

The Unfinished Rumble Plans!

The Story of
— **Tom Skinner** —
Street Gang Leader, Harlem, New York

Read how the leader of the toughest street gang in New York City sat down to plan out the strategy for the biggest ever rumble (street gang fight) in New York (involving 3000 guys) — but forgot to finish the plans because he was distracted by....

This condensed version of Tom Skinner's story has been written, edited, and printed by:

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Knoxville, Tennessee

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Fighting the Imperials!

“The Imperials are coming! The Imperials are coming!”

The Imperials, a street gang of Black teenagers in Harlem, New York, were coming to our turf, to invade us, to start a rumble, to defeat us, and take over our turf. We were the “Lords” of Harlem, and we were known as the Harlem Lords.

Are Lords afraid? Not one of us showed any fear; that is, we were more afraid to let our gang members see any fear in us than we were of the Imperials! Yes, we all had fear in us. We knew that one of us might be dead before morning, but still not one of us showed any fear!

When I was about 15 years old, I was leader of the Harlem Lords with at least 115 Black teenage Lords in my gang. The Imperials were also a large gang. I stationed my men in strategic locations with a few on top of 6-story buildings with pellet guns. (Back in those days, few had any fire arms. Imagine what we would have been like if we had real fire arms—and you'll get some idea of what Harlem is like today!)

While a high school student, I was in a special class that studied the military tactics of some of the most famous generals in the world. I modified some of their tactics for street-gang warfare. I knew that if we won this battle, I would be leader of the toughest street gang in New York City. The strategy worked, and after only a few minutes of fighting, I was leader of the toughest street gang in New York, but I was not finished reveling in my new status when we heard the police sirens. We scattered in forty directions while the police were busy helping injured Imperials.

Why did we fight? Was it because our ancestors were brought over like cattle on ships from Africa? The conditions on the ships were so bad that many thousands of men died while their women were being raped by the sailors. The sick ones were killed or thrown overboard. (Because many books have been written about the slave trade, I'm not going to write any more about it.)

Hypocrites in the Church

My father was a Christian minister, a pastor. To me, church was something you were supposed to do because it was a fine, respectable thing to do. But it didn't make sense to me; most of the people I knew who were supposed to be Christians had plenty of faults, sins, contradictions, hypocrisy, and false fronts in their lives.

I was born in Harlem which is a part of New York City that is a area about 2½ square miles where one million Black people live. (Most cities of one million people cover over 100 square miles. Please try to imagine in your mind how crowded we were.) This was a typical scene from my boyhood: at precisely 4 p.m. every afternoon, a police car drives up to Mike's racketeering shop. Two policemen walk away—out of sight. Mike walks to the police car, leaves a brown paper bag full of money in the police car, and the policemen return. Their daily bribe has been collected and Mike does not have to worry about being picked up by the police on racketeering charges.

Why did I turn from my father's God? I asked my father where God was in all this mess we had in Harlem. No answer. White folks were saying, “God and the Bible have the answers for the people who live in Harlem.” Those people who said this (but never did anything to help bring God and the Bible to us) called themselves “Bible-believing, fundamental, conservative, Evangelical Christians;” and I was thoroughly turned off by “Bible-believing, fundamental, conservative, Evangelical Christianity.” Those people said all we need was “a good dose of salvation,” but I never saw any of them in Harlem dispensing that “dose of salvation.” Or, they might say, “all that those 60,000 dope addicts in Harlem need is to hear the gospel and be born again” or “Christ is the answer.”

Today I know that all of these things are correct. It seems that those people know in their heads, but they do not have those truths in their heart. If those truths were in their hearts, they would crawl from door to door in Harlem, and with tears in their eyes, beg people to repent of their sins and trust Jesus Christ to save them from their sins. When the Christians refused to bring their message to Harlem, the Black men came in preaching militancy and hatred against the White men. These men pointed out to me that some of the leading exponents of hate, segregation, and bigotry were in the Bible-believing churches. They reminded me that the most segregated hour in America is the eleven o'clock Sunday morning worship hour—and they were right (and still are). They also showed me *in writing* in the constitutions of some of America's leading Christian denominations, that the Blacks don't need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ because they are sub-human. Other churches known as fundamental or conservative, wrote in their constitutions that Blacks are not allowed to join their churches. I became bitter against Christianity.

The Initiation into the Gang

I want to go back to the day when I was initiated into the gang. I was about 14 years old, and my resentment against Christianity was at a peak. As I was coming home from high school one day, one of the Lords stopped me. He approached me sarcastically and said, “Hey, Tom, how would you like to belong to the Harlem Lords?” He knew that I was a preacher's kid, and he thought I wouldn't want anything to do with the Lords.

But I surprised him with, “Yeah, man; I'd like to belong.”

“You're puttin' me on, dude...” he replied thinking that preachers' kids were suppose to be nice innocent fellows who don't bother anyone.

“No,” I replied. Deep down inside me, I wanted to prove to the fellows that just because I was a preacher's kid didn't mean I couldn't be as tough as the rest of them.

“In order to be a member of the Lords, you gotta pass the initiation test,” he cautioned. “We'll see if you're tough enough to be in the gang!” That night I met the Harlem Lords. (Or, should I say, they met *me*?) I don't know if they saw through me, but I was scared. The only thing that helped me go through with it was my resolve to show everyone that I was as tough as they.

Three of the older gang members came up to me. The leader—I'll call him Joseph—looked at me with eyes that bored right through me. “So you wanna be a member of the Lords?” Again I nodded. Some of those sitting nearby laughed. Joseph stopped the laughter with a raised hand, and continued, “You know you gotta pass the initiation test, don't you?”

“Name it,” I said with a cocky snarl.

“We gonna be nice to you, Skinner. We gonna give you three choices.”

“Go ahead....”

“You choose whichever one you want. Choice number one....we'll strip you to the waist, tie your hands and hang you from that spike over there.” He pointed to a brick wall where a long spike had been cemented in. The alley would then become an arena with everyone watching one of the bigger gang members beat me with a leather and rope lash about twenty time. “And if you cry out, you won't be tough enough for the Lords,” he added.

“Tell 'em what the other choices are,” someone yelled from the darkness.

Joseph continued, “Second choice is this, We'll pick two guys to jump on you and beat you 'til they get tired or until you get knocked out. You'll take what they dish out without fighting back and without asking them to stop.”

I licked my lips and became conscious of the dryness of my mouth. When I spoke, my voice was just above a whisper. “And what's my third choice?”

“For the third choice, you turn and face this brick wall. Then we'll take Sammy here and put him right beside you. We'll give Sammy his knife and blindfold him. Then he'll take ten steps, turn and throw the knife where he thinks you are. If he misses, you'll be a member of the Lords. If he doesn't miss, you won't have to worry about it, will you?” asked Joseph with eyes flashing, eager for the test to begin. I looked into his face, one scarred and mutilated by many rumbles and I wondered how my own face would look in a few years of street fighting—if I passed my initiation and lived that long. I chose the first test—the lashes.

Roughly they tied my hands in front of me and lifted me to hang from the giant spike. Other hands clawed at my shirt and tore it from my back. I flexed the muscles in my shoulders and back and clamped my teeth down hard to await the blows.

I heard wind sound made by the lash as it whipped through the still night air. No one was talking now. No laughing. It hit! With the pain of tearing flesh and bruised muscles, the lash struck once.

Still there was silence except for the grunts of the tall gang member swing the lash and the sound of the whip itself. *Two!*

It was pain upon pain as the whip struck the welts raised by the first blow. It took every ounce of self-control to keep from crying out. *Three!*

The pain caused my arms and shoulders to quiver uncontrollably as a reflex action to shake off the lashes. *Four!*—Or was it five? I lost track quickly and tried to take my mind off the beating.

Finally it was over. My head was aching and my senses reeling. Two of the fellows cut me down and I struggled to stand. I tried to manage a cocky grin. “Is that twenty already?”

“Yeah,” Joseph grinned back. “Why? You wanna go again?”

“Not just today.”

That broke the ice and the laughter and talking started up again.

Now the sarcasm was gone. In its place, genuine friendship. Out of the hate of initiation was born a strange kind of affection that binds a boy to a gang. I had done it. I had taken the punishment and passed the test. I was a member of the Harlem Lords!

Becoming a Gang Leader

I was a member only six weeks before I decided that I wanted to be the leader of the gang. (In six weeks time, I had already been involved in several fights and some burglaries.) To be the leader, all I had to do was to challenge the leader. Together, we choose weapons and fought it out. I challenged Joseph and we chose to fight with knives.

The fight was over in only a few minutes. After a few swings and misses, I finally landed my knife in his side. When he saw blood squirting out of his side, he looked at it in disbelief, held his side, and conceded defeat. The Harlem Lords had a new leader—one who had been a member only six weeks and was only 14 years old. I reigned as an unchallenged leader for two years.

Many people depict gang leaders as a bunch of mentally retarded, uncouth, or punch-drunk fellows who don't know how to talk or don't know how to act. They envision them with bandannas around their heads, with dirty sneakers and dungarees. Just to set the record straight, while I was leader of the gang, I was also:

- >president of the student body at school
- >I was a member of the Arista Honor Society
- >I was president of the Shakespearean Club
- >I was a member of the baseball team
- >I was also president of the young people's department
in my father's church.

>By the time I was fourteen years old, I'd acted as the lead man in two of Shakespeare's full-length plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. So I wasn't *too* mentally retarded!

However, there was another reason why I joined the gang. (My Black readers will find this much easier to understand than my White readers.) The Black Nationalists said to me, “Tom, it's a fine thing that you're a student leader, that you're getting good marks at school, and that you show the qualifications of leadership. If you've got any idea about

making it in our kind of world, you'd better think again. If you've got any idea about getting ahead in our kind of society, then you'd better let us school you again. You see Tom, this is a White man's world. He controls things from the top to the bottom.

“He might allow you to be a jazz player, a rock-and-roll singer, or the janitor in his building. But he will never allow you to compete with him on an open basis to make a tangible contribution to American society. He feels you are inferior to him. He is convinced that you could never be his equal. He believes somehow that you will never reach the level of social, cultural, intellectual society that he has reached. He will always look down on you.

“And Tom, you may be able to make a good salary and want to move into the best of communities, but as soon as you try to move in, he will protest loudly in all kinds of council meetings to try to keep you out. If you do move in, he will ignore you. When your children go out on the street to play, he will call his kids in because he's afraid that at four years of age, they just might want to inner-breed. He doesn't want you living next door to him because you might mongrelize the races. You see, Tom, he doesn't *want* you. You've got to accept that, Tom.” Most of what he said was correct—and most of it still is the same today!

These Black Nationalists continued day after day: “You are not accepted by him as their equal. You might as well give up any idea about intellectual pursuits, about making it in our kind of world, and join the rebellion—join the revolution. Put the White man in his place. Get back at him.”

They presented to me the convincing evidence that there were outstanding men in Black society with great ability, great intellectual power, and tremendous talent and gifts who were not allowed to develop to the fullest of their potential because of the racist attitudes in American society. And so I grew more bitter and frustrated. I began to hate the day I was born in Harlem and eventually I cursed the day that I was born Black.

To this day, there are hundreds of thousands of Black teenagers who face the same frustrations. They are easy prey for the Black Nationalists and many other militant extremists groups who exploit them and turn their bitterness into rebellion. They tell the Blacks that they don't have a chance for a decent education. They point out that the Watts district of Los Angeles (which is as big as Boston, Massachusetts, does not have a hospital or a swimming pool. No wonder the young Blacks are rioting.

It was no trouble to get me worked up, and it is no trouble to get most other young Blacks worked up.

I admit that the first time I had to get involved in an act of violence, it wasn't easy. The first time I had to break into a store and steal, the first time I had to break a bottle across someone's head, the first time I had to lead the fellows into a gang rumble—these weren't easy because of the moral and ethical teaching I had received at home. However, I learned that if you keep defying your conscience, soon your conscience becomes hardened or deadened. You become convinced that what you think, do, and act is right. This is true of many drunks lying in a gutter; they become convinced that their lifestyle is proper. The same is true with the whore, the whoremonger, and the adulterer; they believe that their lifestyle is okay. And the same is true with the selfish, greedy person (whether he is a businessman, beggar, or housewife); they become convinced that their lifestyle is proper. The same is also true of the racist (Black and White); they become convinced that racism is the only way to solve their problems (and even the problems of the other race). My conscience became so hardened that I got to the place that I could bash a bottle across someone's head and be undisturbed about it. I could take that same bottle, break it in half, and shove the glass in the man's face and twist it without even batting an eye. By the time I left the gang, I had plunged my knife into twenty-two guys.

I was gripped with a tremendous sense of power. To maintain my status as a gang leader, I had to act tough and to be tough. The only way I could keep the gang in line was for them to respect my leadership by letting them know that I wasn't afraid to plunge my knife between some guy's ribs.

During the time I was with the gang, my parents never knew that I was a gang leader, or even a gang member. In fact, every once in a while, to make things look good, I would have the fellows chase me home. They would give me a head start running down the street and take off after me, giving me just enough room to burst into the house out of breath. They would stand outside the door hollering and cursing my name and threatening my life. We gave my parents the impression that I was the poor innocent preacher's kid, victim of my environment. And my poor ignorant parents, like the average teenagers' parents in American society, would say, "I don't know what's happening to our neighborhood. Our dear son Tom can't even walk the streets any more!"

(I know that most parents resent being called ignorant, but isn't this ignorant: Most parents say to their kids, "Look, be good—not because it's the right thing to do, but because I don't want you to embarrass me socially." Now I know that's not the way they say it, but that is the essence of what is in their hearts!) You see, my parents were no different. After all, what reason did they have to believe that I was anything other than what I seemed to be: president of the young people's department in the church, president of the student body at school, getting good marks on my report card, and well respected? Whenever a teacher wanted to reprimand another student for his lack of academic aggressiveness, she would say, "Why can't you be like that fellow Tom Skinner?" (That sounds like bragging, but that is who I was in school.)

I was excited by the double life that I was leading—rumbling with the guys on Saturday night, breaking in, stealing, looting, rioting, and then getting up in the young people's choir on Sunday morning and singing, *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*.

The Church and all of its Dirty Laundry

Now I want to take a closer look at what our churches were like in Harlem; that is, as Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in his day, I want to expose the hypocrisy that I have seen in the religious leaders in Harlem. (It is not easy to "hang out all of the dirty laundry" of my family's closest friends for the whole world to see; but I feel a divine directive to do so.)

When I joined the church when I was seven years old, I did so only because it was the respectable thing to do. My motivation for attending was for the sake of my father's reputation as a preacher, and later as a cover for my gang activity. Actually, I sat in church amused at what I saw going on. (Little did I know in those adolescent days that God was opening my mind to understand the true nature of the hypocrisy because many years later he would use me to expose that hypocrisy!)

Today, I feel confident in saying that in that church, there was **no true worship** (which is also true of very many churches in America)! Church gatherings, as I saw them, were a time for the members to be stirred by the emotional clichés that were used Sunday after Sunday. It seems that as long as the people heard those clichés, they felt good. They

found comfort and security in hearing and seeing that with which they were familiar. If anything had changed, their faith would have been endangered. God never did anything new. Nothing was ever said that was important. Words came without thought. Songs were used for the same reason: to rekindle the emotions. If the minister was soft-spoken, the congregation slept. If he were lively, they paid attention—so they tried to be lively. As a teenager, I found no meaning in those services—except as entertainment. I've talked to hundreds of teenagers who told me the same thing. Sameness was so prevalent, that I was able to predict almost every word and gesture, and who would say it!

Eleven o'clock, Sunday morning.

The choir marched down the aisle dressed in their robes always singing the same song: *We're Marching to Zion*, and filled the choir loft behind the pulpit.

The pastor prayed.

A passage from the Bible was read.

A responsive reading from the back of the hymnal.

Then the pastor called on a deacon to pray (Usually one of the same three deacons every Sunday). The words of the prayer were almost the same every Sunday. After all of these years, I can quote the prayer word for word:

God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
We thank you for our lying down last night
And our uprising this morning.
We thank you that we're still in the land of the living.
And that the blood is still running warm in our veins,
That we've got the use of our limbs
And the articulation of our speech.
We thank you that our bed last night was not our cooling board
[in a morgue],
And that our blanket was not our winding sheet [burial cloth].
We thank you this morning that we've been able
to push our way out to the house of prayer,
And we pray Lord that while you're moving this morning,
that you'll just stop by here.
We pray that you'll go up to the choir, Lord,
And give us that love that runs from heart to heart,
and breast to breast.

We pray for our pastor this morning.

We pray that you will prop him up on every weak and leaning side.

While he was praying, someone interjected: “You just go on and pray that prayer, brother,” while some sister or brother started to moan a little bit, others to hum a little. The deacon continued:

“Now, Lord, we want you this morning to bless the sick and the afflicted, the poor and the needy, the prison-bound.” And he always closed the prayer by saying, “Now, Lord, when we come down to press a dying pillow, when we've done all that You've assigned our hands and hearts to do, we want You to lead us down by the chilly Jordan and let us cross over at a calm time. Take us over there to that land where Job declared that the wicked would cease from troubling us, and the weary would be at rest, where every day would be Sunday afterwhile.”

Then someone picked up the word *afterwhile* and carried it out, “Afterwhile, afterwhile, afterwhile,” then someone else. Before long, ten or fifteen people were saying “afterwhile.” Finally, half the church was repeating it, jumping and shouting all over the place, until no one could hear the deacon praying.

After awhile they calmed down a little bit as the choir began to pick up the chant and then sing *Sweet Hour of Prayer*.

Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer

That calls me from a world of care...

The choir then began to hum. Someone jumped up and said, “That was my mother's song.” And before long emotionalism would break loose again.

When things quieted down, the church clerk came up to read the announcements and notices for that Sunday. The pastor then spent about half an hour talking about the need for money and finances in the church. The deacons and ushers would take up two or three offerings; then the choir sang another song and the preacher was ready to preach.

Perhaps at one time it all had meaning. Perhaps the old words, the same songs, the tattered prayers still said something to some of the people. But I was not helped. The traditions, clichés, and dullness only drove me further from God.

Now we were at the climax of the Sunday morning service—the sermon. It was the usual procedure. The preacher came into the pulpit with his notebook. The night before he had pulled out a couple of books and had copied the sermon in his notebook. Now he would walk up into

the pulpit and preach it. All the people knew he was reading his sermon. The language was stilted and the words weren't his own. The illustrations and points were from another generation. Each Sunday was the same; the preacher read—then about a half hour later, he closed his notebook. As soon as the book was closed, some sister nudged another one sitting next to her and said, “The book is closed.” That meant it was now time to get ready. Another person woke up and noticed that the book was closed. Then the preacher put the book aside and shouted something like this: “I’ve been talking about Jesus, my rock, my sword, my shield, my wheel in the middle of a wheel.”

Then he talked about how he met Jesus down in the clay hills of Georgia and how one Friday in May in a little country church, he “saw the light.”

By now the rest of the congregation was awake. A chorus of *amens* from the people punctuated his little soliloquy. By now we had all heard it so many times we could repeat it with him, dramatic pauses, shouts and all.

At the peak of emotion, the preacher walked over to the mourner's bench, beginning another well-worn invitational sermon. After exhausting his file of clichés and illustrations, he pulled them out again. The words were designed to strike home to the hearts of the people. After fifteen minutes of the preacher's urging, the congregation responded just the way he wanted them to. They knew if they did, they could shorten the service, because the preacher expected them to moan, shout, cry and carry on. When enough people were so “moved,” the preacher extended his invitation—or took another offering.

His invitation was not for seeking sinners to find salvation through the merits of Jesus Christ, but an invitation for everyone not belonging to the church to come to the front and join.

Yes—Sunday after Sunday, it was the same. And I was sitting there amused because I could predict almost to the minute what would happen, when it would happen, and how it would happen. It got to be a game—I could predict every Sunday morning what sister was going to get up and shout, what deacon was going to pray, and what his words would be. Some of us, as young people, sat in the choir giggling and laughing as we would recite the prayer with him. To us it was a big joke, because the same deacon who prayed that long-winded, pious prayer was also a known drunk in the community. The same sister who jumped up and

shouted *amen* on Sunday morning had had three husbands, and was living with still another. So the whole thing became sort of an amusing little program for us.

And I was excited by the fact that I could go to church and live under the nose of the preacher and still operate as gang leader.

We all quoted the right verses and recited the right phrases in church on Sunday morning, but on Monday we faced the world with the feeling that God was unnecessary—that he didn't exist.

We—the *enlightened ones*—saw God as an emotional crutch for the people—just another word in their catalogue of clichés. I became more and more convinced that if this was what the church was all about, I didn't want any part of it.

Above I described the church that I attended all during my adolescent and teen years. But because my father was a preacher, I visited many Black churches in New York City and met many ministers. From what I saw, most of the churches and ministers were about the same as ours. Among the ministers, I don't remember ever meeting one that I felt was in his position because God had chosen him to minister to the people. It seemed to me that in most cases, it was the people who were ministering to the pastors. I recall a conversation that I heard one Monday. A pastor was visiting my father and he said, “Boy, I really preached yesterday morning. I had them niggers jumpin' benches and hollering and screaming at every word I said. And you know, I must have really been preaching, because they raised \$300 for me.” I soon became aware that success in the ministry was measured *only* in terms of money. The success of a pastor was measured in how big a car he drove and the quality of the clothes he wore. Most pastors competed against one another to build the biggest and the most prestigious or famous church.

I also learned that a tremendous number of the Black preachers in Harlem were involved in improper sexual relationships. They had extra-marital affairs, committed adultery with members of their congregations, and had plenty of “girl friends” when they traveled to church conventions. I was especially disgusted to learn that many Harlem preachers were involved in homosexual affairs.

The congregations winked at the sexual misbehavior of their ministers because this gave *them* an excuse to do the same thing; and the pastors winked at the sexual misbehavior of their members, because they

didn't want to lose any dues-paying members!

Furthermore, I learned that among many of the Black clergy in the city of New York, there existed an unbelievable viciousness and hatred for one another—because of jealousy.

The churches would take three or four offerings each Sunday—for one cause or another. It was this sort of thing that sickened me in my stomach.

As a teenager, I observed in many Black communities the pastors were pretty well off. Most had salaries about equal to that of a junior executive in a well-run company. But then, add his rent-free parsonage, church-paid utilities and telephone, plus a new car every other year given by the church (plus the church paid for the gas). Then add a four-week, all-expense-paid vacation and plus expenses for denominational conferences, plus special gifts at Christmas and on birthdays. On top of that, each year on the anniversary of the pastor's joining the church, the members gave him a special bonus—one dollar for each year he had been pastor from each member. I knew one pastor who had been in his position for 15 years and had 1000 members. He got about a bonus of about \$15,000—not bad fringe benefits for someone on a junior executive's salary! Thus, many of them exploited their people, doing what they call “milking the people dry.” The word among preachers was, “Make them give, make them honor you.” There was no mention of Jesus Christ, no mention of the need to reach those who are down and out; no mention of helping the drug addicts, the alcoholic, or the gang leader. No mention of mothers who are raising children on welfare checks, living in a two-by-four flat with five, six, or seven children—with only two rooms and no husband. No mention of how the church can become relevant to this situation. And I said to myself, “If this is Christianity, then I want no part of it!”

But many of the people weren't interested in spiritual help anyway. The church formed the only basis for social action or social security for our Black people. It was the only place that gave the Black man a sense of status, a sense of belonging. In society he was a nobody; in society he was looked down upon; in society he was rejected. But in the church he could become a member of any one of thirty or forty clubs and organizations such as the Flower Club, the Pastor's Aid Club, the Carolina Club, the Faithfulness Club, and some thirty others. Every club had many leadership positions, president, vice-president, secretary,

treasurer, corresponding secretary, assistant corresponding secretary, assistant treasurer, chaplain, and assistant chaplain. The clubs gave everyone a position. For the first time, a man who was a *nobody* in society had a title in the church. And the Black pastors, well-schooled in what some Black preachers called Black psychology, who wanted to exploit this situation, used it to their advantage.

Even taking in new members was another money game. Most pastors, when they saw a new person coming to join their church, saw nothing but dollar signs; they did not see a soul that was thirsting to know God. Once again I resolved that if it is this was Christianity, I wanted no part of it. All I saw in the ministry was phonies, hypocrites, actors, and money-grabbers who were in the business solely for what they could get out of it and who were not the least bit interested in the souls of men!

God Changes Tom Skinner

Despite all of my dislike and hostility against Christianity, one day, something happened to me that changed me. No, I did not find out that the church was right, and I had misunderstood it all the time. Rather, God came in such a way that I understood that the message that Jesus brought to this world was correct, but the churches that I was familiar with, had all been corrupted, deceived, perverted. They did not continue to follow the truth that was delivered to the original church.

And this change happened in me *while I was planning New York City's biggest ever gang war!* It seems that God has a sense of humor. The same thing happened to Apostle Paul. When God chose to reveal himself to Saul (whose name was later changed to Paul), God picked the biggest persecutor of Christians around, knocked him to the ground, and revealed himself in such a way, that no one could doubt that Paul's conversion was of God. (Holy Bible, New Testament, Book of Acts, Chapter 9) So it happened to me. God came to the (then) biggest city in the world, found the leader of the toughest street gang in that city, and changed him in a few moments of time. In following pages, I have tried to describe or explain, as best I can, exactly how this change came about in me.

During the two years that I was leader of the Harlem Lords, I led my 129 men in fifteen fights (or rumbles) and won every one of them. This

power caused me to become more and more bigoted, arrogant, and prejudiced. I got to the place that I hated all Whites. I hated the ground they stood on. Anyone who didn't belong to my race made me boil up in anger. I blamed White society for the dilemma that we Blacks faced. I thrilled in the power I had. I could tell my men to go home and steal from their own mother, and they would.

One day, we Harlem Lords formed a coalition with four other gangs in our neighborhood (including the Imperials) and planned to fight a coalition of gangs from the other side of the city. This gang rumble would involve more than 3,000 guys on the street at one time. It amounted to a small war! My job was to plan the strategy. I had planned the strategy on many rumbles, sometimes against gangs that were twice as big as we were—and always won. This was the reason that I stayed in the position of leadership for two years.

A couple of days before the rumble, I went home and shut myself in my room at eight o'clock at night. I got out pencil and paper and planned the strategy on paper while listening to rock-and-roll music on a radio. I spent one hour working on paper and listening to the rock-and-roll—never suspecting that during the next hour, God would get my attention in such a way that would change my life forever.

When nine o'clock rolled around, I was still sitting at my desk with the rumble plans scattered before me; when unexpectedly, the rock-and-roll music went off the air, and a preacher started preaching to me through my own radio. I was furious! I said, “Dammit,” and reached up to change stations, but I couldn't! I have no explanation for this, but somehow, I found myself *compelled* to listen to some uncouth preacher. Yes, he was as uncouth and uneducated as they come. His grammar was horrible and I was a straight A student, but still I found myself mesmerized by what he was saying. Also, he was excited and emotional. I'd seen too much emotionalism in the churches that I had visited, and I was turned off by it. I tried to keep on mapping the strategy for the rumble and ignore the preacher, but his words got through to me.

He quoted this saying from the Bible:

*If any man is in Jesus Christ,
he is a new creature.
Old things have passed away,
and all things have become new.*

— 2nd Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 17

I had heard that verse hundreds of times, but never the way he explained it: “It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, or what you have done, because Jesus Christ came to earth for the purpose of taking upon himself every sin you have ever committed.” And he said I had a sinful nature and described it as a factory inside man which manufactures evil and causes a man to commit sin. He said, “It's not the fact that a person is a drunkard or an alcoholic or a drug addict or an adulterer or a thief or a cheat or a liar that makes him immoral. No! That man is born with a condition in his human nature—a factory inside him that causes him to act contrary to God. That old sinful nature causes a man to do the things he does.” He quoted another passage from Paul: *I know that there is nothing good in me, that is in my flesh.* (Romans 7)

I was so lost in this new train of thought that I put down the strategy papers I was working on. I forgot about finishing them! Somehow they seemed unimportant before what I was listening to. Somehow I got the spooky feeling that this guy was talking right to me. He continued, “No, it's not the fact that you commit sin that makes you a sinner. You're a sinner—that's why you commit sin.” His uneducated delivery was so uncomplicated. The picture he painted was very clear to me.

As I listened, he continued: “Jesus Christ is your answer. He's the only One who can straighten the whole mess out. He gets right to the root of the problem. He changes the 'factory' inside you that makes you sin. Yessir! That's what He does!”

What seemed like emotionalism only a few minutes before, suddenly blended right in with what that man was saying—it was no longer emotionalism to me. He went on: “When Jesus was nailed to that cross, your sin was nailed there to that cross with Him. He died to pay for every sin you've ever committed or ever will commit. And he rose again to live His life inside you. That's right! His Spirit lives in that 'factory' and makes it over so you don't sin any more.”

For the first time in my life, I took a good look at Tom Skinner. Not so much what Tom Skinner had *done*—the money I'd stolen, the fact that there were fellows who were going to bear bodily injury for the rest of their lives because of me, and the gang fights I'd led. But I began to think of what I had *become*—arrogant, proud, bigoted, hateful. I was as bigoted as any White racist. And yet, here was a man saying that Jesus Christ was prepared to change all of that!

The radio preacher continued: “That's right! the Lord Jesus can

make it possible for you to stand in the very presence of God Himself—just as if you had never sinned.” I'd never really heard this message before. My only contact with religion had been the distorted, phony brand of Christianity from my earlier days. Now here a man was telling me that God would forgive every sin I had ever committed, and then make me a new person—make it possible for me to stand in the presence of God just as if I had never sinned!

It sounded good, but I had some intellectual problems. However, over the next few minutes, I thought through those intellectual problems and I found answers for each of those problems. I was still listening to that uncouth preacher, but the solutions to my problems did not come from him. They came directly to my mind. I thought that I was solving my own problems, but today I'm convinced that my heavenly father had sent an angel to whisper those thoughts into my mind, or was speaking into my mind by his Spirit—so that I thought that I was originating those thoughts. My five problems were:

- ① How do I know the Bible is true?
- ② I can't commit myself to a God I can see.
- ③ How do I know that Jesus existed?
- ④ I don't understand God.
- ⑤ Finally I realized that I had rejected Jesus' message without testing it for myself—something no intellectual or scientist does.

① Is the Bible True?

My number one problem was that everything that the preacher said that night was right from the Bible. My opinion was that the Bible was a nice book with some poetry and religious history—about dealings of some sort of Supreme Being with people who were superstitious enough to believe that He existed.

I believed that since the Bible was written by men who were human, the Bible was subject to human error. But that night, with the rumble strategy papers still spread before me, something or someone was speaking to my mind without my knowing it. Suddenly I realized, *I believe the history books that were written by humans*. I believe that Julius Caesar conquered Pompey in 44 B.C. I believe that Marcus Aurelius ruled Rome in 280 A.D. I believed that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, and that the French Revolution broke out thirteen years later. If I believe the history books that were written by imperfect men, why can't I believe in the Bible that was written my

godly men? It is astonishing that the Bible was written by forty men over a period of 1600 years, yet their writings are compatible and harmonious.

② I Can't See God

My mind argued that I couldn't see God, couldn't touch Him, couldn't feel Him. But my mind flashed back to my science class that very day when the science teacher began his lecture by saying, “Today we're going to study the atom. The atom cannot be seen by the human eye. It cannot be seen under a normal microscope. It cannot be seen even under some of the most powerful electro-microscopes.”

Now imagine this: on the very same day that I was challenged to believe in a God that I had never seen, I was taught by a science teacher to believe in an atom that nobody had ever seen. Did my heavenly father have all this planned out ahead of time—that I should sit in that science class on the same day that I was challenged to believe in a God that I could not see?

Our teacher admitted that he had never seen an atom. Then he said that this atom (which he had never seen) was divided into three parts—a proton, neutron, and electron. Now wasn't that ridiculous? He had never seen an atom, didn't know what it looked like, but he did know that it had three parts to it. And he expected *me* to believe it! Yet, I did believe it—and I still do. I believe in nuclear fission, atomic energy. I believe in atomic explosions and nuclear power. All of these things are structured upon the fact that the atom exist and has three parts, and although we don't know what an atom or a proton looks like, we believe in the atomic bomb. So if we can believe the atom exists without seeing it, why can't we believe God exists without seeing him? Actually, the evidence for God's existence is far greater than the evidence that the atom exists!

I was seeing the weaknesses of my own logic. Just like the atom, there are many things that exist and take place every day, but we don't see them; yet we know they're there, even though we can't see them or *prove* their existence.

Any person who looks at the precision and the symmetry and the beauty of this universe and draws the conclusion that it “just came about” or “just happened to be” is crazy. What if I showed you a high-quality precision watch and you asked me, “Who made that?” If I answered “It just happened to come about,” you'd think I was mentally

deranged! You would say, “Tom, that’s ridiculous because anyone can see that this watch was designed and put together by a person with superior intelligence. It didn’t just happen.” Yet, I had been looking at this universe with its tremendous laws, its millions and billions of stars and planets hurtling through space at fantastic speeds and never colliding, and I was saying *It just came about!*

I thought of many things in my everyday life that I accepted, believed or trusted that I could not see. They taught me in biology that there is vitamin A in carrots, vitamin B in rice, vitamin C in oranges, vitamin D in milk. I can’t see a vitamin, and I don’t know what a vitamin looks like, but I eat them every day and receive their benefits without seeing them. I asked myself, *Why can’t I believe in God without seeing him?*

② How Do I Know That Jesus Existed?

As I thought on this, again it seemed that an outside influence was guiding my thinking: I believe that the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates lived, and we have only one ancient writing about him—by Plato.¹ I believed in Socrates because of only one ancient writer, but with Jesus we have four major accounts of his life plus many minor references. Why did I believe in Socrates and not in Jesus? I understood that my unbelief was not intellectual, rather it was emotional or spiritual. I understood that my intellectual arguments were standing on very shaky ground.

④ I Didn’t Understand God

Furthermore, I argued, “Why should I commit myself to a God I don’t understand, a God I cannot logically figure out? Why should I commit myself to a God who doesn’t make sense to my human mind?” I considered myself a philosophical realist; and as a realist, I said, “If you want me to believe God, then I’ve got to touch Him, I’ve got to see Him, I’ve got to feel Him. I’m not going to commit myself to something I can’t see, touch, or feel.”

¹There was an ancient playwright that mentioned Socrates, but he made only a slight reference to Socrates. We did not learn anything about Socrates from the playwright.

Despite the fact that I was leader of a teenage street gang, I considered myself an intellectual. By the time I was fourteen I could tell you the difference between existentialism and rationalism; between Freudian psychology and behavioristic psychology. I was acquainted with the works of men such as Jean Paul Sartre and existentialism. I was well read in Bertrand Russell, that great philosophical agnostic. And I knew the writings of other great philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Francis Bacon, Spencer.

I reasoned that if I could read these men and grasp some of the great philosophical teachings that had been handed down through humanity, what in the world did I need Jesus Christ for? I could stand on my own two feet, think for myself. One of my favorite poems was:

It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll;
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

I believed it—that I was the master of my own soul. I could determine my own destiny. I thought I had the intellectual ability to stand on my own two feet. As far as I was concerned, God was for emotionally disturbed people who needed that kind of a crutch, for Sunday school kids who didn’t know any better, for older people who were about to die and needed some sort of hope to cling to. But Tom Skinner could think for himself.

Again, thoughts seemed to be coming into my mind from an outside source: I didn’t understand the monetary system, but I spend money every day! I didn’t understand the international balance of payments or the gold reserve system or the economic factors that caused the stock market to go up and down. I didn’t understand all of the intricate processes that make the Federal Reserve Board work, or how easing credit benefits some people and hinders others. Even though I didn’t understand these things, still I believed that they worked.

The same is true with a person who drives a car. Most of us do not understand the engineering principles or techniques that make the car work, yet we get in our cars everyday and drive them. Though we do not understand them, yet we trust them to get us where we want to go. I reasoned: *Why can’t we believe in God even though we do not understand him?* After this intellectual bout, I began to realize that I’m not asked to understand God, only to believe in him. His blessings come *only through believing*, not through understanding.

⑤ Intellectuals Don't Accept Theories Without Testing Them

I suddenly realized that I had done what no true intellectual ever does: I had made conclusions about things that I had never really tested. No scientist ever draws conclusions about things he has never put to the test. I had never really put Jesus Christ to the test, never really given Him an opportunity to work in my life. I had never given him a chance to come inside and live in me and prove whether the things the Bible said about him were true.

As a student of science, I was a strong believer in the scientific method. In science class, our teacher taught us that every true scientist proves over and over that something is true. It occurred to me that I had never really proved that God is true. I had just drawn intellectual and philosophical conclusions about God, but had never given Him a chance to work in my life.

Now I had to conclude that Tom Skinner was a phony, but I also concluded that Jesus Christ died for phonies! The radio speaker had convinced me that Tom Skinner, with his bigotry, hate, and violence, could never—through his own strength and ability—be able to produce anything in this life that would be worthwhile. He told me that Jesus Christ died in my place to forgive me of every sin that I'd ever committed, and arose again to live in me. And God was asking me to believe just that!

There I was, leader of the toughest street gang in New York City, with the strategy papers for the biggest gang war in New York's history spread out before me, but thoroughly convinced that I was a phony. What was happening in me was so overwhelming that I forgot about the rumble and its strategy papers. I knew that I had to commit myself to Jesus Christ right then, so I bowed my head and prayed:

“God...

I don't understand all of this.

I don't understand how you're going to change my life.

I don't even understand why I'm praying to you.

But if these things are true...

If what this preacher says is true...

If what the Bible says is really true...

If you *can* transform my life and make me a new person....

If you can forgive me of every sin that I have ever committed,

Then I'm asking you to do it.

I'm asking you to come into my life and

Take it over and live in me.

No trumpets. No shouts. No visions. But he did just that. I *knew* Jesus Christ came into my life in answer to that prayer. There were no blinding flashes of light, no mountains caved in, no thunder roared. There was no emotional, traumatic experience that night. I simply accepted God at His Word. You see, once you accept the existence of God, God can only be God by virtue of the fact that he doesn't lie. Whatever He does is always perfect, and if everything God says is perfect, then so are the words of Jesus Christ when he says, *I will never reject anyone that comes to me.* That night, I came to Jesus Christ. Because God can't lie, Jesus Christ actually took up residence in my life and began to live in me, and he's been living there ever since.

It's been the most thrilling, the most adventurous life I believe a person could ever live. What a privilege it is to have the God of heaven and earth live inside me! I now have the privilege of living in that close, personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

I turned the radio off and began to think about the wonder of this new life—and was confronted with a reminder of the old Tom Skinner. There in front of me were the plans for the rumble. What a dilemma!

Quitting the Gang

You don't just walk up to a gang of fellows that you've been leading around for two years in rioting, looting, fighting, and lawbreaking, and say, “Well, guys, it's been nice knowing you. So long.” Most gangs kill anyone who tries to leave their gang. So do Mafia-style organizations and Satanic cults. Two weeks earlier, a couple of guys told me they were going to leave the Harlem Lords. I personally broke their arms and legs! (There were two guys who did quit. Their parents got around-the-clock police protection until they left town.)

Now I was in a dilemma. Here I was, leader of the toughest street gang in New York City and a born-again Christian! But again I was reminded of the words spoken by the preacher on the radio: At the end of his broadcast, he ended with these words: “I want to remind you that Jesus said, *Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.*” That was the only protection I had! As I walked into the meeting hall, I would

have to trust God's promise.

I walked into the smoky room and went to the front. There were 129 fellows in that room. Everyone of them had a knife; some had guns—and none of them had any reservations about using their weapons. Yet, I knew what had to be done. I had to tell the gang what had happened to me the night before and why I was quitting the Harlem Lords. What a spiritual battle was going on in me! One voice was saying, *What a fool you are, you'll never get out of here alive*; but another voice was saying, *I will never leave you or forsake you*.

As I stood in front of my men, everyone quieted down and every eye was on me. They were expecting a briefing for the big, all-out rumble. I prayed silently, “God, if I ever needed you, it's now!”

I started out by telling about the radio broadcast that I had heard the night before, how that the speaker had given me insight to truth I'd never heard before. I told them that I was convinced that Jesus Christ had died for all the sins I'd ever committed, and had given me everlasting life. I said to those 129 gang members, “Last night, I asked him to come inside me and live in me. And he did!”

All the time I was talking, I could see the number two man in the gang. His nickname was The Mop. We called him The Mop because whenever there was a gang fight, this fellow wasn't happy unless he drew blood from someone and put his foot in it (or mopped it up with his shoe). I knew The Mop wanted to be number one man. He would term my telling them that I had committed my life to Jesus Christ as a sign of weakness. And he would relish the opportunity to put his knife between my ribs or across my throat.

I forced myself to finish without weakening. “I don't understand everything involved, but I know that Jesus Christ has taken up residence in my life. And based on that commitment, I can no longer be leader of this gang.” You could have heard a pin drop. No one spoke. No one even moved. I walked down the aisle and out into the night air, half expecting a knife to come tearing into my back, or a bullet to dig into my flesh. But nothing! I walked out without one person raising a hand against me. Once I was outside, I nearly shouted my thankfulness to God.

Two night later, I saw The Mop on the street. He motioned to me and said, “Tom, I wanna talk to you.” We stopped and he grinned. “You know,” he said, “the other night when you got up and walked out of that meeting, I was gonna really cut you up. I was all set to put my knife right

in your back.”

“And why didn't you?”

“I couldn't move,” he said, his eyes growing wider. “It was like somebody was holding me back—like I was glued to my seat!” He licked his lips and continued. “And I talked to some of the other guys too. I wasn't the only one. They said the same thing—that something or somebody actually held them back in their seats.” Now my eyes widened and I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise. “What d'ya make of it, Tom?” he asked.

“I know that the Christ I've committed myself to isn't just some fictitious character who lived two thousand years ago...some nebulous spirit floating around in the air somewhere. I know now that Jesus Christ is alive! He's real! What King David said about him is true, *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear any evil; for you are with me*,” I said.

The toughness was gone from my former associate in crime. I turned to The Mop and asked, “Would you like to know who that *somebody* was who kept you glued to your seat?”

He nodded. Standing on the corner of 153rd Street and McCombs Place—two blocks from the Polo Grounds—an ex-gang leader, a Christian less than 48 hours, led another gang member to Christ. I believe that—except for my own commitment to Jesus Christ—this was the biggest thrill of my life!

The Mop has since graduated from law school and has entered one of the largest law firms in the city of New York, proof that Jesus Christ transforms the whole individual! If you want to change a man, you must change *him*. You can't change a man by changing his environment, by removing his circumstances. You can't change a man simply by trying to build a new type of community for him. You see, society is made up of people. If you want to change society, you have to change people, and the only person who can change another person is Jesus Christ. The saying that I quoted from the Bible earlier in this book: *If any man is 'in Christ,' he is a new creature*. (2nd Corinthians 5:17)

If I had not been reached by Jesus Christ, I would either be dead, in prison, or graduated to a higher form of hoodlumism. Without my conversion, I might today be a drug addict standing on 116th Street scratching my head waiting for the next pusher to come along, or I might be one of those running around the country helping to create riots. (I had

already being selected by certain individuals who were interested in destroying our country to be trained in starting riots, and I had already received some training.)

But at this very moment, I'm a new person. Every sin I have ever committed has been completely forgiven. Jesus Christ is alive in me. My life has new meaning and purpose because of Him.

The tremendous work that God's Spirit did in my life in transforming me soon became evident to me. He took the bigotry, hatred, and violence out of my life. I had reached the place where I hated White people and blamed them for all the atrocities, immorality and social injustices that were brought against the Blacks. Now that hatred was gone.

Several weeks later I was playing in a football game when my faith was tested again. In one play, I blocked the defensive end, knocking him out of play. When we got up from the ground, the kid that I had knocked down was furious. He jumped in front of me and slammed me in the stomach. As I bent over from the blow, he hacked me across the back. I hit the ground as he kicked me, shouting, "You dirty Black nigger! I'll teach you a thing or two!"

The old Tom Skinner would have jumped up and pulverized this White boy. But instead, I got up from the ground and found myself looking this fellow in the face. A smile broke across my face and I said to him, "You know, because of Jesus Christ, I love you anyway."

And you know, I surprised *myself*! But what the Bible said is true. I had just seen it work! *If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature.* I was a new person! Here was Tom Skinner who, six weeks before, would have tried to kill this White bigot, barehanded. Now I was able to look into the face I normally would have smashed, and tell him that I loved him in Christ.

The kid threw his helmet down to the ground, ran off the field, and couldn't play for the rest of the game. When the game was over, he met me in the locker room and said to me, "Tom, you've done more to knock prejudice out of me by telling me that you loved me than you would have if you had busted my jaw."

I became convinced that the only answer to the prejudice, the bigotry, and the hate that exists in our world today is for people to allow God's love, through Jesus Christ to be expressed through them. God's love does not come naturally (like natural love does). God's love is not

part of human nature. It is natural for a human to hate instead of to love. A life of godly love can be produced only by inviting Jesus Christ into one's life.

Spreading the Good News in the Streets

The streets of Harlem are always crowded with hundreds of people just standing on the corners. There are the derelicts, the addicts, the prostitutes, and the kids. The kids roam the streets from early morning until sometimes after midnight. The eight-to-ten year olds are forming sub-gangs.

These people became my concern. I became deeply concerned about thousands of other fellows like myself who needed to hear the truth about this person Jesus Christ. They needed someone on their own level, someone who understood their language, someone who understood the anguish, suffering, and frustration that developed when a kid is born and raised in a community like Harlem. I know the bitterness of the kid who feels trapped—who feels there is no opportunity, no way out for him. Hearing the truth about Jesus Christ can be the most liberating force in his life. For the first time he can pick up his head and really begin to live. Jesus Christ says, *I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.* This message is for the street people of Harlem. We didn't have to go search for them, we didn't have to look for them, we didn't have to build anything to attract them. They were there. It was just a matter of knowing how to communicate and to get the word to them that Jesus Christ cares—about them.

Following my conversion, I led several of my former gang to know the Lord. I was thrilled to see my faith reproduce itself as the Holy Spirit worked in the lives of those guys. But I prayed for more effective ways to reach the thousands of kids in Harlem.

Without giving much thought to the implications involved, a group of us picked out certain days during the week and went out in the streets to confront individuals with the claims of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we would rent portable loudspeakers and stand on the street corner and actually have large street meetings. This wasn't too difficult when you consider that as many as six hundred people are within earshot of most street corners. You can get a good audience just with the many people going back and forth!

One of my first experiences was an effort that took us down to 118th Street, around Fifth Avenue. It's a heavily populated area—an area where the gang known as the Diablos operated. The Lords had fought the Diablo gang about two months before God changed me, and we had beaten them rather badly. It was into this area that we went to talk about Jesus Christ. I was standing on the corner, preaching to the crowds of teenagers who stood around or passed by. Others listened from tenement windows. While preaching, I noticed two fellows who were members of the Diablo gang standing on the other side of the street. Within a couple of minutes, they disappeared. Soon they came back with a dozen more fellows. Before long twenty-five, thirty, then forty fellows gathered on the other side of the street. I knew what they were thinking. *That looks like Tom Skinner. That looks like the guy who led the Lords against us not too long ago.* When the meeting on the street was finished, the crowd began to disperse.

Within a matter of moments the Diablo gang had converged across the street. They surrounded us and very sarcastically one of them said, “You are one of the Lords, aren't you?” A couple of them had already pulled out their switchblades, others had bottles gripped in their hands. I knew what they had in mind.

Very calmly I said to them, “Look, fellows, before we fight out here on the street, let me tell you something. I'm not the same Tom Skinner you fought against a couple of months ago.” For twenty minutes I stood there on the street and shared with them my personal testimony of how Jesus Christ had transformed my life. “The frustration that caused me to be involved in the gang, and do the things I did, has now been settled by this person, Jesus Christ, who is now living in me.” I challenged them with the fact that Jesus Christ could do the same thing in their lives. By the time I finished, several of these fellows actually had tears running down their cheeks. Many of them dropped their knives right on the street. Later, we counted at least fifteen switchblades that had been dropped to the ground at that site.

Several of the fellows came up and put their arms around us, asking how they could come to know this Jesus; how they could have all of their sins forgiven, how they could become new people. Right there on the street corner, we led at least twenty-five members of the Diablo gang to Jesus Christ. Many of them prayed openly on the street. And for a person who had just come to know Jesus Christ only a few weeks, for a person who was just now beginning to enter into a phase of witnessing

about Jesus Christ to other people, this was a most thrilling moment!

We began to see results like this in many different communities and on many street corners. Day after day, we made it our business to attempt to win at least one person to Jesus Christ, to witness about the saving power and ability of Jesus Christ. And we saw fellows who were potentially top racketeers in New York City finding Jesus Christ. We saw girls who, if they had continued living the way they had started, they would probably have ended up as prostitutes or drug addicts. Some of them, if they continued, would have ended up raising five or six children on welfare without a husband. But now, because we had the opportunity of meeting them when they were in their early teens, and confronting them with the claims of Jesus Christ, their lives were being redirected.

On the weekends, we dressed up in jeans, polo-shirts, and dirty sneakers, and picked out a target community. We went to the basketball courts in the communities where we knew a known gang was operating. There we would play on that basketball court day after day, four or five hours a day, until we got to know the leader of the guys in the neighborhood. Once we found him, we tried to win him as a friend—not to try and cram religion down his throat. You see, so many of these fellows on the street can't believe anyone really cares about them. Even in the gang, it's difficult for a guy to trust someone as a friend. Most guys who belong to gangs live in constant fear, wondering who is going to turn against them, who is going to try to challenge their leadership, who is going to try to out-do them.

But once we won this fellow as a friend, we began the process of sharing with him what Jesus Christ had done in our own personal lives. And what a thrill it was to see one guy after another, one gang leader after another, one gang member after another, turning to Jesus Christ. We became tremendously excited about this ministry that God had committed to us. This business of witnessing to guys and girls at school, on street corners, in basement hideouts, recreation centers and playgrounds went on quietly.

During this time, I was also enrolled in Bible school classes at the Manhattan Bible Institute in New York City. There I was being grounded in the fundamentals of theology and Scripture.

Spreading the Good News in the Churches

Balancing my ministry to the street gangs was a ministry to kids *in churches*. These teenagers in the churches were only going through the motions, just as I had done before I came to know Christ. Because of the teachings they had received in religious forms that did not have any life in them, many of them found it difficult to understand what it meant to know Jesus Christ through an experience of faith. Often, I found myself in open conflict with some of the leading pastors within the association of Black churches (men who were not teaching their young people about the claims of Jesus Christ).

However, plenty of the young people became interested and invited me to their churches to discuss these issues with them. I went eagerly—and tried to challenge these young people about what it means to really know Christ, what it means to have Christ living in an individual. I told them how Christ could make it possible for us to live upright lives before God. The tragedy was that I was *too late* for many of these young people. At sixteen or seventeen, they were already well experienced in pre-marital sex, narcotics, and crime. Many of the girls in these churches were dropping out of high school and subsequently church because they were pregnant. Many of them were becoming disgusted with church because of the extra-marital affairs that were going on among ministers, deacons, and other leaders of the churches. These young people knew what was happening and they were looking for something real. And they weren't finding it in their churches.

As I began to get into their churches and speak in their youth department meetings, I began to see results. I saw teenagers responding to the claims of Jesus Christ.

Some pastors were beginning to see some real results among the young people, and they invited me to conduct week-long meetings in their churches—especially for their young people. That is the way my preaching ministry began, and we saw that God was beginning a wonderful work.

Maybe I should say that God worked in spite of those who claimed to be his children. As I began my ministry with young people in the churches of New York's Black community, I encountered more direct opposition than I did when I preached on the street. Many Black clergymen resented the fact that their young people were being told that

church membership alone did not guarantee them personal salvation. Whether wisely or unwisely, I de-emphasized church membership and emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The pastors interpreted this as rebellion against the established order of the church and accused me of trying to overthrow the church authority and get the young people to leave the church.

I'm sure my age had much to do with their judgments. I was only sixteen at the time, but was being recognized more and more in the Black churches of New York City as an evangelistic preacher. Several churches that did not have pastors, began considering me—even in my teens—to be pastor of their church. The offers were tempting. As I brought out in the earlier pages of this book, the Black ministers usually did quite well financially. But more and more, I could sense the fact that God had called me to be an evangelistic preacher. On June 2, 1959, when I was just turning 17, the United Missionary Baptist Association of New York ordained me as a Baptist minister.

Then the heat was really put on. More and more ministers resented the fact that I placed emphasis upon the fact that man is born in sin and that there is something in man that is not like God. I preached that man cannot get rid of this spiritual problem merely by joining a church, or by becoming religious. Being young and full of zeal, I even pressed some of the ministers of the largest churches in New York City personally about *their* relationship with Jesus Christ. I challenged them as to whether Christ was running their lives, and whether their ministries were really Christ-centered. I asked them if they were really interested in their people coming to know Christ and having everlasting life, or were they merely interested in building churches, raising large offerings and having the reputation of being *big preachers*?

I suppose it seemed pretty presumptuous to them to have a teenager preaching to them—and perhaps it was. But I felt that it was justified. The personal lives of many of the Black clergy needed attention. Many of them blatantly committed sin.

In July, 1960, I got a change to really speak out on this problem. (The true clergymen and the young people were so disgusted with this state of affairs that many of them left the church.) My name was placed on the program as speaker at a ministers' conference. I spent many weeks in preparation for that message, and prayed that God would give me the message he wanted me to deliver. It became clear what he wanted me to

speaking about: to challenge those men from God's word, and I grew fearful. I knew what it meant to go against the wishes of the ministers' association. Through gossip and the use of their influence and power, they can ruin a young minister's reputation. I know of young preachers who started out meaning business for God but who were forced to compromise their message and morals by the association of ministers. I knew that if I delivered the message that God was leading me to deliver, it might be the end of my ministry among those people. But I had learned a lesson the night I resigned the position of leader of the Harlem Lords: that my Lord would not forsake me. I claimed another of God's promises: *Being confident of this:...that the one [speaking of God] who began a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.* (Philippians chapter 1, verse 6)

The day finally came. Standing before the ministers' conference in a large church in Harlem packed to capacity, I delivered a message entitled, *Revolution for Jesus Christ or the Status Quo?* Right down the line, I emphasized the fact that the kind of minister Jesus Christ is calling for in this twentieth century is one who will stand uncompromisingly and speak the truth about Jesus Christ. I challenged them with the moral state of many of our ministers. I said, "As long as there is sin in our midst, we will never be able to experience the mighty movement of the Holy Spirit! Unless we clean house among ourselves, unless the clergymen of Harlem can develop the reputation of being Godly men, holy men, men of character, truth, and uprightness, we will never be able to shake the community for Jesus Christ. There are thousands of young people in the Harlem area who are disgusted with religion because of the immoral lives of some of their pastors!"

I challenged them to return to God's word. "Less and less emphasis is being placed on sin, judgment, the death of Christ on the cross, and his ability to cleanse people of their sins; and more and more emphasis is placed on organization, church membership, large offerings, higher salaries, better cars to drive, and better clothes to wear. All the emphasis is being placed on the material things rather than spiritual thing."

At the close of the message, I offered an invitation for every minister there who had never committed his life to Jesus Christ to do so. I concluded with a warning: "Unless there is a change in your ministry here in Harlem—unless there is spiritual renewal, things will get worse. Your congregations will leave. Your denominations will split, and there

will be increased strife in this organization." When I said, *your denominations will split*, I did not realize that I was prophesying.

When I finished, the place was silent. For a while, no one moved. Finally, one minister got up and made this statement, "There comes a time in all of history when God has to raise up a prophet to speak the truth to us. We may not always like hearing that truth, but nevertheless, it must be said." Then he sat down.

I prayed silently that God's Spirit would work in their hearts as he had in my own. Then another minister stood. He was a most influential Black pastor and leader in one of the larger religious organizations. He said, "Let's be honest about this thing. This young man does not know what he is talking about. After seventy-two years that our denomination has been together, this young whipper-snapper stands up and predicts that we are going to split." As he spoke, he became angrier and angrier, denying the things that were said about immorality among some of the clergymen. He shook his fist at me. "Who does this youngster, only 18 years old, think he is talking that way to respected members of the clergy three times his age?"

Another minister rose and continued the tirade. The conference broke up in angry confusion and noise. After the session had been dismissed, one minister walked up to me and said, "If you were my child, I'd take my fist right now and bust your jaw!"

In the days following, I received threatening telegrams and telephone calls. Some told me that I should leave the city. Others told me they'd do everything possible to see that I would never preach at another church in New York City.

I will never forget the darkness of the days that followed, as I received one threatening call after another. An association of Black churches met just a few days after I had preached that message, and all they could discuss during their entire session was *that message Tom Skinner preached*. They were really disturbed.

The denomination split within three months, vindicating my prophecy/prediction, but few of the ministers in that meeting remembered it. One minister had the courage to come up and say to me, "Tom, you were right; I'm sorry."

But in spite of the concentrated opposition against me, I did continue to speak in Harlem churches. One Sunday I was the speaker in the church pastored by Adam Clayton Powell (who was a United States

congressman from 1944 to 1970). In the evening meeting, I gave an invitation for all who wanted to receive Jesus Christ into their lives to come forward. More than 55 people got out of their seats and came to the front of the church to publicly declare their need for Jesus Christ.

Out of that church came a group of young people who became concerned about other Harlem teenagers. We formed a young group dedicated to using every available means to reach Black teens for Jesus Christ. We met for several weeks, praying desperately that God would show us how we could bring the gospel message to Harlem as never before.

One more incident that happened in those days was very interesting: Once I was invited to Mount Vernon, New York, an exclusive neighborhood where mostly upper-middle class people lived. They were having a problem with their young people and wanted me to solve it. The problem was that every Thursday night, at about 6:45, most of the teenagers came into town, did drag racing, and caused all kinds of chaos. But there was no trouble on Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night or on weekends. It was only on Thursday nights that they had this trouble. The town officials told me that they had been trying to solve this problem for two years. I solved their problem in 15 minutes.

I went out on the streets with a group of social workers, and a policeman (of the youth squad). We went out about 6:30 p.m. to walk through the streets, and sure enough, at about a quarter to seven, they all came into town. The place came alive with activity. Young people were running all over the place. About seven o'clock, I turned to one of the social workers and said, "I've got your answer."

He said, "You're kidding. We've been wrestling with this problem for more than two years and you've got the answer in fifteen minutes?"

I said, "Yes." Then I said, "Let's go back to your office." Though he was full of skepticism, he took me to his office. At the office, I asked him to take out of the files the name of any particular boy who had been giving them real trouble from one of these upper-middle class homes. Next, I asked him to call his home and ask to speak to the maid.

He shook his head. "To the maid?"

"Yes."

So he dialed. The boy's mother answered the phone. He said, Mrs. Walters, may I speak to the maid please?"

Mrs. Walters said, "I'm sorry, but she's not home. She won't be back until tomorrow." And she hung up.

The youth worker turned to me and said, "So what does that prove?"

I answered him, "Very simple. These kid's parents are so busy with their social activities, that they don't have time to raise, discipline, or give affection to their kids. The *maid* is the one who does it. The maid disciplines the kids; she is the one who sees that they do their homework; sees that they get to bed on time. The maid sees that they get up in the morning; she is the one they run to when they have problems; she is the one whose shoulder they cry on. In other words, she becomes a mother to these kids. And everybody in this community knows that Thursday night is the maids' night off. So, on Thursday night—because the maid isn't home and the they're unable to discipline these kids—these parents have no control over the kids at all. So you see, human nature is the same, no matter on what social level it exists—whether in the slums of Harlem or whether in the socially elite of the upper-middle class."

Let me give a word of advice to parents here. Raising your children to conform to the rules and regulations of a particular society is not enough. You may raise them to be disciplined, cultured, refined, and respected. You may give them the latest copy of Emily Post. You may teach them when to enter a room; how to sit down; when to rise; how to be seated at a dinner table. You may instruct them on how to pick the chicken from the bone without touching it with their fingers—and all of the other rules and regulations of the community to which you belong. But the Bible calls this your [own, human] righteousness, nothing but filth compared to God's righteousness. The Apostle Paul said it this way: *I know that no good thing dwells in me, that is in my body.* (Romans 7) We need to teach our children what God's righteousness is, and that it is found only in Jesus Christ. Outside of Christ, it is possible that our children may fall into any crime in the book.

Planning a Major Crusade

Being young and naive has its advantages. We believed God would answer our prayers. After this group of young people had met for several weeks and had prayed much about how we could reach teenagers for Jesus Christ, we decided to venture into a large, area-wide meeting which was called a *crusade*. We decided to have it at a church located in the middle of a very populated area. In fact, directly across the street from the church was one of the largest houses of prostitution in Harlem.

We approached the pastor of the church and ask him if we could rent the church for that week. He agreed to rent the church for six nights.

That was only the beginning. We were just teenagers and people in our early twenties who put up the money out of our own pockets to sponsor the crusade.

By calling people on the telephone and by word of mouth on the street, we advertised our meetings.

We began the crusade that summer on a Monday night in August and carried it through until Saturday night. It was tremendous to see the church literally packed every night. By the end of the week, we had seen more than one hundred people invite Jesus Christ into their lives. We then went to Brooklyn and conducted a one-week crusade at a church there. Then we fanned out across the city and saw more young people won to Jesus Christ.

Some of the ministers were antagonistic to this message. Many pastors would even get up in their pulpits on Sunday morning and announce that they wanted none of their young people attending any of Tom Skinner's crusades. Of course, that only built up our crowds, because the young people became more curious as to what it was they were supposed to avoid. They came, heard the Gospel, and trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior. And more and more, we saw God changing people through this very humble ministry that he committed to a group of young people.

In one church, I spoke on a simple gospel story—John 3, where Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the new birth. I simply told the congregation what it means to be born into God's Kingdom, what it means to have one's spirit remade by Jesus Christ, actually to have Christ come inside and live through you. I invited those people who wanted Christ to come into their lives to come up front. Ushers began to leave their posts and walk down the aisle. Robed choir members, seated behind the platform, rose and walked out of the choir. Scores of people across the auditorium, and from the balcony of the church, got up and walked down the aisles.

The minister was seated behind me on the platform. He jumped up out of his seat, almost like a mad-man, and ran to the side of the platform where the people of his choir were filing out to come forward. He stopped and loudly said, "What are you going for? You're already in the choir." Then he said to another, "What are you going for? You're

president of the choir." He looked down the aisle and saw the president of his usher board coming. He ran off the platform and down the middle aisle of the church. He stopped the president of his usher board and asked, "What are you going forward for?"

The president of the usher board said, "Well, he said for all people who want their sins forgiven to come forward. I want this Christ! I want him to live in me!" One of the deacons got up and came forward. Then another one came forward. And several of the leading officers of the church responded. Like a mad-man, the pastor paced up and down the platform trying to stop the people from coming forward.

Finally, the invitational hymn was over and 125 stood at the front of the church. The pastor turned to me and said, "What are you going to do?"

I said, "Well, after I pray for these people right here, I'd like to take them downstairs into the basement of your church so I can instruct them on what it means to be a Christian. After they have received Christ, I want to tell them how they can let Christ live through them. I have some literature with me I'd like to give them. I'll show them how they can get a free Bible correspondence course to help them in their spiritual growth and in study the Scriptures."

The pastor was frightened. He must have thought, *Boy, with all these people responding, maybe this young preacher is going to start a new movement, or a new church. And he will take all my church members away.* So he said to me, "Look, you know we take the offering for the speaker next." It's customary in some of the Black churches, after the preacher finishes preaching, to take up a "retiring" offering for him. It can be a substantial offering some Sunday mornings. I understood that he was saying to me, *If you take these 125 people downstairs while we take up the offering for you, these people won't be able to give and your offering will be that much smaller.* He was tempting me with money, to compromise my position and not be able to help these people. I told him that I would take them down anyway.

He left his assistant pastor in charge and followed me downstairs with the inquirers to be sure that I wasn't telling these people I wanted them to join another church or to join a new movement that I was starting. And right in front of him, I asked for the ones who had never received Jesus Christ into their lives to raise their hands. We counted 117 who had never received Jesus Christ as their Savior. Eight more had

once professed faith in Jesus Christ, had drifted away from him, and were seeking to be reconciled with God. After I finished instructing these people, and before we returned to the main auditorium where the service was still going on, I asked if there were five people who would be willing to stand up and tell the church why they had come forward.

Two deacons, the president of the choir, one person on the usher board, and one teenager agreed. The deacon stood up before the whole church and said, “I have been in this church for seventeen years. I have been a deacon in this church seven years. And during all of those years, I have been living a lie. I did not know Jesus Christ. But I thank God that this morning I have come to know him.”

The president of the choir stood up and said, “I’ve been singing in the choir for years. Many of you have listened to me sing and have told me how much you love the way I sing. But after what happened this morning, I can now say from now on I will be singing for Jesus Christ.”

Each one of them gave a similar testimony. When the service was over, the pastor refused to speak to me.

One Sunday morning I spoke in a church where the pastor had recently died—a chronic alcoholic. As I walked toward the church from the subway that morning, I passed a car with two girls in it. They were embracing, kissing, and making physical love with each other—lesbians. I tried to ignore them.

But as I passed the car, they straightened up, got out of the car, and started walking down the street holding hands and leaning on each other. They walked into the church just ahead of me. I later discovered they both sang in the choir.

Because of the sinful life of the pastor, the church was a den of all kinds of sin. That morning I spoke on a passage from Deuteronomy 1:4, *You have lived long enough in this mountain*. I wasted no words. “We have been in the mountain of indifference towards Jesus Christ long enough. We have been in the mountain of materialism long enough. We have been in the mountain of immorality long enough.” And I stressed the places that we need to move on to, in Jesus Christ.

When I gave the invitation, nearly 300 people came forward. It was a tremendous movement of the Spirit of God. I rejoiced to see all those people coming forward. For the first time in their lives, these people heard someone inviting them to Jesus Christ—not invite them to come

join the church, to give in the offering—just simply invite Jesus Christ into their lives! I asked permission to have the inquirers taken downstairs so we could tell them what they were doing and what it meant to come to know Jesus Christ. It disturbed many of the deacons in the church, wondering what I was going to say.

After the meeting, one deacon said to me, “You really told the people the truth this morning. You may never get invited to preach back here again, but you at least told those people the truth.” Thank God for one man who recognized the truth. We saw many similar incidents.

Some of the churches were actually hostile to the good news of Jesus Christ. Most of these churches had been conditioned over the years by their pastors and leaders to give the people what they wanted. “Keep the people happy. Don’t say anything that will bother or disturb the people,” was usually the philosophy among so many of those pastors. And so, as a result, in many of the Black churches in America, the people have grown up spiritually starved. For them, the churches have become a racket. It is astonishing that so many of these church members know that many of their leaders and pastors are living in open immorality, and they do nothing about it, sometimes even condoning it. It seems they think: “If my pastor is having an affair, then it’s okay for me to have an affair.” In the Black churches in America, there is a crying need for a voice to be raised up, someone to stand and tell the truth about God’s standards.

In so many of these churches, the standard of success among the ministry is based upon how successful or prosperous one is materially or economically. A pastor who is not prospering economically is not considered to be a successful minister. After I preached in a particular church one Sunday morning, the pastor took me into his study and said, “Well, young man, that was a fine message; but if you expect to get any place, I mean, if you really expect to make it, then you can’t go on preaching like that. That’s not what the people want to hear.” He walked to the window and pulled aside the drapes to point out his brand new Cadillac, and said, “The church buys me a new one every year.” Then he opened up a closet in his study, and he showed me some fabulous looking clergy robes that the church bought for \$500 each, and a leopard skin cape costing \$300. He said, “You’ll never have any of these if you keep preaching that way. And another thing,” he added shaking a finger at me, “you’re too puritanical or prudish. If you want to be a successful

preacher, you've got to keep the sisters happy. If they want you to go to bed with them, do it—just use discretion. It really gets you a favor when you need it.” I don't know how many times I got that kind of *advice* from clergymen. I'd become depressed, wondering if we could ever make any headway in the battle against Satan *in churches* professing to serve and follow Jesus Christ.

While attending a national convention one year, I was approached by a minister who said, “Are you Tom Skinner from New York?”

I said, “Yes.”

“Well, we're planning a party tonight and you're invited; in fact, we've already picked out a girl for you.”

I said, “Perhaps you have the wrong ‘Skinner’—you're not talking to me.”

“Oh yes I am. I heard that you were the prudish type. I heard you were the kind who won't play ball. But listen, man, if you're going to make it, you'd better get with it.”

I said angrily, “Listen, God has called me into the ministry. God is the one who is going to bless my ministry. God is the one who's going to take it where he wants it to go. I don't need to ‘play ball’ with anybody in order to get there.”

It breaks my heart to realize that so many of the Black churches across America have this kind of ‘ministry.’

The Harlem Evangelistic Association

Despite all of the bad, immoral things that I found going on in the Black churches, I found a few very good churches—even in Harlem; churches that were preaching the true gospel of Jesus Christ. They were like oases in a desert, really doing an effective job in reaching their community for Jesus Christ. I came into contact with one such church that did not have a pastor, and was meeting upstairs from a bar. I was invited to speak for several Sundays. Through this church, I met several men who were interested in reaching Harlem for Jesus Christ. On the last Sunday in October, 1961, twelve of us met to discuss the vision and burden and lay out plans for reaching Harlem (when I went to that meeting, I was still 19 years old). The result of that meeting was the birth of the Harlem Evangelistic Association. Among the twelve men in that meeting were businessmen, ministers or pastors, a high school teacher,

a policeman, a college student and a few other church members. We laid strategy for an all-out crusade to be held at the Apollo Theatre in New York City.

These were bold steps to take because none of us had any money. The Apollo Theatre is the center of entertainment in Harlem. It is the place where outstanding Black performers have started and become famous—Nat “King” Cole, Billy Epstein, Ella Fitzgerald,² Duke Ellington, and many other famous people started performing at the Apollo Theatre. It was a showcase of entertainment for Blacks in the Eastern part of the United States. We decided that it would be the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ would be preached every night for one week during the summer of 1962—thus giving ourselves almost a year for preparations.

After much prayer, the group decided that I would be the main speaker. We approached the manager of the theatre about the possibility of renting the theatre the following summer. He wanted to help us and he let us rent the theatre for six days for less than the usual price. We had to raise \$5,000 to use the theatre. But even \$5,000 seemed like a fantastic amount to us. None of us had that kind of money. We soon found out that the \$5,000 was just to rent the theatre. Above that figure, we'd have to pay the stage crew, theatre employees, the sound crew, the use of the air conditioning, plus advertising, the marquee. Also we needed radio spot-announcements, newspapers, loudspeakers, and posters. We faced the task of organizing a choir, the training of counselors and personal workers. It seemed like an impossible job.

We began by first approaching White Evangelical Christians in New York City whom we knew had experience in these things. We went to get their advice and help. But, to my dismay, we got “cold shoulders” from most of the White Evangelical leaders in New York City. Many of them thought we were a bunch of ambitious, fanatical young people, who were taking on more than we could handle. Some of them were

² Ella Fitzgerald died June 15, 1996 at 78. She debuted at Apollo Theatre in 1934 and did 250 albums and won 13 Grammy Awards in the next 50 years. In 1935 she sang at Yale University and she went back to Yale 51 years later, in 1986, to receive an honorary degree. In 1954, she sued Pan American World Airways for racial discrimination and won. This case is still being used in litigation workshops in some universities law schools.

gracious enough to say, “We'll pray for you, but we could not see how we can really lend any help.”

I then became aware of how so many White Evangelicals were willing to say that the Black community needs Christ and needs the preaching of the Gospel, but when it comes to action, they are not willing to join forces with brave and uncompromising Black Evangelicals who make the Gospel of Christ relevant in such a community.

But then, when we began approaching reputable Black Evangelical leaders, we again met polite coldness. They said, “It's a wonderful thing you're doing. We're behind you...we'll pray for you...but we really can't get involved.” Minor doctrinal disagreements kept Black Evangelicals from joining together in a cooperative venture such as the one we proposed.

But we were still convinced this was God's venture. Our group rented an office and began the tremendous ground-work necessary for the July crusade. In March, we started to train counselors, personal workers, and a choir. We began compiling a mailing list for promoting the crusade. We urged Christians everywhere to begin praying for our spiritual assault on Harlem in July. Before long, we had trained a 150-voice choir and had more than 200 counselors to do the personal work.

We started pre-crusade rallies in various churches across the city, and requested people to stand with us in prayer for this tremendous venture. It seemed slow at first, but Christians started seeing the crusade as reality and were beginning to express their interests.

Preparing for the Harlem Crusade in 1962 was tremendously difficult work. After setting up an office, we had to recruit staff volunteers for the office work, typing, mailing and a host of other details. The other duties were more complex—signing contracts, scheduling advertising, setting up of pre-crusade rallies, the training of the counselors and preparing the counseling material. Much of this kept me up as late as three o'clock most mornings and then rising at eight o'clock to begin a new day. But, to encourage us, God blessed us—great numbers of people were coming to know Christ during the pre-crusade rallies. Lives were being changed. Christians became excited and enthusiastic about spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. Black Christians had been praying for years for God to raise up people who would unite themselves together for an assault on the Harlem community

with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those people saw our efforts as an answer to their prayers.

We sensed the urgency of that crusade, because for the first time in quite a while, unrest was coming to the surface. Black Nationalist leaders were becoming bolder in their threats of violence. While anticipating God's blessing, we also saw seeds being sown for turmoil and unrest throughout the community.

The first Saturday in June, we began conducting mass evangelistic rallies right on the streets of Harlem. We picked the most populated areas in the Harlem community to conduct crusades every weekend.

It took the entire crusade choir and all of our personal workers to set up a platform with loudspeakers. A police permit allowed us to have the street blocked off. Then we had the opportunity to minister the Gospel to literally thousands of people.

On strategic Sundays, we conducted rallies right in front of the Theresa Hotel, on a corner known as Harlem Square. Everything that is anything in the Black community can be discovered on that street corner.

The Theresa Hotel was made famous when it became the meeting place for Fidel Castro (president of Cuba) and Nikita Khrushchev (premier of the Communist Soviet Union). That corner was also the sounding board for Malcolm X's emerging philosophy of Black Nationalism mixed with the Black Muslim religion.

It had been the place where many thundering statements were made calling for Black unity, sometimes calling for violence. But, the Good News of Jesus Christ had never been proclaimed on that corner in a mass effort.

There were some who suggested we should not attempt to preach the Gospel on that street corner because of the strong feelings of Black Nationalism. Many Black Nationalists considered a person who preached the message of Christ to be an “Uncle Tom”—a compromising type of Black man who puts up with the status quo and is not willing to fight for his rights. (It was also a play on my first name: Tom!) Many people felt that bodily injury might result for anyone who went out to preach what was termed *the White Man's religion*. Christianity, they argued, had been given to the Blacks to keep them in their place, and for this reason, thousands of Christians were afraid to go to such a street corner to make Jesus Christ known. I knew the implications, and yet I felt that God was deliberately calling me to go right into the middle of

the controversy and make Jesus Christ known.

In several of the rallies we had in front of the Theresa Hotel, I deliberately chose controversial subjects to attract the crowds and challenge them with the change that Jesus Christ had done in my own life. I knew that by some I would be labeled an *Uncle Tom*. But I felt there were enough Blacks in Harlem who knew that while I was interested in social, economic and political progress for the Blacks, I was more interested in their spiritual progress.

The first message that I preached in front of the Theresa Hotel was a message entitled *The White Man Did It*. I am reproducing a part of the message here:

As a Black person, are you concerned about the problems of the Black community? If so, we have something in common. I was born and raised in Harlem, and I have lived in the Harlem community most of my life. Like most people in this community, I am concerned about the problems we face and the so-called 'Black Revolt.' As a boy, I remember asking many people of my race why it was that there was so much crime, immorality, dope addiction, alcoholism, in our community. In most cases the answers went something like this: "Son, you won't understand this until you are older, but the White man is responsible." Thus, I have found that many of our race-minded leaders are blaming the White man for the plight of many Black communities. I wonder just how far we can go with this accusation. There are more than 60,000 dope addicts in Harlem alone. Do you mean to say that a particular race twisted each addict's arm and forced him to take dope? The Harlem community consumes fifty per cent more liquor than it does food, producing hundreds more drunks in our community each day. Is the White man causing the madness that makes many a Black man stop at the nearest bar with his week's pay rather than going home to his wife and children? Thousands of illegitimate children are born in the Black community every year. Is the White man standing over our young people with a gun forcing them into immoral affairs? When decent Black girls cannot walk the streets of their own community without the fear of being molested, it isn't the White man who brings that fear. When concerned parents pray for the day when they can afford to move their children to another community, it isn't the White man they are running from.

My work requires me to confront these issues every day. Many times in my office or on the streets, I have run into someone with whom

I went to school who is now a dope addict, drunkard, or an unwed mother. When I ask them why, they say, "I don't know. Something made me do it. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help myself." And that is exactly it, for the Bible teaches us that *all*, Black and White, are born with a sinful nature. This nature makes man live contrary to God's law, renders him helpless to help himself. In the Bible King David says, *Behold, I was formed in iniquity. My mother conceived me in sin.* The issue in the Black community is not *Black vs. White*, but sin in the human heart. It is not the slums or the environment that makes our community so bad, but the sin in the hearts of the people who live there. Rather than attack a race of people and blame them for our dilemma, let us attack the sinful nature of man. The Bible says, *Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.* Man's nature is the reason for the sad conditions in the world. It means that man's present nature must be done away with and replaced with a new one.

That is exactly what God is doing through his son, Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches us that Christ carried our sinful nature to the cross with Him—*He was wounded for our transgressions.* It was for *your* sin that Jesus died on the cross. If you will repent of your sin and confess it before God, the Bible declares that God will give you a new nature which will be the very nature of Jesus Christ himself. The Bible says,

*If any man is in Christ,
He is a new creature.
Old things have passed away;
All things have become new!*

Can you imagine what would happen in the Black community if everyone of us had the nature of Jesus Christ, God's son? Even though others refuse him, it can still happen in your life. The Bible says,

*To as many as received him,
He gave the power to become God's sons,
Even to those who believe on his name.*

You can believe, right where you are, that the death of Jesus Christ provided a way for you to be free from your sinful nature. The moment you believe it, Christ will come into your life. If you will trust Jesus Christ, you will find, as I have, that all the issues of life are met and solved in him.

Perhaps you are asking, "How can I be sure that all you are saying is true?" There is only one way: try it! Ask Jesus Christ to come into

your life. Trust him without any doubting. When he comes in, you will be a new person. Not because you would feel new, but because God's word says you will be new. Why not invite Jesus Christ into your life right now? And trust him to make you a new person.

This is the message that I preached on the street that day. At the close of the message, the choir began to sing the invitation hymn, *Just As I Am*. My heart was thrilled to see about twenty-five people step out of the crowd and stand beneath the public platform to confess Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Once again, we had proven that the message of Jesus Christ is relevant to mankind's need and has proven to be God's salvation to those who believe.

On the street corners, in the crowds, and everywhere people gathered, our counselors and choir members personally talked to men and women about their souls. These needy people listened with tears in their eyes as our personal workers told them how Jesus Christ cared about them.

We told them that Jesus Christ would change them and eventually change the Harlem community. Whether their problem was social, economic, or educational, Jesus Christ was the answer. Jesus Christ sympathizes with the cause of civil rights, with the struggle for equality, with every man's desire to have enough food for his family, to be able to live where he wants and can afford. He sympathizes with the Black man's desire to be able to go where he pleases to eat, to get a decent education for his children, and provide a future for his family. We pointed out that Christ was not opposed to these things, but that they should be no more important than a man's search for God.

We were now in the final stages of preparation for the crusade at the Apollo Theatre. We visited the various ministerial conferences and spoke to denominational groups in New York City about helping us. I told them that every effort was being made to raise the finances, now amounting to more than \$15,000. We were trying to raise all the finances in advance of the campaign so that we would not have to solicit any funds during the crusade. We believed that the least emphasis we placed on money, the better. We knew there would be accusations of our being involved in rackets or that we were simply out for money. This is the reputation many of the Black churches have given to the Black community.

Immediately after I finished my presentation to a group of ministers, I was verbally attacked. One minister got up and said, "I cannot support a crusade like this. With all the churches there are in Harlem, where a campaign like this can be held, these young people have decided to go to the Apollo Theatre where there is all kinds of entertainment and burlesque, and with half-naked women and all kinds of bad music."

Another minister got up and condemned the fact that we were trying to raise all of the money before the crusade started, rather than *during* the crusade. He was one of the biggest fund-raising ministers in the entire conference and more concerned about money than anything else. I suppose he felt that if we succeeded in raising the money in advance of the crusade, that this would be a condemnation of his money-raising tactics.

The ministers' conference refused to endorse the crusade. I left there that afternoon somewhat dejected, but at the same time a little happy that perhaps our Lord did not want us to be mixed up with that group in the first place.

The manager of the Apollo Theatre informed me some weeks later that a group of ministers came to his office and asked him if it was possible for him, in some way, to back out of his contract with us. They used all kinds of pressure to get him to cancel that Apollo Theatre crusade. I began to realize that many of them were really afraid that God would speak to Harlem through this crusade. They were afraid that something fantastic would happen. The more opposition we met from different clergymen, the more positive I became that we were in the will of God. He would continue to work out details and supply the funds.

A Fantastic Crusade

Perhaps the most outstanding thing about the Apollo Theatre crusade was the sacrifice that some of the Black people did to put it over. I know some people who emptied their savings accounts. I even know people who took out second mortgages on their houses so they could help pay for the crusade. Some people sold their cars and donated the sale price. Many donated a week's salary and a few donated a month's wages.

On the opening day of the crusade, July 23, 1962, a group of us met in the Theatre at one o'clock to pray for God's help. We scattered

throughout the theatre—some to the top balconies, some down to the basement, some on the stage—each praying that the Holy Spirit would be present in every corner of the building, convicting the hearts of people who did not know Jesus Christ. I'll have to confess, those hours were a real struggle for me: thinking of all the opposition by the churches, by Black Nationalists, by the constant need for money, and by all the needs for organization. Even in the final moments, the staff was in a flurry of activity with last minute details.

We had superb music at the crusade. Our pianist was a beautiful young lady name Vivian Sutton who later became my wife. One of the singing groups was five sisters and their mother. The Seale Sisters dedicated their lives to singing God praises. The 150-voice choir was superb. I was appointed to be the main speaker.

The tension weighed on each of us; however, one by one the team members came by and put their hands on my shoulder or gripped my arm, assuring me of their prayers and God's oversight. (Remember, I was still only 20 years old!)

When the doors opened, the theatre filled up immediately. Many people were anticipating this meeting. There were more than 1800 people in that theatre. When the meeting began, the presence of God's Holy Spirit was there, and I felt the liberty of the Spirit in my preaching. The pre-opening tension was gone. Many people responded to an invitation to accept Jesus Christ into their lives. We saw hearts broken and tough, sin-hardened people weeping tears of repentance before God. It was the same every night.

Very interestingly, in the congregation I saw the clergymen who had fought us—and some of the people from churches where pastors had told them not to attend the crusade. They were jammed into the theatre with the others.

The theatre was packed to capacity every night; there was standing room only. By the end of the week, we had to turn people away because there was not enough room. Many stood outside and listened over loudspeakers that we set up for them the last minute. It was the most tremendous moving of the Holy Spirit I had ever experienced. In six days, 2200 people responded to an invitation to accept Jesus Christ and his salvation into their lives. Drug addicts found Jesus Christ and broke the drug habit; alcoholics found Christ and were freed from alcoholism; broken homes were put back together; frustrated teenagers found new

meaning for their lives in Jesus Christ. (Some of those young people are today missionaries in foreign fields, some are pastors, and some are studying for the ministry—all people who encountered Jesus Christ during the six-day crusade.)

We were told by the managers of the Apollo Theatre that we broke the record for attendance of any single event that had ever been held in their history. (Remember, our competition included such well-known and talented people as Duke Ellington, Nat 'King' Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Epstein, Ray Charles, and other famous rock and roll, jazz, and blues singers. They had gone in and out of there and had tremendous crowds. But more people came to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ on a single night than to hear any of those people. If properly presented, Jesus Christ is more popular than any other person, dead or alive!) I give God all of the credit!

On the last night of the crusade, God's Spirit led me to challenge people with controversial aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (This was an outdoor meeting at the Theresa Hotel before the main meeting in the Apollo Theatre.) My message that evening was, *A White Man's Religion*. You see, I knew that most people in the Black Nationalist movement had been teaching that Christianity was a White man's religion. I decided to peck away at that issue by presenting the claims of Jesus Christ. In my message that night, I challenged the people with these words:

Christianity? Why, that's a White man's religion. I want no part of it! Christianity was given to the Black man to keep him in slavery! The Bible has been changed and added to by the White man in order to brain-wash the Black man. These are statements that are being made in practically every Black community in America. The civil rights issue and the struggle for social equality have become such hot issues that many Blacks can see life only in terms of *Black and White*. Many Blacks in their bitterness are denouncing Christianity and the Bible despite the fact that it has been and will continue to be the Black man's only hope. I am a Black man who has lived in the Black community all of my life. Let's you and I, as Blacks, face the issues head on. The Bible records these words of God: *May all the ends of the earth look to me and be saved, for I am God and there is no other*. Notice that God does not say, *look to the White man*, but *look to God*. The Bible teaches us that God has seen fit to manifest himself through his son, Jesus Christ. So then,

it is Jesus to whom we are to look, not any person, Black or White. This word *look* means to draw all our attention to; it means that we should surrendered even our very lives to God through his son, Jesus Christ. If God demands that we look to his son, Jesus Christ, it means that Christianity is not a *religion*, but a person! It is Jesus. Therefore, those who are attacking Christianity as a *White man's religion* are all wrong! God's word, the Holy Bible, is telling to look to Jesus.

The Holy Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is the only hope, or the only salvation, for any group of people. The Bible declares, *There is salvation in none other, for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we can be saved.* Notice again, *May all the ends of the earth look to me and be saved.* It does not say, *Look to me only if you are a White man.* The Bible teaches us that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. It declares *God loved the world [this includes you] so much, that he gave his only-born son, so that whoever believes [this also means you] in him may not be destroyed, but have everlasting life.* This passage does not make any mention of Black people or White people. Many Blacks are falling into the same error they are denouncing by creating religions custom made for Black people. This is not what the Bible, God's word, says. The Bible teaches that every man, regardless of race, is born a sinner and will be destroyed in his sins unless he receives Jesus Christ into his heart.

Many Blacks ask, "If so many White people are really Christians, how do you account for their prejudice?" I answer these people: "When Jesus said, *Look to me*, he is telling us to focus our attention on him, not on the prejudices of the White people, not on social oppression!"

The Bible teaches us that the very purpose of Jesus' coming into the world was to do away with the sin that separated us from God and from his people. As long as there is sin in the human heart, it means that man will be separated from God. And when man is separated from God, he is automatically separated from his fellow man. But thank God, by the death of Jesus on the cross, he has made it possible for each of us to belong to a new race, not the *White race* or the *Black race*, but to a third race of men, known as God's sons—transformed by his power. It can happen to you right this moment if you will confess before God that you are a sinner, and then thank him for taking the punishment of your sins on the cross, and invite him into you life. Do this, and this very moment, you can be a child of God!

The Bible declares that *If any man is in Jesus Christ, he is a new creature.* Ask Jesus Christ to come into your heart at this very moment and you will be a new person, because God's word says so.

— *End of Message at the Theresa Hotel* —

Again, as I gave an invitation for people who wanted to trust Jesus Christ, I was thrilled to see scores of people step out of the crowd and invite Jesus Christ to come into their lives.

After the Harlem crusade, we began to pray and plan for the Brooklyn crusade. That crusade was conducted in the month of December, at the Brevoort Theatre in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant which was the scene of riots a couple of years earlier.

There in the theatre, night after night, for one full week, we again saw people being confronted with the claims of Jesus Christ and responding. And more and more, many of us became aware of the tremendous ministry that God had committed to us in preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Blacks.

Later Years [By the editor:]

During that time in his life, Tom Skinner was positively thrilled at what he saw God doing in Harlem, and in his own life. He did not want to do anything else but spend the rest of his life ministering to the people of Harlem, and bring the whole community to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and his ways. However, God had other plans for his life. A few months after the Apollo crusade, He received an invitation from British Guiana (a country in South America that was renamed Guyana after it gained independence from Britain four years later—in 1966). This was the beginning of an international ministry that took Tom Skinner into several countries over the next few years. In those countries, he had some very large and very successful meetings. However, he continued to have the same problems that he had in Harlem, persecution by some of the long-established ministries.

This book is a condensed (shortened) version of Tom Skinner's earlier book (which is out of print). I am not recording a description of Skinner's international ministry in this book. If a person wants to read this part, you may be able to find Tom Skinner's first book ***Black and Free*** in a library or a used book store. If any reader is able to find a source for some of Mr. Skinner's books, please let me know at the address below.

Tom Skinner published a second book entitled: ***How Black is the Gospel?***

Tom Skinner died of leukemia when he was about 52 years old [1994]. The ministry he started is being carried on by his widow.

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Who is Tom Skinner?

At 14 years of age, the leader of the toughest street gang in New York, at the same time a pastor's son, a straight-A student, and captain of his high school's football team. At sixteen years of age, Tom stood before his gang of 126 teenagers and told them that Jesus Christ had changed his life and he could no longer be their leader. He walked out expecting a knife to plunge between his ribs any minute, or to stop a bullet. Within two days, some of the gang members told him that they wanted to kill him, and tried, but someone or something held them back. It was an invisible angel, and within a few days, Tom Skinner had convinced several of his former gang members to commit themselves to following Jesus Christ!