

# My Testimony

By Dr. John H. Roller

To understand my story, it is first necessary that you know about my family background.

My mother, Lorraine Winifred Grosjean, was born March 12, 1921 to a family that had been living in the New York metropolitan area for thousands of years. By that I mean that some of her ancestors were “Staten Island Indians” – Lenni-Lenape who had fought with, traded with and intermarried with her Dutch ancestors, who had founded New Amsterdam. Later, this family absorbed English and French bloodlines. Newark, New Jersey (where Lorraine was born) was founded by one of her great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfathers, who named it after his former home in England. Lorraine’s last name comes from her father’s father’s father, who came to America as a teenager because he didn’t want to be a Roman Catholic priest, which is what his family in France wanted. He founded a silversmithing company that eventually merged with what is now Tiffany’s. These are just a few samples of my mother’s background.

Mom (as I know her today) was raised in the Protestant Episcopal Church, where (to hear her tell it) she “heard the Gospels but not the Gospel.” In other words, she learned stories about Jesus in Sunday school, but was never told she needed to make a personal decision to receive him as Lord in order to be saved until she was 16. After she accepted Jesus as her personal Savior, the Lord gave her a burden for the people of China, and she hoped to go there as a missionary. Events in China (and in her own life) delayed that plan, but she finally got to go to China as an English teacher in the mid-1980s. Now she’s retired and lives with me in Concord, North Carolina.

My father, Murray Ralph Roller, was born July 18, 1907 to an Orthodox Jewish couple who had come to New York from eastern Europe when they were teenagers. He was the second of their five sons – a circumstance which led to his going to school only until he completed the eighth grade, then working to help support his family so his older brother could go on to high school and college. Murray (as he was known then) was very bitter about this arrangement and engaged in many self-destructive behaviors by way of expressing his anger and his dissatisfaction with life.

According to his own testimony, which was published in the mid-1950s in the “Jewish Hope” magazine, Murray joined the U.S. Army in September of 1942 and was befriended by a young Presbyterian, who gave him a copy of the New Testament and asked him to read it. He was “completely abashed” by the very first verse, which reads, “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1, KJV). “What has Jesus Christ to do with David and Abraham?” he wondered. “I realized that I had been entirely wrong all my life and I asked God to forgive me. He did. I promised to live a new life, dedicated to do the will of Jesus, my Saviour.”

Lorraine and Ralph (as he began to be known, more frequently, after his conversion) met at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, in New York, and were married August 24, 1946. I

am the oldest of their three children. I was born November 7, 1949 in Orange, New Jersey. At the time of my earliest memories, Papa (as I knew him) was working as a “missionary” to the Jewish people of New York City. His message to them was that Jesus is the Messiah, the coming king of Israel and the world, and that they could find salvation, as he had, only through faith in Jesus.

The day I was exactly six and one-half years old (May 7, 1956), Papa gave me a King James Version of the Bible and encouraged me to read it through – Genesis to Revelation – within the next 365 days. I did that, and I did it five more times before I was twelve and one-half (May 7, 1962). I dare say there are few Christian children who were more familiar with the contents of the Bible than I was at any given age of my childhood.

As early as the spring of 1957, I began accompanying Papa on his “work” trips from our home in Queens to his various places of ministry on the street-corners of Manhattan and Brooklyn. I often distributed Gospels and other Scripture portions to those who passed by while he was preaching, took pictures of those who were listening to him and tried to count how many were in the “audience” during the course of a sermon. On weekends, we often went to churches throughout the New York metropolitan area, where Papa would share his testimony and appeal for financial help for his mission work. By this means, I was exposed to a very wide variety of approaches to Christianity, including (but not limited to) Baptist, Pentecostal, Quaker, Salvation Army, Christian Science, Seventh-day Adventist, Mennonite, Holiness and non-denominational. We also went to churches of differing ethnicities, including at least Hebrew-Christian, Italian and African-American, and others I don’t now remember. I should mention that I also went to church with Mom sometimes – she was a member of the Reformed Episcopal Church during those years.

My parents’ marriage was not a happy one, and they were separated on and off at various times, during which I usually stayed with my father. The last (and longest) of these separations was from the fall of 1961 through the winter of 1962-1963, which included the entire year I was in the seventh grade. I lived with my father during that year. My sister, Ruth, spent most of the summer of 1962 with Papa and me, but my brother, Joel, remained with Mom. Late in August, Ruth went back to Mom’s (in Rochester, New Hampshire), and I started eighth grade at Beard Junior High School, in Flushing, in September. A few days later, Papa was in court for not sending child support payments to Mom. He left that courtroom in restraints, and I never saw him again. I was sent to live with Mom. I was unhappy with this at first, but gradually grew accustomed to it.

Shocking news came on the evening of Ruth’s 11<sup>th</sup> birthday – Papa had committed suicide that morning (March 4, 1963). He had been staying at a friend’s house, and he had hung himself, leaving no note or other explanation. I refused to even believe that it was suicide until his friend gave me a tour of the house and a detailed explanation of the evidence. Then I switched from denial to anger – directed, not at my father, but at God, who was (in my view) either unaware of (or unconcerned about) such tragedies or powerless to prevent them. None of those pictures matched the view of God my father had taught me, so I soon concluded that God didn’t exist. I made a conscious and deliberate choice to become an Atheist and to frame my life around that anti-belief.

I didn’t know any other Atheists personally, but there was a considerable Atheist

movement going on in the world at that time, and I began to find many things to read that bolstered my new anti-religion. Most helpful, in my opinion, were the books portraying evolution (rather than creation) as the explanation for the existence of the universe and of life. Throughout my years at Spaulding High School, in Rochester, New Hampshire (from which I graduated in 1967), I studied as much science as I could – both at school and at home – hoping science could help me prove there is no God. I continued on this track through my freshman year of college (at the University of New Hampshire, in Durham).

My sophomore-year roommate, David Robertson, was the son of a Baptist minister, and was an outstanding Christian who tried (very gently) to show me that Atheism was foolishness. He rose early every morning to read his Bible and pray before going to classes, and we stayed up late many nights discussing God (and other topics). But, more importantly, he invited me to go to a Boston Red Sox game with several of his church friends. I was very attracted to one of the girls in the group (Kay Werren), and I spent the next several weekends going home with Dave so I would have the chance to see Kay (which mostly happened at the church). So here was an Atheist becoming a “regular” at a Baptist youth group! The people in the church showered me with expressions of love and never “let up” in their efforts to “convert” me. Outwardly, I reacted by making fun of their beliefs, and steadfastly refusing to change my own; but inwardly, I was beginning to have serious doubts about whether I’d chosen the right path. I could see that Dave and his friends had “something” in their lives that made them “different” (and “better”) than me – but the only thing it could possibly be was their claim of a personal relationship with God. Could God really exist after all? In ways that are very difficult to explain to anyone but myself, I slowly began to believe that there was evidence God really did exist, and I began to feel I must either ignore this realization (which I thought would be hard to do) or commit my life to Christ (which I knew would be a radical change for me).

Things came to a head during the Christmas vacation. I even told Mom that I was considering becoming a Christian. The youth group put on a “pageant” at the church, and I played a shepherd, holding a staff but not saying anything (because I still claimed that I didn’t believe in Jesus). Later that evening, at Kay’s house, I watched the NASA special “message from the moon to earth” during which the astronauts took turns in reading the Creation story from Genesis 1. This was a “last straw” for me – even my “science heroes” (it seemed) were telling me to believe in God! I decided that I would “accept Christ” – but on my own “terms”! Rather than “going forward” during a church service (which was what my friends were urging me to do), I would make an appointment to speak to the pastor, privately, in his study. That way, I thought, if I later decide it was a mistake, I can always deny that it had happened – it would only be “his word against mine.” The Holy Spirit, however, had the “last word.” During the service the next Sunday morning (December 29, 1968), I felt intense internal pressure to make my stand public and final by going forward. It was as if God himself was saying to me, “Now or never!” and I felt very afraid that if I botched this opportunity, he might never allow me another. So, at the conclusion of the service, I got out of my pew and literally ran to the “altar” to pray for salvation. Afterwards, one of the girls in the youth group (Rita Wallace) told me, “You’ve just made a decision you will never regret!” and I can honestly say I believe she must be a prophetess, because she was certainly right about that. I never have.

A few weeks later, I felt that God was calling me into full-time Christian service, and I

made the decision to transfer from U.N.H. to a Christian college to prepare myself for ministry by majoring in Bible. Before the semester ended, I became acquainted with a youth evangelism ministry, Truth 'n' Teens, and began traveling with them on weekends, sharing this testimony and counseling with teenagers about their spiritual lives. The next fall, I began my junior year at Gordon College, in Wenham, Massachusetts. I continued to travel with "T'n'T" during the two years I spent in residence there. Because of having changed my major so many times (and changing colleges), I hadn't accumulated enough credits to graduate by the spring of 1971. Consequently, I was drafted that fall, and spent the next two years in the United States Army, first being trained to be a medic, then working as a medical research laboratory technician as part of Operation Whitecoat at Ft. Detrick, Maryland. Weeks before being discharged, on August 25, 1973, I married a young woman I had met in the course of doing youth work – Mary Hegg, of Newport, Vermont. We began our married life in a small off-post apartment in Frederick, Maryland, while I finished up my tour of military service. When I was discharged, we moved to Sanford, Maine and spent the next three and one-half years working full time for Truth 'n' Teens as youth evangelists. Mary played her guitar and sang Christian folk songs (many of which she had written), and I preached and organized high school Bible clubs and other youth ministries throughout the six New England states. I was very happy doing what I had believed (for several years) God was calling me to do, though I also felt he was telling me it would only be a "springboard" to other ministry in the future.

In January of 1977, Mary and I (and our two-year-old daughter, Emily) left New England and Truth 'n' Teens, and I took a job as director of New Dimension Teen Center, in Warrensburg, New York. Funding for this ministry ended soon afterwards, and I worked for a while as a relief manager at a convenience grocery while Mary was pregnant with our second daughter, Sara. That summer, I read an article on Church Growth in a monthly newsletter we received called the "Advent Christian News." I wrote to the author, Rev. Adrian Shepard, the Executive Vice President of the Advent Christian General Conference of America. I told him I was familiar with the Advent Christian Church, having served as a counselor at several Advent Christian youth camps and as a guest speaker in many Advent Christian churches during my years (both 1969-1971 and 1973-1977) with "T'n'T" – and that I would like to "help the Advent Christian denomination grow" if there were any way it could use me. Rev. Shepard sent copies of my letter to the five Regional Superintendents. That led to my meeting with one of them, Rev. Nelson Melvin, and that meeting led to my first opportunity to serve as Pastor of an Advent Christian church.

To make this long story a little shorter, I served as Pastor of the Village Church (Advent Christian) of Carpentersville, Illinois from 1978 to 1984 (our son, Brian, was born during this time); the Advent Christian Church of Tallahassee, Florida from 1984 to 1987; and First Advent Christian Church of Charleston, West Virginia from 1987 to 1998. In January of 1997, I took on an added responsibility as North American Area Director for Urban/Ethnic Ministries for the Advent Christian General Conference of America – a part-time position that eventually led to my resigning the pastorate in Charleston, moving to North Carolina, and becoming the Resource Center Coordinator for ACGC (a post which I held from February of 1998 through December of 2005). In 2006, the General Conference office was restructured, and I was reassigned to serve as coordinator of

publications.

I've written this testimony for several reasons:

I want to answer the question, "Who are you?" that is frequently asked by those who have received my e-tracts but don't know the person behind them.

I've been asked to explain how it was that I became a Christian.

I hope my story will serve as an inspiration to you if you're trying to witness to someone who seems "impossible" to lead to faith in Christ.

Most of all, if you're not a Christian, I want to encourage you to become one. I hope my story will help you find a path to that decision.

I also want to encourage "inactive" Christians to become more "active" both in living out their faith and in sharing it with others. There is no greater joy to be had than the joy of leading another person to receive eternal salvation!

I hope that my effort to explain my own story, in writing, will lead many other people to write down their stories and share them with others, as I am doing.

Thank you for taking the time to read this! It would also make me very happy if you would forward this message to anyone you know who might benefit from reading it. If you have any questions about me, my story, or how you can have a personal relationship with God, please write to me. I promise I will answer every email I receive (though it may take me a while to get around to you if lots of people write!).

Sincerely, in Christ,

Dr. John H. Roller, [johnroller@faithbiblechristian.com](mailto:johnroller@faithbiblechristian.com)