

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE PREACHER

The sermon is so much a part of the person delivering it that sermons can best be understood if one knows about the preacher. Being so informed, responses about his preaching can be interpreted more meaningfully. It becomes important, then, to characterize him, and this chapter will serve that purpose. He will be made known through a biographical sketch, description of personal traits, summary of theological views, statement of his motivating philosophy, and his conception of the Church.

#### Biographical Sketch<sup>1</sup>

##### Family

Roy Abram Burkhart was born on a farm near Newville, Pennsylvania, on August 28, 1895. He was the son of John Diller Burkhart and his wife Ellen Gutshall Burkhart. They were Pennsylvania Dutch farmers as were their parents before them.

---

1. The information for this biographical sketch was secured from Dr. Burkhart by personal interview, gleaned from sermons, and gathered from miscellaneous conversations. Who's Who in America (Chicago: Marquis - Who's Who, 1954) was also consulted.

His grandparents on his father's side were John and Elizabeth Burkhart. Their parents all came from Switzerland, though John and Elizabeth were born in the Cumberland Valley. Grandfather (John) Burkhart was a very religious man. He was a minister in the Mennonite Church as well as a farmer. He was a lover of books and was studious in his way. He owned a set of Matthew Henry's commentaries and read them from beginning to end. Roy never knew him, for he died before Roy was born, but he inherited the commentaries and found them thoroughly underlined. In this way his grandfather had met the handicap of only three years formal schooling.

His maternal grandparents were William and Anada Gutshall. They were Lutherans. William Gutshall was the only grandparent Roy ever knew. He felt very close to his grandfather who came often to the Burkhart home. His smoking a corncob pipe was confusing to Roy, however, because he had been taught that it was wrong to smoke.<sup>1</sup> But his grandfather's prayers seemed beautiful, and he felt that he was loved and understood by him.

Roy's father's name was John Diller Burkhart-- John for his own father, and Diller a family name. He was born on the farm near Newville, Pennsylvania, where Roy was later to be born and spend his childhood. John

---

1. His Mennonite home taught a clear-cut code of conduct. Unto the day this writer knew him, he would not drink coffee unless it was decaffeinated. Yet he was remarkably patient for others to follow their own consciences.

developed a goiter early in life. Surgery for goiter was not employed or understood, so he lived with it and suffered organic heart disease most of his life as a consequence.

John Diller was fourth in a family of seven. His older sister, Mamie, spent most of her lifetime with Roy's parents and "ruled the roost". John never became free from the domination of his sister. This had repercussions for the whole family.

John was a studious man, as his father had been. He read "everything he could get his hands on". He was well informed in government, especially regarding tariff. He had strong theological interests and spent hours arguing the Virgin Birth and other theological issues. He had developed an elaborate argument against infant baptism and immersion. He believed in baptism by pouring and supported the position.

John was a farmer, but in later life he went also into the manufacture of fertilizer. He was successful in business and at one time gained a good deal of money. Reverses came, however, when a brother, Roy's uncle, lacking character, forged some names. To save him from prison, John made the money good. It cost heavily and set the family back financially.

As a farmer also John was keen at business. He bought pigs, kept them until they weighed around 200 pounds, then sold them. He had a successful dairy opera-

tion, churning about seventy-five pounds of butter a week.

In many ways, John Burkhart was progressive. This was evidenced by his developing a dog treadmill for churning butter, having the first telephone in the area and starting the movement to get telephones for the entire community, and owning the first automobile there. He was liberal in some respects regarding Mennonite traditions. While he was conservative and traditional in theology, his believing in musical instruments and education made him a liberal.

John's relationship to Roy was very firm, and frustrating for Roy. He could never quite measure up to his father's expectations. "I don't remember ever doing anything that got praise from him. I loved him. I revered him. I had profound respect for him. I almost worshiped him, yet I never felt close to him." It is to be wondered that out of that kind of relationship came a man of indiscourageable optimism and profound theistic faith.

The mother of Roy Burkhart was the former Ellen Gutshall. She was born at the foothills of the Blue Mountains near Center, Pennsylvania. She had a quiet, friendly disposition and was popular among people who knew her. Even after she came to Columbus to live with Roy and Hazel, she would wear her Mennonite bonnet and prayer head covering to church and people were attracted to her.

Aunt Mamie's domination of Roy's father created quite a problem for his mother. She had no choice but to acquiesce to keep peace in the family. When she came to live with Roy and Hazel, however, her need to have her own way came to the fore. She never had her way in her own home. Consequently, in her son's home she tried to impose her will. Strains and stresses were overcome as Roy came to the place that he could "absolutely stand by Hazel when the issue came up". He would often have to tell his mother to go to her room until she could be happy. They lived satisfactorily for twenty years on that basis. In the last months of Mother Burkhart's life, she and Hazel became very close. She said to Hazel: "I never had a daughter, and you are my true daughter."

Roy summarized his feelings about his mother by saying:

To outsiders my mother was a wonderful personality: loving, outgoing, generous. She covered up her inner tensions very well, until Aunt Mamie and my father were gone, and then her inner need to assert herself became evident. She was a profound person and her influence was tremendous upon my life. She never had many of the satisfactions she wanted. She got from me a great deal that she should have gotten from him. And even when I was forty years old she would tell me not to stay out late, and when Hazel and I would come home at night she would always be waiting for us. She never really got over being my mother, but she did the best she could, and I have only the finest feelings for her.

There was one brother, Mervin, who was five years older than Roy. He suffered a fatal attack of appendicitis when he was twenty-three years old. Their father had always shown a preference for Mervin, which the younger

brother felt deeply. He had death fantasies about Mervin because of it. When the fatal attack of appendicitis came for Mervin, guilt problems came for Roy. Only in later years he "came to insight about it" and no longer had guilt feeling over the death fantasies.

#### Memorable Experiences of Childhood and Youth

Roy recalled several other traumatic experiences of his childhood which he considered to be of great significance. One was the occasion of a woman calling in their home when he was four years old. He was very timid and hid under the couch. His mother, not knowing that he was there, said something about his having a bad heart and that he would not live beyond his sixteenth birthday. While he didn't fully comprehend it, he didn't forget it. He was never free to talk to anyone about it and held it to himself. Approaching his sixteenth birthday, each day grew in horror. The day he became sixteen was a day of terror. Near the end of the day he asked Aunt Mamie if she was sure that that was his birthday. She took him to the old family Bible and showed that it was. The record in the Bible showed that the moment of birth was one minute before midnight, however, so there was yet time for trouble! He went to bed, couldn't sleep, thought surely he would die, but didn't. When the family clock struck twelve he finally went to sleep, but was anxious for weeks to come for fear there was a mistake in the record. For years to come he suffered a fear of heart disease.

Another unhappy childhood experience was of a teacher who treated him sternly. When he got Pennsylvania Dutch mixed with English, she would stand behind him and hit his head with a book. This led to stammering which continued until he was in college.

Another teacher left an equally lasting impression of another kind. He was Silas Orris, teacher of the fifth grade. He got possession of a "bad note" that Roy wrote one day, and the usual expectation was to be kept after school to be punished. He wasn't kept in, so expected it the next day. It did not come, nor any day following. Five years passed. Then one evening the teacher asked him to stay after school. Roy's mind went back to that note, but he heard the teacher say: "Roy, I want you to go to high school".<sup>1</sup> Relieved, he said without much thought, "I'll go". Two comments connected with this incident will be quoted, since they are valuable in understanding this man.

I have the feeling that if it had not been for that I never would have gone to high school. It is just one of those intimate things that makes one wonder how the destiny of a life hangs on such a little idea.

The other comment relates to an occasion years later when he saw Silas Orris. He had been to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to give a talk. Silas Orris was there, and Roy took the initiative to ask to talk to him "about that awful note I wrote long ago at Stouts School". But the

---

1. Mennonite children were not encouraged to go to high school, as a rule.

venerable teacher had no memory of it. About that Roy said:

I have a feeling that this played a profound part in my whole life. I often have been charged with being too easy with boys and girls. If I have, part of the reason is Silas Orris. He never punished me; he never mentioned the note. In the end I was punished much more because I never could quite forget it. The night he told me that he had no memory of it tears came to my eyes. It seemed to be such a wonderful illustration of compassion and understanding.

This man, who became expert at advising both young and old on matters of courtship and marriage, had a rather difficult time with that phase of his own life. He was a timid boy, and he stammered in speech. He was rather fat, too, and these conditions made dates hard to get and difficult to handle.

The first girl to really become a girl friend was lost to someone else, and that left a memory of bitter disappointment. The next girl to receive his affections he kept company with for some time, and he recalled that "She taught me many of the finer things I know". But she married someone else.

Then, one day, he met Hazel Shover. She was walking with a hymnal under her arm from choir practice at the United Brethren Church. This first acquaintance with Hazel left him with a sureness that she was the one for him; but Hazel wasn't sure.

I have the feeling that she married me not being sure. And of course this was not easy to take, since I was aware of it then. But as time went on, even while I was in France, our relationship deepened, and our relationship has grown through the years despite



the conflict we had with her mother and with my mother.

This happy conclusion was slow in coming, however, and was not in character with his beginning experiences with women.<sup>1</sup>

### Religious Development

During these years the religious life was initiated, too. The Burkhart family was very religious. Sunday afternoons were often spent in theological discussions. The family had devotions at home and attended church in spite of all obstacles. Mennonite religion was literally inclined, which is illustrated by a memorable incident.

The minister, from a study of the Book of Daniel, had derived that on a certain day the Second Coming would take place. John Burkhart believed it along with the minister, and at the appointed time had the family mustered in the parlor in their best clothing. The hour of appearance was set at four o'clock, but at four o'clock nothing happened. After another half hour's waiting, John said to the boys: "We'll go do the milking". The religious background of boyhood may have been credulous, but it was not one of indifference!

The Mennonite Church had a depressing effect on young Roy. As an older child he recoiled from it and prayed that they wouldn't go. He vowed that when he got

---

1. Roy A. Burkhart was married to Hazel Shover on August 24, 1918. Two children were born to them. William is at this time a medical doctor in Upper Arlington, Ohio, and Jean is the wife of Paul Selby, Assistant Dean of the Law College of Ohio State University. There are seven grandchildren.

away from home he would never go to church. A cunning circumstance frustrated that plan, however. When he went to high school, he was breaking the church's rule. So, he attended services to compensate for breaking the rule, and that kept him in church.

Then, when he was sixteen years old, he was elected superintendent of the Sunday school. His father used influence to get the position for him, for some were not in favor of it. He introduced some new ideas into the staid Mennonite congregation, even at that early age. His interest in the church quickened after he became Sunday School Superintendent.

He became a member of the United Brethren Church, which was the church of Hazel, his wife. As will be seen later, he held positions of responsibility with religious bodies of distinction, yet confessed that when he came to First Community Church in 1935 his theology was weak. The highly theistic theology this writer knew him to have in the sixth decade of this century he professed to have developed during his ministry at that church.

The First World War played a large part in the spiritual career of Roy Burkhart. His father had arranged for him to be a conscientious objector, but Roy couldn't go through with it. His father had been forced to purchase liberty bonds--he would have been tarred and feathered if he hadn't--so Roy said, "Your money is going, so your son must go". He enlisted as a noncombatant, and before he

*deferment*  
*deferment*

left, had the approval of both his parents. He was in France, was at the front, was respected for his view, and never carried a gun.

But this experience did something to him, for in going he had not quelled the inner conflict. He had been taught that it was wrong to go to war. When he returned, therefore, he couldn't pray and felt spiritually dead. He had "lost everything".

### Education and Career

Educational experiences began at Stouts Public School, where he was a student from 1900 to 1910. He attended Blouserville High School in 1911 and 1912. After a brief interval of work on the family farm and a year of teaching at Stouts School, he went to Shippensburg Normal (now Shippensburg Teacher's College) during the years 1915-16 and 1916-17. He was graduated in 1917. He took courses at Dickinson College from 1922 to 1925, while he was principal at Mechanicsburg High School. In 1926 he arranged to take the necessary hours at Otterbein College and received the A. B. degree in 1927. Between 1927 and 1935 he took work at the University of Chicago where he was awarded the Masters degree in 1930 and the Ph.D. degree in 1936.

The first part of his career was in education. A teacher in Stouts grade school in 1913 and 1914, he became principal of Blouserville High School at the age of 22. After discharge from the army, he was principal of the

Mechanicsburg High School for the years 1919 to 1921. From 1921 to 1923 he was Superintendent of the South Middleton Vocational High School.

Then the shift came in his career, as he took a position on the staff of the Pennsylvania State Sabbath School for one year, then became National Director of Young People's Work for the United Brethren Church. This work he continued until 1927 when he became Associate Director of Youth Work for the International Council of Religious Education.

The next major shift came when the opportunity was presented to come to First Community Church as Pastor. About preaching he said:

I always had a feeling that I ought to be a minister. I went through the lot three times in the Mennonite church and it never hit me. I had the feeling that God wanted me to meet Hazel, for she was the medium by which I came into the United Brethren Church. But I thought for a while that I would be a school man and before that had thought of being a doctor. That looked to be too far ahead, so I decided on public education. Then the way opened to go into religious work. I became a youth leader, and this I liked. Then in 1934 the opportunity came to come to Columbus. I always felt that I wanted to be a pastor, so I came. I have never regretted it. In fact, as I look back over the various steps taken, I feel clearly that the will of God was in every one of those steps.

### Pioneer Spirit

Roy Burkhart has been characterized by a pioneering spirit throughout his career. As has been stated, his father had a pioneering, progressive spirit, and this made an impression on young Roy. When he became Sunday school superintendent at the age of sixteen, he introduced innova-

tions. New stools for the children's classes and some new approaches to children's work were revolutionary in the staid Mennonite church. As high school principal, he organized a Hi-Y Club, and wrote the ritual for the Hi-Y Clubs used across the nation. He introduced student government, which was not common at that time, and organized the football team and school paper.

At First Community Church he continued his experimental approach to his work. Examples include the Research Groups for men and women, his program of marriage counseling, the resourceful design in working with youth, including the Church of the Block of Wood for seventh and eighth graders and Bar None Dance for high school and college students.

The organization of the International Council of Community Churches around 1940 is a manifestation of that spirit. When an appeal to the National Council of Churches to make a place for the Community Churches failed, he called the Community Churches representatives together in Columbus, and the International Council of Community Churches was born.

In the spring of 1952 another instance of this pioneering spirit was to be made manifest. Asked by Walter Judd and others, he became the leader of a movement to channel nongovernment help to underdeveloped peoples at the village level. World Neighbors was organized and became a vital organization for world peace and welfare.

Personal Traits

Roy A. Burkhart had a genial, warm manner.<sup>1</sup> His friendly disposition tended to melt down the reserve in others. To this he added a personal, informal touch. He invited all to call him by his first name and made them comfortable in doing so. Even children addressed him as "Burky". When the church membership had risen to more than 4,000 persons he still knew every member by his or her first name.

His work displayed a personal interest in individuals. Until the time of his retirement, he prodigiously called from house to house. He knew the knack for making quick calls graciously and effectively. Through the years he has done personal counseling with thousands of persons. He organized many small, intimate groups and worked with multitudes on that more personal level. More than one person expressed the opinion that "Roy is at his best in a small group". In staff meeting, when the week's calling was up for review, he frequently inquired about individuals or offered information about them.

He was a man of initiative. Amply supplied with goodwilled aggressiveness, he moved in quickly to make friends, initiate activities, or implement ideas. He was a natural salesman. He sold his ideas, his program, and

---

1. The past tense of the verb refers back to the time the study was done: 1956-57. Many of the things said here could have been expressed in the present tense, for they continue to describe him.

his church. "If he had been in business he would have been a millionaire", a sales manager of a large firm confided to the author.

Dr. Burkhart thought and acted in the superlative, and had a special vocabulary of superlative terms which found frequent expression. "Tremendous", "amazing", "great", "terrific", "fabulous", "something special" and similar terms were constantly in use. If he spoke of a subject, it likely would be called "a very unusual subject". "In a sense" often became "in a very deep sense". "A revealing thing" was apt to be "the most revealing thing I've ever seen". The groups with which Roy worked were inclined to pick up the superlative spirit, and "great" and "terrific" were heard on all sides.

He was possessed of deep convictions. He believed strongly in what he was doing. To this was added an enthusiasm that may well be described as a magnificent obsession. His "cup runneth over". To hear him was to feel that you had just been let in on an important, new discovery.

He had the ability to express himself in simple language which was yet attractive and full of meaning. A specialized vocabulary of Burkhart-coined expressions became naturalized around the First Community parish. To "possess the keys to the kingdom" meant to have the attitudes and practices basic to Christianity, which unlock

the treasures of the spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> To "bring your best gift" meant to develop one's talents and make the fullest contribution to the world of works and service. To "become free from tyranny" meant to no longer need unhealthy adaptations--fear, defensive aggressiveness, impulsiveness, etc.--which distort or restrict one's potential rather than fulfill. "Someone forgot to love him" meant that the unhealthy adaptations that tyrannize one's life are the consequence of a failure in love in the formative relationships, and to "become free to love" meant the experience of love in one's relationships with persons and with God, which set aside the suppressing adaptations and allows love to express itself.

Roy Burkhart wanted things to succeed. He worked indefatigably for the success of the things he believed in. Here again a kind of magnificent obsession showed itself. He seemed to ache to see things at their best. The staff members felt a steady, subtle pressure to stride on for greater achievements. The author recalls a time when Roy was working one hundred hours a week to keep the work up to his expectations.

These personal characteristics made the man a colorful person, and will help the reader to understand his preaching of the Word.

---

1. They are prayer, faith, love, forgiveness, acceptance, commitment, and healing, and the ring uniting all of these is eternal life now.