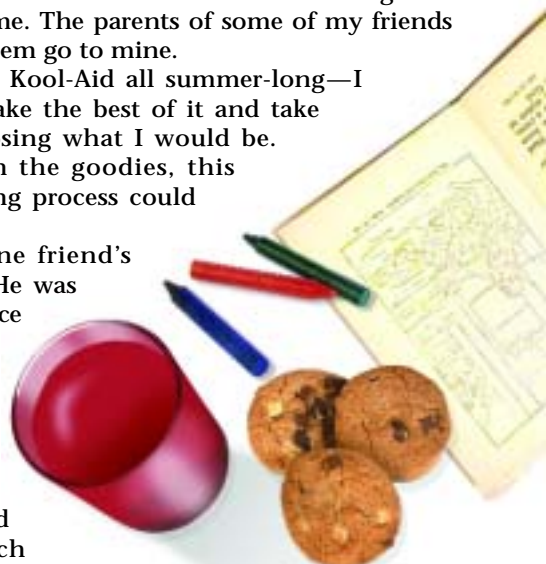
I wasn't sure what to do, and the cookies were waiting. I remembered what a woman next to me in their services had said once before. "Abba Dobba Shun Die," I yelled. Boy, were they happy with me. I was welcome to come back anytime.

I went to Lutheran, Baptist and Nazarene Bible schools, but I didn't get to go to Catholic Bible school (if they had one), because none lived in our neighborhood. Daddy worked with Catholics, and he said that they had strange ideas—just like us.

I didn't think anything about the differences. One friend couldn't go to the movies and drink Cokes. The Baptists couldn't dance, which was alright with me. I wasn't sure what we Methodists couldn't do, and I felt somewhat left out. I tried to think up something that was against my religion. I told a teacher that bending over for a punishment swat was against my religion. It worked for awhile.

We kids played and got a long just fine, considering each other's various restrictions.

I asked my friend if he wanted to sneak into the drive-in movies when we were camping out in my



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back yard. The idea of sneaking in was appealing to him, but he said the movies were against his religion.

Different Strokes for Different Folks?

Granny (Father’s mother) was a Hard Shell Baptist. They were the Marines of the Baptists. The Baptists were a funny bunch. There were Missionary, Fundamentalist, Hard Shell, Southern, Northern and on and on.

They were all alike to me, but they didn’t like it when you told them that. They each had some doctrine which set them apart from the others, plus the rest of the world. I often wondered why God waited till the Baptists came along before setting everybody straight.

“The Devil invented music and used Rock ‘n Roll with Elvis singing it to cause people to sin.” Now, I could agree with that argument because Pop’s hillbilly music sure could cause me to commit sin. I always had to get out of the house before it did.

Granny’s Hard Shell church didn’t believe in using musical instruments in church. So an old man started everybody off to singing when he tapped his foot three times, and on the third stroke everybody began to sing. Boy, were they horrible singers!

The Hard Shells didn’t have seminary educated ministers. You were called by the Lord to preach. Granny’s daddy was a called-preacher.

They had strict membership requirements. You were nominated in front of the con-



gregation, then they voted on you joining or not. They were tough boogers; they voted you out just as fast. Uncle Tom had been voted out because he got divorced and re-married.

Granny’s sister revealed some sin to the congregation and they voted her daughter out. I never knew what the sin was—maybe because she dipped snuff. She had a steady stream of snuff spit running down her chin all of the time. I had noticed that Great-Uncle Frank carried a coffee can into services like many other men—chewing tobacco and spitting between amens.

I had seen a picture of Granny smoking a corncob pipe so it seemed that smoking and chewing wasn’t a sin. Smoking or baccar chew’n *could* be sins, but God let you get away with certain ones. Chewing gum in church was allowable; putting it under your pew was not.

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I think my father was voted out because he had been a bare-knuckle boxer. The fighting didn’t bother them, but fighting in bars did. They were tee-total-ers. But nobody had the courage to tell him he was out.

Father took Granny to the association meetings many times. The men in the church hugged his neck and kissed his cheek, which I thought was brave. Any other time Pop would have punched them in the nose. Pop was a man, and being kissed by other men in church always caused him to blush. He had that half-embarrassed, half-approving look on his face when they did it.

God Ain’t Religious

Daddy would spend hours with Granny talking about God and the Bible. Pop was sour on religion. “Too many man-made rules,” he said.

*There are two Gods in Christianity: One is the God that gives and takes life as he sees fit; the other is the one of man’s creation, who people use to lord over others.* People who worship this man-made god strap the Bible onto their hips like a six-shooter, going around shooting people with it—like they were Marshal Dillon in Dodge, according to Pop.

Granny told Daddy that God wasn’t religious. She said that her strange ways, as we called them, were by her choice, not God’s requirement.

A lot of church people use religion in order to feel good about themselves and avoid having a relationship with God. Too many people use religion as a god.

"My religion is just the comfortable coat that I wear in the presence of the Lord," Granny said.

Pop said, "People choose to obey silly little rules, so they can feel good about avoiding the important things that God has for them to do."

"Good people don't go to heaven," Granny told me, "only those who accept the invitation.

"We ain't good by any stretch of the imagination. You allow God's goodness to flow through you; you don't sit around dreaming up things to do for God. Humble yourself, give up your life and pray that God orders your steps," she said.

"Be real careful and don't fall into the trap of do'n what others in your church come up with. The Devil can go to church and preach a twisted gospel any day of the week," Granny warned.

The teaching about predestination was a hum-dinger to me. Granny said that God knew you before he had laid the foundations of the earth. He knows ahead of time who's going to do what, and he has a plan for everybody. He has already decided what's going to happen in your life.

"What about free will Momma?" Pop asked.



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"You have it and you don't—

to a certain degree," she said, thinking.

"God has angels run'n around herding you along without you knowing about it. If it takes a truck run'n over you to get your attention, he'll let it happen and arrange for you to be in front of it on time.

"You see, God isn't fair, by our way of thinking. He is go'n to make you into something he wants, whether you like it or not. He is the potter and you're the clay."

Pop asked, "Momma, who is go'n to hell? The Catholics say the Baptists is, and the Baptists say the Catholics is, not to each others' face of course."

I was concerned because I had heard the two churches Pop mentioned were not the only groups destined for hell. There was a long list, according to whose church you were in at the time.

"I think there will be a fair representation from every church and religion in hell."

Granny thought for a moment.

"Saying you're a Christian and go'n to church doesn't mean anything," she said.

I asked, "How 'bout other religions?"

"God has secrets he ain't shared with us, yet. But my job is clear. I'm hired to sell Buicks, not recommend Fords. I will preach Christ as the only way to be saved because that's what I believe I'm to do," she said.

"I trust God to be just, but once you have been preached the gospel and reject the Lord, your goose is cooked," Granny said.

"Jimmy, God is not an old man sit'n around on a porch with baccar in his jaw, swat'n sinners like flies. He is a master jeweler, cutting and polishing your soul. Your soul is your character and personality. Sin is to your soul as cancer is to your body. If you let it go untreated, it will eat you up. God is not a prude," Granny said.

Granny was a Christian woman, who God lived in. She could walk on water. The people in Hollis, Oklahoma knew her and when I went into any store, if they knew Granny, I didn't have to pay for soda pop. When Granny found out, she made me go back and pay. She shut that special deal down in a hurry.

The only time Granny's teaching ever got me in trouble was when I was in grade school. My teacher, Mr. Wright, asked me who the President during the Depression was. "S.O.B Hoover," I said. Granny never said Hoover without the S.O.B. in front of his name.

Well...Granny was human too. □

*Jimmy Gilbert Ramey lives in Ponca City, Oklahoma.*

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