

My Grandfather's Letters

By Liz Gibbons

Although we visited my paternal grandfather every year or two, I really did not get to know him for he died when I was eight years old. He lived on a small farm in a part of Baltimore, Maryland, called Woodlawn. He grew up in New Jersey and graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary. He was a Presbyterian minister and then taught Latin and history at the Friends School. He lived in an interesting three story home with his second wife. They had two daughters and a deceased son. He kept a cow to provide milk, grew a garden and had some chickens and geese. My brother and I often accompanied him to the barn when he milked the cow. He would try to squirt milk from the cow into our mouth.

After our Father died my brother and I cleared out his study and found a stack of letters that our Grandfather had written to him. They were fascinating letters that told of his viewpoint of the political scene and the candidates for president in the 1920's and 30's or comments on legislation and other items in the news. The letters made the history of that era come alive for me. He also commented on how pleased he was that his wife, Margene, was taking some courses at the university. He wrote, "Women need to be able to get out of the kitchen." Holy cow! He wrote that in the 1930's.

Also among the letters were some news clippings from the *Baltimore News* newspaper. In 1927, when he was 64 years old, he wrote a letter to the Presbytery for permission to resign from the ministry. The newspaper interviewed him. His request grew out of a deeper study of Hebrew and Greek and modern science and his realization that his updated beliefs were incompatible with the fundamental beliefs of many orthodox Christians. Paradoxically, his study had given him a firmer belief in spiritual truth and a greater zeal for service to his fellow man. He also did not agree with the types of questions asked of applicants for the ministry. In the prior year an applicant was asked to give the difference between Luther's and Calvin's theories. He asked, "Would Jesus 'care a hang' about that controversy?" He said that theology in many instances is crowding out the Christ. He felt the church needed a school for theological unlearning. His "intellectual and spiritual freedom" required that he leave the ministry. He found the spiritual freedom he sought in the quiet solitude of the Quaker worship service.

I identified so much with what he wrote. When I was young I did not like Sunday School. I had many questions about what was taught. At age twelve we were expected to join the church. That meant our class had to recite the Apostle's Creed before the church congregation. I felt like a hypocrite, because I did not know if I believed what we were required to say. I longed to have someone to talk to but had been taught not to "rock the boat," so I kept quiet. Having a brother who has been a Christian missionary has been very interesting. He is concerned about my beliefs. I appreciate his concern, but much like our grandfather, I find spiritual truth in the quietness within.

My Grandfather's letters were a wonderful avenue to get to know him. I wish he were here now to comment on the current political and religious scene.