

This is a complete transcript of the oral history interview with **Torrey Maynard Johnson (CN 285, T3)** for the Billy Graham Center Archives. No spoken words which were recorded are omitted. In a very few cases, the transcribers could not understand what was said, in which case [unclear] was inserted. Also, grunts and verbal hesitations such as “ah” or “um” are usually omitted. Readers of this transcript should remember that this is a transcript of spoken English, which follows a different rhythm and even rule than written English.

. . . Three dots indicate an interruption or break in the train of thought within the sentence of the speaker.

. . . . Four dots indicate what the transcriber believes to be the end of an incomplete sentence.

( ) Word in parentheses are asides made by the speaker.

[ ] Words in brackets are comments made by the transcriber.

This transcript was created by Marissa Lemmen and Paul Ericksen and was completed in March 2001.

**Please note:** This oral history interview expresses the personal memories and opinions of the interviewee and does not necessarily represent the views or policies of the Billy Graham Center Archives or Wheaton College.



**CN 285, Tape 3. Oral history interview with Torrey Maynard Johnson by Robert Shuster on December 13, 1984.**

**SHUSTER:** This is an interview with Dr. Torrey Johnson by Robert Shuster for the Archives of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College. This interview took place on November...or December 13 at 9:00 A.M. in the offices of the Billy Graham Center. Dr. Johnson, I wonder if you could tell me [thumping sound] about...a little bit about the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals. I know you were their first Midwest representative.

**JOHNSON:** The...the initial meeting, as I recall, of the NAE was held in St. Louis, Missouri, and the follow-up meeting was held in Chicago. In those days there were two men who stood out [thumping sound] very strongly in the leadership of the conservative movement. One was Carl McIntire of the First Presbyterian Church of Collingswood, New Jersey. The other was Dr. Harold Ockenga of the Park Street Congregational Church of Boston, Massachusetts. Had these two men been able to come to some accommodation, there probably never would have been an American Council of Churches as in contrast to the NAE. Carl McIntire was quite combatant and quite implacable in many ways. Harold Ockenga was more of a mediating type of a person, and as a result of that the two did not get together and could not get together though there were overtures for several years, particularly on the part of Harold Ockenga and those who became the founders of NAE.

**SHUSTER:** Do you remember the nature of some of those overtures?

**JOHNSON:** Sir?

**SHUSTER:** Do you remember the nature of some of those overtures?

**JOHNSON:** Yes. [Pauses] Both in St. Louis itself in the first meeting and again in the Chicago meeting they tried to find some kind of a middle ground, some kind of a common ground where we [?] could get together. McIntire was more of what we called in those days, quote, a "come-outer," unquote. He felt that we couldn't have any relationship at all with a church or a denomination that wasn't pure as he looked at it. The leaders of the NAE felt that each church, regardless of its denomination, could stand on its own feet. So that the Presbyterian Church as a whole could not speak for the individual churches. Nor could the Methodist Church as a whole speak for all the Methodist churches. That men could be true to the word of God in a context where there is a lot of liberalism, and a church could be true to the word of God regardless of the denomination in which it was identified and regardless of the way in which the denomination seemed to go. As a result of that (and I'll come back to what you asked me)...as a result of that, in the NAE, there was room for individual members as persons. There was room for local churches regardless of their denomination, and there was room for denominations. I think too that the NAE has made room for many parachurch organizations to become identified with it. Carl McIntire (just to push that point a little further)...Carl McIntire felt that you couldn't stay in the Presbyterian church with which he was identified as the denomination and be true to the Word of God. It was very interesting, however, that he never did come out of the Presbyterian denomination. He was defrocked and he fought like a tiger to stay in, as did also Dr. Buswell, the president of Wheaton

College at that time where I had been a student. They fought to stay in and fight from within, but they were defrocked. But then having been defrocked, they encouraged and challenged others to get out without being defrocked, which I thought was quite inconsistent. That gives you a little bit of the thinking and the philosophy of Carl McIntire. So there was no ground of compromise. There was no ground...common ground of conciliation. So the arguments were quite heated, and a good many were...took sides, both...I won't say too...many took sides. Most of them were on the side of the NAE, but a few were on the side of...

**SHUSTER:** Most of who?

**JOHNSON:** Most of the delegates, or those in attendance.

**SHUSTER:** At the...?

**JOHNSON:** At the preliminary conference of the organizing conference of the NAE.

**SHUSTER:** Okay.

**JOHNSON:** The [pauses] American...what they call it...the Independent Churches denomination (I forget what they call it now), the group represented by Dr. Billy McCarrell and that group, they were...they had been a bunch of "come-outers" already, so they si...all of those who had come out of different denominations I think very largely sided with Carl McIntire, but those were still in the denominations and those who were among those not quite so pugnacious, they stayed with the NAE. And there were heated arguments. I don't have the detail of that, but there were heated arguments and a certain amount of animosity and bitterness developed particularly on the side of those that went with the American Council. They accused the folk going with the NAE of being compromisers with liberalism as they understood it. Whereas it was not a compromise, but it was rather bearing a witness in your situation rather than coming out and losing any opportunity for witness.

**SHUSTER:** Now were McIntire supporters trying to propose a statement of faith, a statement of policy for NAE, or were they just opposed to the NAE organizing at all?

**JOHNSON:** Policy. Policy was the big question. Doctrine and policy. And they would refer to different passages of Scripture given to us by the Apostle Paul and by John in his three epistles where they, both Paul and John, speak about "coming out from among them and being ye separate, sayeth the Lord," [2 Corinthians 6:17] So their separation was a first degree separation and a second degree separation, and they talked a great deal about second degree separation, which was a very interesting thing. Second degree separation had to do...first degree separation had to do with doctrinal purity. Second degree separation had to do with separation, not only from people who compromised, but people who did not compromise but were identified in some way with those who did. So if, for instance, a man had a Presbyterian church, a minister had a Presbyterian church, because the Presbyterian church belonged to the National Council of Churches and through that to the World Council of Churches, that church was a compromising church, and that was what we call second degree separation. A true believer must not have anything to do with another believer

who is identified with something that they felt was a compromise. It...it took on very extreme proportions so that if you were going to follow that philosophy through all the way, you would be almost as Paul suggests [1 Corinthians 5:10], you'd have to get out of the world, because most of them have some kind of a relationship that others wouldn't endorse. And that was...that was a good deal of controversy at that time.

**SHUSTER:** Were...what position did other Fundamentalist leaders like Bob Jones or John R. Rice or William Bell Riley take at...at this initial debate?

**JOHNSON:** Bob Jones was an ecclesiastical politician. He was building his school. He had had a couple of failures along the way in Florida prior to that. Now he lives in Cleveland, Tennessee. He was interested in students from wherever he could get them at that time. This was Bob Jones, Sr., the founder of the college. He, because he was an ecclesiastical politician, tried to accommodate himself to both groups, although in his heart he would have favored the position of Carl McIntire. And having come out of, I think, the Methodists in the South himself, he was...he not only left the Methodists, but also I think they were also glad that he left. John R. Rice, pretty much the same kind of a thing. He didn't have a school. He was promoting his evangelistic ministry. Interesting about Bob...John R. Rice, he had community-wide campaigns or multi-church campaigns, and while he condemned in later years Billy Graham because Billy Graham had community-wide campaigns that took in all the churches, he himself did the same thing where he could. But he was not as...he was not as acceptable to all the churches because of the pronouncements that he had made. So his campaigns were as large as he could get support, but he had alienated a great many people because he was in what we would call the "right wing" of Evangelical church. He would be uncomfortable in the NAE in those days. I don't think he ever joined them. I don't know that he joined the American Council, but they would have welcomed him, and he would have been comfortable with them. W.B. Riley, I knew him very well. He had been the president, and I think one of the leading lights, of what we used to call the Fundamentalist movement in America. He was old enough to have been among the pioneers in that movement, and yet he continued right into the days of the NAE. The two movements were running parallel for a period of time. I know I spoke for him at the Fundamentalist meeting in Minneapolis back in the early 40s. At that time it was diminishing in its power. It was divided. Some went with the American Council, some went with the NAE. I think Dr. Riley would have had some misgivings about the NAE because he took his church, and he was able to swing the boat to take the majority of the Baptist churches in Minnesota out of the American Baptist Conference or denomination. And he claimed at that time, and he saw the fulfillment of it, that his people controlled the Minnesota convention, and all of the other churches were on the outside of the convention. That's how he came into the control of Pills...what is now Pillsbury College and certain other denominational properties. So he was not looked upon with any favor by the American Baptist Convention. And his thinking was more in line with the American Council actually than the NAE, but I think after a while he became disillusioned with the leadership of the American Council and leaned more toward the NAE.

**SHUSTER:** But he didn't join either.

**JOHNSON:** Not to my knowledge.

**SHUSTER:** What were the basic motives, reasoning, or reasons for the people who organized NAE? What were they trying to accomplish?

**JOHNSON:** [Sniffs] The folk who organized the NAE wanted to bring together as a force in the local community, and the state, and in the country to speak for all the Evangelical people of the United States. They wanted to speak for all the Evangelical people regardless of their other affiliations. That was a big line of demarcation as I've tried to say. The American Council wanted their group to be completely separate from anything that even suggested liberalism. The NAE was satisfied with you as an individual to join, or your church to join, or your denomination to join, or your missionary or other society to join if within themselves they were orthodox in their biblical beliefs and creed, regardless of the other affiliations they had, so that they had...they would speak for all Evangelicals. And even today the NAE assumes for itself, and I think quite rightly so, that they speak for the majority of Evangelicals in America, although the great Southern Baptist Convention does not belong to it and that's about, what, thirteen or fifteen million people. And the Missouri Synod Lutherans, which were quite orthodox until recent years and still are I think basically orthodox, do not affiliate, but churches of both of them do. So they wanted to speak for all Evangelicals, and they profess to do so, but not all Evangelicals belong.

**SHUSTER:** Why was it felt that it was necessary to have an organization that would speak for all Evangelicals?

**JOHNSON:** The reason for that was because the National Council of Churches assumed for itself that they were speaking for the Protestants, all Protestants. And the position they took on a great many issues did not represent the Evangelicals. So there was a great unease about that kind of a thing. Then too, certain positions and certain benefits that derived from being national they didn't participate in, for instance radio. Gratis [free] time on the radio was given to the National Council because they represented Protestants, and the NAE said, "Not so." They said that to the networks. "Not so. They don't represent all Protestants. If you want a voice for the Protestants, you've got to give us a part of it." So there were things of that kind. Chaplaincy, for instance also, in the military, that was controlled at that time by the National Council of Churches. And as a result a good many conservatives couldn't qualify or become chaplains in the military. And those kind of things were very important in the late '30s and getting into the '40s when we were approaching and in World War II. So there were many things like that. Also represented the conservatives in Washington with the government, with Congress, a sort of a quasi...quasi-lobby as it were. Those were some of the reasons why all of us felt at that time it was necessary to joining hands to accomplish those purposes [train passing in background].

**SHUSTER:** In files that we have in the Archives of the early documents of the NAE, the letter that was sent out to kind of invite people to a beginning meeting was signed by J. Elwin Wright and Ralph T. Davis. Are you aware of the part that Davis played in getting NAE started?

**JOHNSON:** No. Davis was not the...the strong leader that Elwin Wright was. Elwin Wright was the leader of what we call the New England Fellowship, and they had a conference grounds and headquarters I think both in Boston and Rumney, New Hampshire. He was a strong man, and he could devote all his time to these things.



**SHUSTER:** When you say strong, what do you mean?

**JOHNSON:** Strong leader and a hard worker. His work...he was not a platform speaker, but on one on one, he was a tremendous force. He would meet with individuals and meet with individual leaders. He was very persuasive. He had great confidence. He was persistent. He was a very good and wise man, that he took with him into the work of the NAE a rich background of the struggle of Evangelicals in New England against the strong liberal forces and other different forces there were in New England because the Evangelicals at that time in New England were a very, very small minority, and he struggled there. And with that as a background, he brought that into the NAE on a nationwide basis. Ralph Davis was not the strong leader. He was more of an assistant. He was more, I would say, like Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas seemed to be very strong at the beginning, and then later it was Paul that came to the front. And it was Elwin Wright that came to the front in the NAE. And beside that I think Elwin Wright put in, I think, almost full time in the work, whereas Ralph Davis did not.

**SHUSTER:** How did you come to be the Midwest representative of NAE?

**JOHNSON:** [Pauses] I think I became the Midwest representative because the NAE reflects my own personal philosophy. Anyone that can take 1 Corinthians 15, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and was buried and rose again the third day from the dead according to the Scriptures," is my brother, and I can reach out the hand of fellowship to him regardless of any other identification he has. He is my brother. I may be unhappy with some of his associations. I may be quite uneasy about some things he does, but he is my brother, and perhaps I can help him. Maybe he can help me. Maybe we could mutually be a benefit one to another. That was my philosophy, always has been. So that I fit very comfortably into the NAE. Then I think the reason why they chose me in that regard was because [sound of passing training] perhaps I was about the strongest man in the Chicago area that was willing to be identified in that way. Ir...Dr. Ironside was at the Moody Church at that time, and he was not concerned at all with organization, administration, these kind of issues per se. He was a Bible teacher, pre-eminent, and occupied himself completely with that and his writings. The other strong men we had in Chicago were Dr. Billy McCarrell of the Cicero Bible Church and Dr. J.C. O'Hare of the North Shore Congregational Church. There was one other man in Chicago, however, that stood very close to me at that time. That was Dr. Harry Hager of the Bethany Reformed Church on...in what we call Roseland, Chicago, and he was very effective in NAE. His church was, I think, larger than mine, but probably mine was the most aggressive and fastest growing church in the area. So I think they recognized that perhaps there's some future potential in me as a young man.

**SHUSTER:** Of course, Herbert J. Taylor was another one of the early...

**JOHNSON:** Sir?

**SHUSTER:** ...Herbert J. Taylor was another one of the early founders of NAE. Did you have much association with him?

**JOHNSON:** Yes. Herbert J. Taylor was my very, very dear personal friend. Just as an aside, which has nothing to do with what we're talking about but very interesting for you to know. He was one of the original founders I think you could say, at least he was on my committee, the first committee of Chicagoland Youth for Christ. He met with me and my original committee for a good period of time, but he was occupied with developing a number of different organizations: the Young Life, Boy's Brigade, Girl's Pioneers, Inter-Varsity [Christian] Fellowship, and so on. He told me one day, "Torrey, I'm never going to give you any money [pauses] unless you need it. But if you need it, you can come and ask me." But I never did come and ask him. But we were very warm friends from that day to the time of his departure to be with the Lord. Herbert Taylor was a Methodist, and he's a classic example of what I've been talking about. A man like Carl McIntire and McPherson from Philadelphia and McCarol and so on, would be very squeamish in association with a man like Taylor. And they would feel I...I was compromising because I was in fellowship with Herb Taylor. So Herb was like myself. He fit in beautifully into the NAE, and I think at that time he probably was the president of the Jewel (what did they call it at that time?)...the Jewel Tea Company, became the Jewel food stores, big chain. Then he went from there to Club Aluminum and became the president and I think the chairman of the board of Club Aluminum. He was a success...very successful adult. He was a layman in the Park Ridge Methodist Church in a suburb of Chicago, and a genuine believer, and he saw a need for the NAE, and he contributed largely.

**SHUSTER:** What would you say were his [pauses]...when you think about him, what were the main characteristics of his personality that come to mind?

**JOHNSON:** [Pauses] Herb Taylor [pauses] was an example of a fruitful Christian layman on the highest level. He...he had a rare insight into the needs of our time, and how some of those needs could be met. For instance, not only the organizations I've mentioned did he have so much to do with, but also at that time there was a young man in California by the name of Charles E. Fuller who likewise was a rancher. He had citrus groves and so on. And Mr. Taylor was looking for someone who was broadcasting on the air that he thought could be a voice for America. And the Holy Spirit led him to feel that Charles Fuller might be that man, and he became a very early and a very substantial supporter of Charles E. Fuller. I think he recognized the needs, and he recognized the potential of some people who could help to meet those needs so that when he got behind a particular movement, I think he also got behind the man that was leading the movement, and maybe it was more the man than the movement. Stacey Woods had come down from Canada to establish the Inter-Varsity [Christian] Fellowship of the States, and he became very close to Herb Taylor. Herb Taylor also was a great supporter of a magazine. I forget what they call it now. It had to do with the promotion of Sunday schools. It was the predecessor of magazine of what we call *Christian Life*. Herb Taylor saw potential in a magazine for the Sunday schools, the building of the Sunday schools, but also saw Robert Walker, who was the editor of that magazine. And he was a great supporter of that work in those early days. It then moved on from being the Sunday school magazine to *Christian Life*. [Pauses] Herb Taylor was a team player. He didn't always have to have his own way. He was a good man to have on the board, a good counselor, very fair, very generous with his time, his talent, his substance. He was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and much people was added to the Lord.

**SHUSTER:** When you said he was a team player, can you think of an example from your experience that illustrates that?

**JOHNSON:** Yes. I think maybe in Youth for Christ I could think of something about Herb Taylor. When we were going to put on our first meeting in the Chicago Stadium which was really the largest meeting of its kind west of New York for many, many years. Jack Wyrzten had put on a couple of meetings in the stadium in New York City, forgot the name of it now. And I got inspiration from Jack Wyrzten and I said, "I can...Jack can do it in New York. With God's help we can do it in Chicago." So we rented Chicago Stadium. I went to Herb Taylor among others with my board, and Herb Taylor at that time shook his head, said, "T...too much, can't do it. You don't have the money, you don't have the resources." But as the committee talked, we came to the conclusion that we would do it anyhow. And he said, "Well, if you're going to do it, I'll support it, although I have some reservations about it." And I call that a team player. Once a vote is taken, even if the vote is adverse, you're a part of the team. You get in there and pitch. He did tell me one thing, though. One meeting...we had an outdoor meeting that was going to cost at that time about twenty-two thousand dollars, and I suppose that would be the equivalent of maybe a hundred thousand today, outdoors. I said, "Herb, should we take rain insurance?" Ten percent. The premium would be ten percent of what you want. So if the meeting cost twenty-two thousand, the premium would be twenty-two hundred. He said to me in his office, he said, "Torrey, did you ever read about Elijah?" Of course I had read about Elijah. He prayed and it didn't rain. That's all I needed. I put my tail between my legs, [Shuster laughs] I walked out of his office, and I thought, "My goodness, here's a layman in a beautiful way rebuking a preacher for his unbelief." So we prayed, and God gave us a dry day [laughs]. That was Herb.

**SHUSTER:** Let's talk a little bit now about your own early work in radio with the *Church of the Air* and the *Songs in the Night*. How did you become involved in radio?

**JOHNSON:** [Sneezes] I had a growing church, the Midwest Bible Church in Chicago. It did not represent what "Bible church" seemed to represent at that time in the thinking of people. The name "Bible church" at that time was repugnant to a great many people because it sounded like, quote, "come-outers," unquote. And I was not either a "come-outer" or a "go-inner." I was just a worker. So we had started that church in a little storefront building. And as the church grew and became stronger I felt, under God, that I had a message, not only for the local congregation, but beyond the local congregation, first in the Chicago area, and then beyond the Chicago area as God would open the door. That was the reason why I went on the radio to begin with the *Chapel Hour*. We took an old garage building, an old two-car garage building, and re-worked it and made a studio out of it.

**SHUSTER:** When was that approximately?

**JOHNSON:** That would have been about 1940. And we began to broadcast on Sunday afternoon between five and six o'clock. Radio was still somewhat of a novelty, and so people would come from various places to that service, after which we served a lunch, and then we had the evening service at seven o'clock. That broadcast developed and was quite flourishing in Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana. It reached an audience that was close at hand who could, from time to time, perhaps visit us. Most churches then, as now, did not have Sunday evening services, and I

specialized on the Sunday evening service because we always figured the Sunday morning crowd was more or less an automatic crowd. People would go to the church, which is a custom, but Sunday evening they don't go. So all of these people on Sunday evening were either sitting around at home or visiting relatives and so on. If you have an attractive service on Sunday night, there was the potential of drawing them and others in. And then others who don't go to church at all on Sunday morning might come on Sunday night. So we had a very strong evening service, many times much larger even than the morning service. Then later on I took on more, and we thought, "Now what about Sunday night?" Paul Rader of the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle had a broadcast that he called the *Back Home Hour* on Sunday night. And people would get back home from their own church, and they would listen to Paul Rader all across the country. And he had a great grip on people, and they would sit by their radio sets, even beginning with the crystal sets, and then on to hear him. Well, he died I think in 1938, but he left Chicago sometime before. So there was a vacuum, and I thought maybe we could fill that vacuum. So we had that Sunday night service on a clear channel station, WCFL, that would reach coast to coast. In those days, people used to try to see how far they could reach with their radio, that was how far they could hear from home. And if you could get a station from Chicago in New York, that was quite an exciting thing. Now, of course, you listen to your local stations, period, usually, although some of these clear channel stations still reach some people. So [unclear] there. The idea there was, quote, "Easy does it," unquote.

**SHUSTER:** What was the name of his later program?

**JOHNSON:** *Songs in the Night*.

**SHUSTER:** *Songs in the Night*.

**JOHNSON:** *Songs in the Night*, from 10:15 to 11 o'clock at night.

**SHUSTER:** And the earlier one had been called *Chapel Hour*?

**JOHNSON:** *Chapel Hour*.

**SHUSTER:** *Chapel Hour*.

**JOHNSON:** The *Songs in the Night* was from 10:30...10:15 to 11 o'clock. We produced that on the platform of the church. Some people would even...would even say, "I went to bed with your program, and then I went to sleep." It was that kind of quiet program, where we took a current event, very much like Billy Graham does when he starts preaching today. Billy usually starts out with something that's happened, something...an earthquake, a flood, a leakage of poisonous gas, a battle of a war, something of that sort that would immediately attract attention, and then move on from that to some kind of a spiritual application, and then with music. But the speaking would be maybe five or eight minutes and then some music, and then a little more speaking, maybe a testimony or two. Herb Taylor would testify for me for instance, and Billy Graham testified, and many, many others like that would come in and testify in that program from 10:15 to 11:00. And people would come from everywhere just to sit in and be a part of it. That kind of a broadcast. I had

that for a whole year. It was during those days that Billy Graham and I became very close friends, and Billy would come down to hear me. He liked my preaching. He said you preach like an old fashioned Southern Baptist hellfire preacher, which I guess maybe was quite true. So after a year Billy had a little church in Western Springs [Chicago suburb], a basement church. It was called, I think, the First Baptist Church it was called or something like that, in Western Springs. But they were in the basement. And Billy wasn't doing very well because he's not a pastor as far as visitation work and...and deacons meetings, and those kind of things. They were very [pauses] very difficult for Billy to...not to do so much, but to like. He'd rather preach. He'd rather be in association with other men who were preaching and learn from them. So that one of his leading men, Dr...not Dr. but Robert Van Kampen said to me one day, he said, "Torrey, Billy's not a pastor. He's an evangelist," which was true. But anyhow, at that time I thought Billy needed help, and I couldn't carry with the two broadcasts, two church services, and a Sunday school class every Sunday, beside other things. So I said, "Billy, I want you to take that broadcast." And there were several men on his board that I knew well. Bob Van Kampen was my friend. Another fellow by the name of Vince Holgren, who lived Wheaton here for a while, but suddenly went to be with the Lord some years ago. They were his board. They agreed to take it over. So after I had had it for exactly one year, on the first anniversary on the platform of my church, I turned that broadcast over to Billy Graham to help him be known with his church and hopefully build his church. And Billy continued it, and when Billy left there, his successors took it. And it was in that church for many years until George Sweeting, the president of the Moody Bible Institute, was called to the Moody Church. Then the Western Springs Church gave it to the Moody Church, and it continues until the present time, and I think they are now on about three hundred stations.

**SHUSTER:** Now you described a little bit of the format of *Songs in the Night*. What was the format of *Chapel Hour*?

**JOHNSON:** Well, *Chapel Hour* was totally evangelistic. It was [pauses] a typical evangelistic service: some gospel music, some special music, a preaching, an invitation over the air for people to come to Christ. It was an evangelistic meeting, nothing special about it, just down-to-earth, direct.

**SHUSTER:** Did you have any trouble getting the local radio stations to broadcast your programs?

**JOHNSON:** No, we had no trouble that way. Our trouble would have been financial. If you had the money, you could get the time, but you couldn't always get the time you'd like. But I was very fortunate. 5:00 to 6:00 on a Sunday afternoon was quite good. We had to compete with baseball broadcasts on a Sunday afternoon. Sunday night late, from 10:15 on, competition as it were, was very much less. To get a broadcast early in the afternoon with football and baseball on the air would have been difficult. We had no problem getting on the air so far as religion or theology was concerned. So I would say my problems were relatively small.

**SHUSTER:** Did...one of our collections we had a copy of a newsletter which I guess was put out in conjunction with the program called *Midwest Church of the Air*. Do you recall much about that publication?

**JOHNSON:** [Pauses] The mag [unclear] this here *Midwest Messenger*?

**SHUSTER:** Uh-huh.

**JOHNSON:** Oh yes.

**SHUSTER:** Now is this...do you recall much about how this publication began?

**JOHNSON:** [Pauses] This is substantially what I said, isn't it?

**SHUSTER:** Uh-huh.

**JOHNSON:** Yes, the...the...the gentlemen who helped me get started in the broadcast.... Oh, that's very interesting. I went to the church board when we were going on the air the first time in *Chapel Hour*, and I said, "Gentlemen, I feel led to go on the air and broadcast on Sunday afternoon from 5:00 to 6:00. And I know that we don't have the money, but I want you to know that the church will not be responsible financially for it. If it fails, I will personally assume the financial obligation." When you put it like that to a church board, it's very difficult for them to turn you down. They had nothing to lose and everything to gain. So, they were hesitant, and some were somewhat reluctant and maybe that's why I put it the way I did. So they said, "Well, if we're under no obligation, and if you'll assume any obligation in regard to it, we'll go along." I had one man on the board with me especially at that time. His name was William Erny, E-R-N-Y. He went to be with the Lord in 1982 perhaps, quite suddenly in a heart attack in New York. His wife still lives in this area in one of the northwest suburbs. He was in the box, paper box manufacturing business. He had a brother, Eugene Erny, who was the head of the Oriental Missionary Society out of Greenwood, Indiana. And Bill was my business manager for that aspect of the work, and he supported me both emotionally but also financially. And he would have come to my rescue, I think, if I had gotten into some financial distress. So he was a...a good, solid brother, and he was also the first treasurer of Youth for Christ in Chicago and Youth for Christ, International. He was a great fellow, one of the unknown laymen that are really giants that stand with a person. But that's how we got started.

**SHUSTER:** What kind of response did you get from listeners?

**JOHNSON:** Their response was very encouraging, very, very encouraging on the air. We were already getting in those days to that stage in radio of diminishing response. There was a time in the very earliest days of radio when the mail would come in by the bushel basket because it was novel, it was new. But when I got into it, it wasn't quite the same. It was one of those kind of things people had gotten used to and took it for granted. It was something like for instance the shuttle program. When we first had programs down at Cape Canaveral, most of the people in America looked in. Now we have a shuttle program, and you take it very casually. I forget...I do not know at this time...I can't tell you what the percentage of response is in radio today, but they have a evaluation that tells you for every letter that you get, you have possibly a certain number of listeners. And we were in that in-between stage where we got more letters than you get today, but not as many as they did in the earlier days. But we had enough to keep us encouraged and know that there was a good audience out there. Also, I may mention to you, we had another broadcast in Youth for Christ. That

also was on WCFL. The vice president of the WCFL was a very fine fellow. He looked at me with tears in his eyes in his office one day and he said, "Torrey," he says, "you've got Youth for Christ." And then the tears formed in his eyes. He said, "When are you going to do...have Old Men for God for fellows like me?" And I can see him now. His name was Mr. Holt. I thought of that many, many times, and he was very valuable to us in opening up WCFL for a broadcast in connection with Youth for Christ in the early part of the Saturday evening service. And that was exciting. To think that you were broadcasting in connection with Youth for Christ. It was...it was novel course, and that made it exciting. And on one occasion at least, we had a boat out in the...in Lake Michigan called the *City of Grand Rapids*, seated about twenty-five hundred people, and the *Chapel of the Air* sponsored that. And there were all these people that responded and the boat was jam-packed. I think we did it for several years, and we broadcast ship to shore [Shuster laughs], and then from shore across the nation. And those were new things at that time, innovative things. And all of it added up to the salvation of souls.

**SHUSTER:** What do you think was the advantage of doing innovative things like that?

**JOHNSON:** [Pauses] Attract attention. Attract attention for what purpose? Not for a selfish purpose, but to get the ear and the eye of people for the gospel. You're alive. You're doing something. You're not a part of a fossil age. You're with it. Others have done the same thing. Percy Crawford did it. Jack Wyrzten did it. Charles Fuller was in the Civic Auditorium in Long Beach, California. And in Long Beach, California, at that time the city was full of servicemen, and the servicemen gave to him that added dimension of excitement. Parents would listen on the air and they would hear a boy, sailor boys and marines, coming to Christ. You've got to get the attention of people before they hear what you're saying, and I think that was a part of it. And then too, the unreached or the untouched would come to something like that. Not to hear the gospel. They would come for other reasons, and then they would get the gospel.

**SHUSTER:** What was the relationship of *Chapel Hour* with radio station WAIT?

**JOHNSON:** Sir?

**SHUSTER:** What was the relationship with *Chapel Hour* with the radio station WAIT?

**JOHNSON:** We had no special relationship to WAIT. WAIT was a very interesting station, which has nothing to do with that. The...what they call the Catholic Church, not the Roman Catholic, not the Greek Catholic, but the Christian Catholic Church of Zion, Illinois, that was founded by some thorough-going, Bible-believing people of a little extreme type. They had that wavelength in part. So that station was partly a Christian station and partly a secular station. And they got into financial difficulties, I guess, and the whole thing was taken over by WAIT. And we were able to buy time, but we had no special relationship to them.

**SHUSTER:** I just mentioned it because this newsletter has it *Chapel Hour* being broadcast over WAIT, but I guess that was...it was more one of the stations that are carried by you. How long did the *Chapel Hour* last?

**JOHNSON:** I don't know how long it lasted. I couldn't tell you.

**SHUSTER:** It's not still on today?

**JOHNSON:** No, it's not going today. I'm not sure whether Bob Cook continued it. If he had for a while after I took leave of absence from the church and then let it die, or whether I concluded it. I, again, maybe had too much to do at YFC because you see after one year of YFC, I was just on the go so much that it may be that I felt I couldn't do it. I don't recall.

**SHUSTER:** What...were you at all involved in the beginnings of the association known as National Religious Broadcasters?

**JOHNSON:** Yes. I was, and they recognized me in 1984, this year, at the annual meeting of the National Religious Broadcasters in Washington D.C. in the Sheraton Hotel. I was recognized with some five or six or seven other people in being one of the founding fathers of the National Religious Broadcasters. Our first meeting was held in Houghton Hall of the Moody Bible Institute on the first floor a room just off from the information desk as you come in. I think we had that meeting at that time there.

**SHUSTER:** What time? Do you recall what year that was or...?

**JOHNSON:** That would have been in connection with Moody's Founders Week Bible Conference, so it was convenient for men who might be attending the conference or who would for this reason come to the Bible conference, and then combine this preliminary meeting with that other activity.

**SHUSTER:** But do you recall what year that was?

**JOHNSON:** [pauses] No, I don't.

**SHUSTER:** In the 1940s or 50s or...?

**JOHNSON:** Yes, it was in the 1940s. I would say probably it was about 1943 or 1944. That can be...that information can be gotten from Ben Armstrong of the National Religious Broadcasters. He would have that in their files. William Orear [?] was one of those who was there. Charles Leaming, L-E-A-M-I-N-G from St. Petersburg. I think that Charles Leaming was the Elwin Wright of the National Religious Broadcasters. He was the man that stuck with it, worked hard at it, and really saw it come to a fruition. Some of us were so busy with other things that we lent our hand to it, but we couldn't give too much time. And I was one of those that was fully supportive, but I had other things to do as often happens.

**SHUSTER:** How many were at that initial meeting?

**JOHNSON:** Well, there must have been probably about seven or eight because these were considered the founders. William Orear [?] I know was one of them as I said and Charles Leaming

was another one. We talked then about the radio. Why did we do it? Because we were concerned...I told you I never had any difficulty personally getting time on the air, but there were very grave difficulties. The...the National Council of Churches was working very hard to keep gospel broadcasters off of the air. Their contention was that religion ought to be something provided for by the radio free of charge, and the Protestant end of it ought to be taken care of through the National Council or the local council. So for instance in the Chicago area, the Chicago Council of Churches would decide who would be on the air and who wouldn't be on the air, and they had a strong bias. And they would put the liberals on, and the others were omitted. So we had quite a struggle at that time as to whether you could buy time on the air or not buy time on the air, whether it shouldn't be sustaining time. The National Council wanted sustaining time because I do not know even until the present moment anybody who is a liberal that can buy time on the air and be provided for by the listeners. People just don't support that, but they do support gospel. And the liberals evidently must know that and it's a continuing controversy even until now. So to defend ourselves against those kind of possibilities. Then too, I suppose it's true that many people, and in some cases I think a majority of those in control of communications, are biased against the gospel. So in order to take care of those and other problems of different kinds, and also to lend something by way of regulation for our own people, so as to give guidance...guidelines to men on the air.... After all, we had no background. There was no historic precedent. There was a lot of trial and error, and to share ideas to begin to build up a code of ethics in regard to the work and so on. Those were some of the reasons why we got together. Then too, there was Christian radio coming in, Christian radio stations, and there were difficulties along that line as to whether or not you could get a Christian radio station. I think the first one was the station of the Moody Bible Institute. I think they were the first in America that was non-commercial Christian, but others were coming. So to help in the whole field of Evangelical communications by radio we met.

**SHUSTER:** You said that there was some problem as to whether you could have a Christian radio station. What...what do you mean by that?

**JOHNSON:** Whether the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] would listen to an application or give an application or give approval for the construction of a Christian radio station. That was something at that time that even they had to ponder, and, of course, that was understandable. It was a whole new thing, and they had to look into all the implications and complications, and there would be different voices speaking for and against. And we wanted to be sure that we were heard and got a fair hearing.

**SHUSTER:** You mentioned bias on the part of Federal Council of Churches against gospel radio and also in some of the higher reaches of the communication industry. Can you think of examples of that bias?

[Recording is stopped and restarted]

**SHUSTER:** When we had the tape recorder switched off just now you were mentioning something about the ghettoizing of radio and TV. What did you mean by that?

**JOHNSON:** The broadcast industry, radio and television, are interested in what we call the bottom line. They're in the business to make money, so that they want to make every hour commercially as profitable as possible. And they follow the polls very, very carefully, A.C. Nielson, etcetera. They have determined that religion as a whole interests only a minority of the people, and Evangelical ministry even a smaller part of that. They...their rate...their rate that they charge for time is based upon the audience that is listening. What I mean by that is this. For a Super Bowl football game thirty seconds count enormous lot of money because they figure there are so many people, perhaps a hundred million people listening at that moment. Now, when it comes to religion, if they were to put religion on on a Sunday afternoon, they wouldn't get the hundred million that they get for the Super Bowl. They'd get whatever they do get which would be a very minor part. Therefore, any ads that they would sell at that time, if they would sell you either before or after and so on would only command a very small amount of money. So what they have done is.... They can't sell time in the early morning on a Sunday. They can't sell time nearly as well late at night. I'm talking about radio now in particular, but also television. So they will sell that time cheaper because the audience is smaller. And sometimes they can't sell that time at all. They're glad to have anybody come on. So we called the early Sunday morning time and certain late night times and certain other times as the "ghetto." That time does not cost much money because the audience at that time is small. And so they push Evangelical broadcasts into those time slots because they're getting some money where they might not get any otherwise, and that won't hurt their audiences later on because they only have that small audience. If they were to put, for instance, an Evangelical broadcast from 1:30 to 2:00 on a Sunday afternoon, people would switch to another station at 1:30, and they might not switch back again at two o'clock. The argument is that they lose their audience, and religion does them no good audience-wise, and so financial-wise. So we'd get shoved into the ghetto. Now here's an interesting observation even at this very moment. When Billy Graham is on television in the Chicago area, he would like to be on the big networks, but until this very day he has not been able to do it. The Billy Graham programs are on...usually on one of those UHF stations where the audience is not nearly the audience that they claim for the great networks. Why can't Billy get on on the networks? He simply doesn't have the political clout, and there's politics involved in that connection. If you know the right people in government and otherwise, you put the right pressure, you might possibly do it on an occasion, but you'd have to keep on that pressure all the time to stay with it. And even Billy Graham, I would think, doesn't have that clout or at least hasn't exercised that clout. And as a result, in some local areas they do have more clout, and it gets on a network station, but in a big market like Chicago where there's a big Evangelical audience, he has to take one of the lesser stations. So it's a problem, and I'm quite sympathetic with the broadcasters. It comes down to the whole question as to whether money controls communications or whether there are some other things that ought to have a higher priority. Now the BBC in Britain is an altogether different thing. It's somewhat like our educational stations where they put on a program that may not appeal to everybody but is constructive and good.

**SHUSTER:** I wonder if we could turn now to the founding, beginning of Youth for Christ. How did you first become involved with the idea of Youth for Christ?

**JOHNSON:** I became involved in Youth for Christ.... The immediate...the immediate emphasis for it was developed by two people: [George] Beverly Shea who was an announcer on the radio station of the Moody Bible Institute, and Lacy Hall who was a student at the Moody Bible Institute

but working in the radio department as a student. I knew them both well. They called me time after time after time suggesting that I ought to do something for the young people of Chicago sim...similar to what Jack Wyrzten was doing in New York.

**SHUSTER:** What was he doing in New York?

**JOHNSON:** Jack Wyrzten had a Word of Life rally in Times Square of New York every Saturday night. It was held usually at the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue near 42<sup>nd</sup> Street which is right at Times Square. Sometimes it was also held at the Calvary Baptist Church depending on other programs. And he also, I think, at that time had had his first rally in that large stadium in New York, whatever they call it.

**SHUSTER:** Shea Stadium?

**JOHNSON:** Which one?

**SHUSTER:** Shea Stadium?

**JOHNSON:** No, the indoor stadium.

**SHUSTER:** Madison Square Garden?

**JOHNSON:** Madison Square Garden. So Beverly Shea and Lacy Hall. Beverly had been with Jack Wyrzten, and he had worked with Jack Wyrzten. Beverly Shea was an insurance salesman in New York, and he had worked with Jack a good deal, so he was quite acquainted with it, and when he came to Chicago there was a vacuum in himself because there were no youth rallies. In Chicago at that time we had hundreds of thousands of servicemen walking the streets of the downtown Chicago because it was the railroad center from which they went to the West coast or the Orient or the East coast and Europe for the war. This is 1944. Beside that the young people in Chicago had nowhere to go because gasoline was rationed, so you couldn't drive anywhere, and they were downtown. These two men persisted and then I finally said to them, sort of to get them off of my back, "Well, I'll see what I can do, but I'm busy." And I had five meetings every Sunday then beside other things that I was doing: evangelistic campaigns, and this and that, and a growing church.

**SHUSTER:** Is that the reason why it took a while for you to respond to them?

**JOHNSON:** Yes, I told them, "I can't do it. I'm too busy." But they...they agitated, and the Holy Spirit used that agitation until finally I said, "Well, if God will give us an auditorium, we'll do it." So we prayed, did a great deal of praying. And I turned to one friend of mine who was a member of the congregation of the Midwest Bible Church, and I said to him, "Christianson, go downtown and see what kind of auditorium there is." If there's some auditorium downtown, we'll take it." He went downtown. He saw an auditorium called Kimball Hall that was a music hall, but it only seated about five hundred people, and I knew that wasn't big enough. And then he ran into Orchestra Hall which is the equivalent of Carnegie Hall in New York or the Philharmonic in Los Angeles. That struck me immediately as being something we ought to do. Now the orchestra

played throughout the winter season, but during the summer they didn't play. So the hall was vacant very largely during the summer season. He said you can have that hall from I think the last Saturday of May for twenty-one weeks before the orchestral season begins, and you can have it for five thousand dollars. I knew God wanted me to do it. I said we'll sign up. I didn't have the money. I couldn't ask the church for the money for reasons I've suggested in some other things, but I did sign up for it. And when I had signed up for it, I gathered together people from Chicago that I thought would help me: ministers, a Christian businessmen's committee leaders, the Breakfast Club leaders, the leader of Christian Endeavor, the leader of youth fellowships of different kinds. I called them all together and told them what I was going to do. I didn't consult them now. I knew I was going to do it, but I wanted their help as far as they could give it. So they responded [sound of passing train] in various degrees, and we went ahead, and we started on that first Saturday night, which I think was the last Saturday of May 1944. I had...I had Merrill Dunlop of the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle to play the piano. I had my minister of music, Doug Fisher, to play the organ. I had Bob Cook, who was my associate pastor assistant, my song leader. And I invited Billy Graham to be the first preacher because he had been my friend, and I saw he had lots of potential. And he preached that night on Belshazzar's Feast: "Thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting." [Daniel 5:27] We had no idea how many people would come. There was no yardstick by which to measure.

**SHUSTER:** How did you get the word out about the meeting?

**JOHNSON:** We got the word out for the meeting very largely through the printed material, through these people, these different organizations, and then through my own radio broadcast, and my own congregation, and promoted in those ways the best we could. The Moody Bible Institute did not cooperate with me. Dr. Will Houghton said when I asked him, "No, I won't help you." And I understood why. He had come from New York where he had been pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church, and Jack Wyrzten at that time had great misgivings about the church. He was quite right-wing. He would have fitted in quite well with the American Council people. And so he gathered from his experience with Jack Wyrzten that we would be anti-church or at least not positively for the church. I was a church man. I was a minister, and I think my whole makeup is such as cooperative. So I assured him otherwise, but he told me he would not cooperate. But at the end of October (when we'd been there twenty-one weeks), he cooperated whole-heartedly and gave us the use of his radio to do the broadcasting. So I appreciated him. He was honest with me, and he had the good grace to change his mind when he found out he was wrong.

**SHUSTER:** But before that you said you used your own program, and the people who were in this group that you formed to get the word out.

**JOHNSON:** Yeah. They...they generated interest for me, and I was well-known in the Chicago area. I had done a lot of work around Chicago and so on. So we started, and we looked into the auditorium behind the curtains, almost afraid to look. And the auditorium was about full with three thousand people. And I think there were about forty-five that responded that night to the invitation, both men in uniform and others. And that was a tremendous encouragement, not only to us but to the whole community. And we were on our way. After that and the following twenty-one weeks there were times when we had two meetings in the same night. One perhaps from 7:00 to 8:30 and

another one from 9:00 to 10:30, something like that. The young people were thrilled to go to the Loop of Chicago [downtown area with concentration of business, entertainment, shopping, schools, parks and government offices]: lots of excitement, stores, window shopping, places to eat, Michigan Boulevard, all the excitement of a downtown district. So for them it was a lot of different things. There was the adventure of coming from fifty or a hundred miles away maybe. And for the servicemen we had people out on the street inviting the servicemen in, and they would come in. And we had novel programs, arrangement for some of them to call home from the platform, and those kind of things. So at the end of the twenty-one weeks we asked, "What should we do?" And I went to godly people and I asked them, "Now our twenty-one weeks are over, what do we do?" We had a big meeting in Chicago Stadium for thirty thousand, and Ernest Wadsworth was the head of the Great Commission Prayer League, and I thought he was a very discerning man. And I said, "Now, Brother Wadsworth, you've been in this a long, long time. What should we do?" He said, "Close it down." He said, "You fellows are a bunch of racehorses, and you've turned the racehorses out to pasture. And you need to be turned out to pasture and maybe begin again next year." But God didn't let us do it. It wasn't that we were so smart. We were just carried along by the Holy Spirit, and there was great momentum. So we cast a ballot. If we do go on, where would we go? We wanted a neutral auditorium, but we couldn't get one, so we settled on the Moody Memorial Church. And they with a great deal of reluctance as a whole let us come. Some of their trustees were afraid that we would scratch some of the finely varnished areas of the church, that we would disturb the decorum of the platform, and so on. So they laid some restrictions down on us of things that we could not do by way of banners and spotlights and otherwise, but we went to the Moody Church. And that was full. And sometimes, two meetings a night, eight thousand people a night, filling that church. And we continued til the following spring. Then we went back to Orchestra Hall. And for a number of years we were in Orchestra Hall for the summer, Moody Church for the winter. That was the beginning of Youth for Christ, Chicagoland Youth for Christ. Now there were things happening in different parts of the country before us. Things happening in St. Louis, and Indianapolis, and Detroit particularly, and so on.

**SHUSTER:** What was happening in Detroit?

**JOHNSON:** Sir?

**SHUSTER:** What was happening in Detroit?

**JOHNSON:** Detroit, they had the Voice of Christian Youth, which now is called Youth for Christ. And they...they had started back in the 1930s already with something quite similar, and they met in a Masonic Temple. And they met I think every other week, twice a month. And they had good leadership and a good program. However, I didn't get my impetus from them. My main impetus came from Jack Wyrzten immediately, and before that Percy Crawford with what he was doing in different ways in Philadelphia. And he was a schoolmate of mine in college. Well, then we began to get inquiries from all over the country. "What are you doing? Can't we do it here? How do you get started?" And we did everything we possibly could to help everybody we possibly could. And they came here, and we sent people out there, and we were busy. Already that first fall, Billy Graham became a full-time employee.

**SHUSTER:** Let me stop you for a second. This tape's almost out, so I'm going to put another tape on.

**JOHNSON:** Well, we only got a few more minutes for now. I got to go.

**SHUSTER:** Yeah. Maybe we should just end here.

**JOHNSON:** Alright, we could.

**SHUSTER:** And we could pick it up....

**JOHNSON:** Well, let me just talk to you, and then you can turn it off.

**SHUSTER:** Okay.

**JOHNSON:** Umm.

**END OF TAPE**

