

Richard C. Halverson: The Burning Life

Paraphrased and expanded by Dan Trygg from *They Found The Secret*, by V. Raymond Edman, with additional information from Wikipedia, the Memorial Tributes of the United States Senate for Rev. Richard C. Halverson, and from www.seekgod.ca/fuller.htm

The letterhead reads simply: "**CONCERN, Inc.**" There is a byline by way of explanation, and it states: "**Putting Confidence in Giving. Not a reservoir -- but a channel!**" Letterhead and stationary often reveal something of the personality or character of the one to whom it belongs, and this is decidedly true in this case, for **concern for others is one of Richard C. Halverson's most conspicuous characteristics.**

Dick Halverson is a big man; big of heart and hand, of body and spirit, with a *large love* for God and for the souls of men. He is a man of vision, but not visionary; he is a worker of intense activity, but deep within are reservoirs of quietness. Sanguine, sunny, radiant and realistic, he is a leader of others because he himself is a humble follower of the Good Shepherd.

For twenty years Dick was not concerned with God. He was born in Pingree, North Dakota on February 4, 1916. Pingree is a rural community about 20 miles northwest of Jamestown. He was the eldest son of Roy W. and Edna Halverson. Reared in their nominal Christian home, spiritual things had little meaning to him. **His ambition was success in the field of drama and entertainment.** He was a singer and member of a vaudeville troupe during his school years. After attending what is now Valley City State University for two years, **he went to Hollywood at the age of 19, seeking work as a performer.** After becoming disgusted with life there in 1935, he had had enough. Of those days he has said, "I did not go deeply into sin in the grosser sense, yet **from the standpoint of pride and self-determination I was certainly rebellious and insubordinate toward God.**"

He held a variety of jobs in California while still dreaming of a career in show business. **Feeling lonely and ill at ease one New Year's Eve, he decided to attend a service at a small Presbyterian church.** "I had a very dim view of churches and pastors at the time. In my view then, a minister was a man who had failed at everything else." Nevertheless, "Six months of careless living, economic difficulty, and professional disappointment in Los Angeles helped me to see that the direction I was taking could easily lead to self-destruction. Accordingly **I 'dropped in' to the church nearest my residence, was readily and warmly received, and soon blessed with a group of new friends whose lives were centered in the church** and quite the antithesis of what I had known for many years.

He accepted an invitation to join the choir at the small church. "Three months after I entered the Vermont Avenue Presbyterian Church, the Reverend L. David Cowie candidated for its pulpit. Listening to him two Sundays awakened in me a deep desire to possess the indefinable quality which was obviously in him. I questioned him about this, with the result that **he led me to faith in Christ.**"

"**Following my conversion,**" Dick adds, "**there were three very definite crises which have decidedly marked my life and ministry.**

"**The first occurred five months after I received Christ as my Savior.** There was no doubt of the new birth following my talk with Cowie. Within two weeks my life had unconsciously undergone a radical adjustment of which I became aware in retrospect. My motivation, affections and affinities switched 180 degrees. I was literally a new person. Very shortly the implications of life in Christ began to grip my heart and **the conviction crystallized and deepened that God had a very definite plan for my life.** Though I was not willing to admit it even to myself, *I felt this involved the mission field, evangelism, or the pastorate.*"

Awareness that God had a plan for his life became increasingly urgent upon young Halverson. "The crisis came at the first Bible conference he ever attended. With Pastor Cowie and young people from the church, he went to the Mt. Hermon Conference near San Jose. His burden and bewilderment increased steadily during the first three days of the conference, until finally he requested his pastor's permission to return home. The wise preacher consented, on the provision that the new convert would stay just one more day at the conference. To this Halverson agreed, and was inwardly preparing to leave on the morrow. However, God's hour for him had struck. That evening the late Dr. George S. McCune, pioneer missionary in Korea, was the speaker.

Here is Dick's account of what happened: "There were about 800 young people present, but *it seemed to me that Dr. McCune spoke directly to me* throughout the message. The decision seemed to involve me alone. **The issue was very clear: Christ wanted my life in full surrender.** I literally broke out in a cold sweat as I realized this. At that moment, *surrendering to Christ seemed to mean the end of everything I'd ever dreamed of for myself.* To me it meant turning my back on everything I had wanted to be and do. I left the meeting that night in a terrible condition, having refused to yield to Christ. However I was rushed from there into a cabin prayer meeting during which time God met me in an unusual way. I surrendered to Him as completely as I knew how, and of course experienced the deepest peace and happiness I had ever known. **This experience of utter yieldedness to the Savior and the consequent joy that filled my life was far more cataclysmic than my conversion.** When I returned to Los Angeles, my church friends were aware of great changes in my life. **As a result of that experience, the Holy Spirit has always been real to me.** I do not remember having had any specific teaching on the subject at that time, and I certainly was not seeking any sort of an experience of the Spirit; nevertheless, from that night to this present day, the Person, work and reign of the Holy Spirit has been very precious and relevant."

Pastor Cowie, during his student days at Wheaton College, had been deeply taught in the truths of the Holy Spirit by the late Dr. Orien Tiffany who had been chairman of the Division of Social Sciences. Wanting his friend to have the benefit of such training, **Pastor Cowie urged Halverson to apply to Wheaton College for admission.** After completing junior college in Los Angeles, Dick enrolled in Wheaton in the fall of 1937. He was able to fulfill all graduation requirements and graduate within two years. To that end he majored in business administration, and all the time took Greek for his foreign language so as to be prepared for Princeton Seminary.

When seminary days were completed, Dick was called to the assistant pastorate at Linwood Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, where the pastor then was Dr. Cowie. He was there from 1942-1944.

Later, Halverson was called to the pastorate of First Presbyterian Church, Coalinga, CA, where he served for three years. **It was in this first regular pastorate that his second deep crisis experience of the Holy Spirit transpired.** Let him tell his own story:

"After two years in Coalinga, *I entered into a period of disillusionment that became so acute I felt I must leave the ministry unless something happened to alter the situation.* This was resolved when after two weeks of intense aloneness and spiritual wrestling, accompanied by the feeling that God had put me aside for any further useful service. *I finally told the Lord I was going to continue to serve Him the rest of my life whether there were any fruit or blessing in that service, ...and whether or not He would finally accept me in heaven.* Furthermore, I was willing to be 'buried' for the rest of my life in Coalinga and serve in obscurity there or anywhere. *This was a tremendous hurdle for me, for I had become very ambitious.* When this was settled, I took a completely new lease on life."

Dr. Henrietta Mears was the Christian Education director at the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood during those years. She had been raised Baptist, under the influence of Pastor W. D. Riley of First Baptist Church in Minneapolis, and president of Northwestern Schools. In 1928, she accepted the call to work at the First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood. **She was a very gifted teacher, and had developed one of the largest Sunday Schools in the world.** Others came to learn from her ministry methods. Dr. Mears wrote her own Sunday School curriculum, which came to be in such demand that she formed Gospel Light Press in 1933 to keep up with the requests which were pouring in. This later developed to become Gospel Light Publishing. **Dr. Mears founded the Forest Home Christian Conference Center in the San Bernadino Mountains of Southern California.** Her influence was extensive, as she preached to thousands of young people. **She was already having a significant influence in young Halverson's life.** One of the "side notes" in Dick's life was that he had become a director of Forest Home Christian Conference Center in 1944, while serving at the Coalinga church, so *he and Dr. Mears had known each other for a couple of years before the next crisis of faith in his life took place.*

In 1947, Dr. Mears presented her theology as "the Cause of Christ," which meant winning the world to Christ, and establishing Christianity as the guiding force in society through the evangelization of the world. **She challenged her students to be willing to die for "the Cause of Christ."** Among the many of those present for this speech at The Forest Home which responded to this motivating challenge were Bill Bright (Campus Crusade for Christ, 1951), Richard Halverson and Billy Graham (President of Northwestern Schools, Youth for Christ, and, later, founder of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Organization).

Dick continues his account, "One month later a group of our Sunday school teachers went to Forest Home Bible Conference in the San Bernardino region of Southern California for a training conference, and I accompanied them. Following the evening meeting on the second day of that conference, I joined them for refreshments and a time of prayer. This being over, I left the group to return to my cabin. However, **the way led past Miss Henrietta Mears's cabin; and here I was strangely constrained to enter and pray.** As I approached the door, though the cabin was darkened, I realized some were inside praying. Not wishing to disturb them, I waited outside for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes when the absurdity of my position overtook me. It seemed logical that I should join whoever was praying inside. So I opened the door, crossed the room through the darkness to a chair I could see was empty and knelt beside it. **A long period of silence ensued and I began to feel that they were waiting for me to pray. I began to pray, others followed, and God came down into that cabin.** There was no unusual ecstatic or cataclysmic experience, but God visited us in a way none of us had known before. There was weeping and laughter, much talking and planning. **What is most clear from that experience is the fact that upon the hearts of us who were in that prayer meeting was laid a burden for the world, and a world-wide vision, that persists to this day.** Through the years that vision has been fulfilled in many respects in detail as we saw it that evening; and the vision remains as fresh and vivid as ever to us.

"In the middle of the night I finally got to my cabin but could not sleep. Under real compulsion I spent time at the typewriter and wrote what later became known as **the four commitments of The Fellowship of the Burning Heart.** These are:

"Having come to a personal belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, and realizing that the urgency of the hour in which we live demands the highest type of Christian Discipleship, **I wish to unite with a band of young people offering themselves as expendables, with a vision of evangelizing the youth of the world for Jesus Christ in the shortest possible time.**

"I AM COMMITTED TO THE PRINCIPLE that Christian Discipleship is sustained solely by God alone through His Spirit; that the abiding life of John 15 is His way of sustaining me. *Therefore I pledge myself to a disciplined*

devotional life in which I promise through prayer, Bible study, and devotional reading, to give God not less than one hour per day (Psalm 1).

"I AM COMMITTED TO THE PRINCIPLE that Christian Discipleship begins with Christian character. Therefore I pledge myself to holy living, that by a life of self-denial and self-discipline, I may emulate those Christ-like qualities of chastity and virtue which will magnify the Lord (Philippians 1:20,21).

"I AM COMMITTED TO THE PRINCIPLE that Christian Discipleship exercises itself principally in the winning of the lost to Jesus Christ. Therefore I pledge myself to seek every possible opportunity to witness in order that I may always be engaged in winning someone to Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8).

"I AM COMMITTED TO THE PRINCIPLE that Christian Discipleship demands nothing less than absolute consecration to Jesus Christ. Therefore I present my body a living sacrifice, utterly abandoned to God. By this commitment, I desire that God's perfect will shall find *complete expression* in my life; and I offer myself in all sobriety to be expendable for Jesus Christ (Romans 12:1,2; Philippians 3:7-14).

"God being my guide, I desire to make these commitments to HIM."

Something else became clear to Dick that night. He felt he must resign the pulpit at Coalinga to follow God's further leading. He did not know what the next step would be. The following morning he shared with the group the commitments he had written and his determination to resign. **"Imagine my thrill," he said, "when I learned they had been praying all through the night that I would be led to do this!"**

All of those present received the commitments and together they pledged themselves to the disciplines involved. A group of them formed a team and went several places that night telling the story of *The Fellowship of the Burning Heart* that had been formed, and its purposes. Everywhere the story was told it was accompanied by unusual blessing from the Spirit.

From this deep experience of God in his life, Halverson returned to Coalinga and tendered his resignation from the church. It was June, 1947, and the resignation was to be effective the following October. In the meantime **he had been invited by Dr. Louis D. Evans, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, to be youth minister in that church,** the largest of Presbyterian churches in the United States. After considerable prayer on the matter, and declining the invitation several times, he agreed to go to Hollywood for a year's trial. **The Holy Spirit confirmed that choice by having him remain there for many years.** It was during the Hollywood Presbyterian days that **CONCERN, Inc.** was born, and the pointed, pungent little paper, *Perspective*, was launched to reach businessmen with gospel truth.

The third deep experience of God in his life occurred at the end of his first year at the Hollywood church. One Sunday when a group was having prayer in a home following the evening service, the conviction came upon all present that a team of them should go to China the following fall after Bill and Betty Blackstone, missionaries on furlough from China, had returned and had sufficient time to prepare for an evangelistic mission among students. "We covenanted to pray about this," says Dick. "The Blackstones returned to China and we continued to pray and to correspond. The result was that I went to China in November of 1948. *God blessed the mission with many finding Christ at a most strategic time in the affairs of that nation.* Especially was the mission effective among the students. (Note: In 1949, China fell to the communist regime of Mao Tse Tung. All religious activities were banned, and the country was closed to outsiders. Undoubtedly, some of those affected by R. H.'s work in China became leaders in the underground church that continued to grow and multiply, despite intense persecution, during the next 40+ years. During these years of oppression, *the church actually multiplied from 100,000 to over 20 million.*)

"One morning we had risen about 4 a.m. for prayer. While one of the missionaries was praying, **the thought occurred that God wanted me to lay down my life in China and not return to the States.** I disregarded the impression at first, but it persisted and became so strong, ...and terrifying..., that I remained behind in the bedroom after the others had gone downstairs for breakfast. **I remained there until noon at which time the matter was settled. I promised the Lord I would gladly lay down my life in China.** I fully *expected* that sacrifice would be required of me.

"This experience, together with the sum total of the experiences in China that year, once more radically changed my ministry. Upon my return to the church and the young people in Hollywood, God made it plain to me that I *was* in the center of His will; but *life's values had all been changed.* **I was utterly willing to be anything, do anything, say anything, go any place that He desired, for my life had been utterly and irrevocably yielded to Him.** In a very real sense I experienced what Paul meant in Phil. 1:20: "To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Halverson continued as minister of new life at the Hollywood church until 1956. He was Associate Director of Christian Leadership, Washington, DC in 1956. He served as the Senior Pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Bethesda, Maryland from 1958-1981. He became the Chaplain of the United States Senate in February of 1981, at age 65, where he served until 1994, retiring at age 78. He was an associate for the National Prayer Breakfast movement since 1956. Along with Vonette Bright, he was influential in having the Senate declare the National Day of Prayer. He served as a director of World Vision from 1956 to 1983, and was chairman of the board from 1966-1983. He was also president of Concern Ministries, a charitable organization, first in California, and then in Washington, DC. He was also a member to the advisory board for the

Navigators and for Orient Crusades Missions. As an author, Dr. Halverson published over 20 books and wrote the popular nationally distributed bi-weekly newsletter, *Perspective*. He was also a frequent speaker at Bible conferences.

Halverson was married to Doris Seaton and they had three children, Richard Jr., Stephen, and Deborah. **After a very long and fruitful life, he passed into the arms of Jesus on November 28, 1995.** After his death, the United States Senate passed a resolution of condolence to be delivered to the Halverson family. The Congressional Record was kept open for 15 days so that all 100 senators could offer tributes to the man they had come to know and love. This record is available online, and is a testimony of the effective power of a life lived for God. Many testified to Dr. Halverson's humility, Christlike character, and love for *all* people as outstanding qualities of his life. **His life truly was aflame for God, and everyone benefited from the warmth and light generated by the Holy Spirit within him.**

Observations From Richard Halverson's Life:

Born into a nominal Christian home in 1916.

Little training or interest in spiritual things.

Went to California in 1935 to try to get into "show business".

Disillusioned after six months, decided to go to a neighborhood church.

Was readily welcomed and accepted. Found new friends there. Invited to sing in choir.

Something about new pastor intrigued him. After heart-to-heart talk, *pastor leads him to Christ*. Age 20.

Became a radically new person. Began to feel that God had a definite plan for his life, possibly ministry.

At Bible conference, *surrendered his life entirely* to Jesus Christ. Holy Spirit has been real, ever since.

At pastor's encouragement, went to Wheaton College and Princeton Seminary.

First assistant pastorate was with his pastor-mentor in Kansas City, MO.

After two years, took a position in Coalinga, CA. He became very disillusioned.

Determined that *he would serve Christ no matter what*, whether there was fruit, recognition, ...or not.

God dealt with his pride and ambition in a deeper way.

Second crisis with the Holy Spirit happened at Bible conference with Henrietta Mears.

God led him to cabin where there was a prayer meeting. Went in to pray and God came powerfully.

God gave him the Four Commitments of the "Fellowship of the Burning Hearts".

Was led to quit his current pastorate. Was called to Hollywood Presbyterian Church as youth pastor.

Stayed for 10 years. Ministry matured and deepened.

At prayer meeting, was impressed to go to China on an evangelistic campaign with missionaries.

Campaign very successful. Later could see how strategic this was.

God asked him to be willing to lay his life down in China. After some struggle, agreed to do anything.

This brought about a new inner freedom to be entirely available to Christ at any time, for any reason.

After 8 more years, took a pastorate in Bethesda, Maryland, less than 10 miles from Washington, DC.

During next 23 years, led a very productive, fruitful life, engaged in numerous organizations and causes.

In 1981, was selected to become Chaplain of the United States Senate.

Effectively represented Jesus' love and concern for all people on "the Hill".

After his death, was publicly honored for his humble, loving service as spiritual leader to the Senate.

All 100 senators contributed to the Congressional Record written tributes in recognition of his service.

God Hunt 12: Wholly Devoted To Jesus

II Chronicles 16:9a

II Tim. 2:1-26 (esp. vss. 20,21)

II Cor. 6:1-18