

## Dr. John Wolf

As a senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church he used his pulpit to promote civil rights for minorities, women, and children.

### Chapter 01 - 1:09

#### Introduction

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**Announcer:** Dr. John Burton Wolf was the senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, for thirty-five years, becoming the Minister Emeritus in 1995. He served churches in Racine, WI, and Meadville, PA, before coming to Tulsa in 1960.

Dr. Wolf was a navy veteran of WWII, serving as a signalman in the Armed Guard and in the Pacific and was commissioned into the navy Chaplaincy Reserves during the Korean War.

His sermons at All Souls included civil rights, reforming the funeral home industry, and the importance of public education.

In the community Dr. Wolf was a leader against racial prejudice and promoted the rights of racial minorities, gays and lesbians, and women, including women's reproductive rights.

Many of his sermons were the subject of stories in local newspapers.

After retiring from the ministry in 1995 he remained active locally and nationally in causes for education and interfaith understanding.

Our Voices of Oklahoma oral history interview was recorded December 16, 2011. Dr. Wolf was ninety-two when he died September 19, 2017. Listen to him tell his story on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).

### Chapter 02 - 7:53

#### Wolf Family from Illinois

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**John Erling:** Today's date is December 16, 2011. My name is John Erling.

John, if you'll state your full name, your date of birth, and your present age, please.

**John Wolf:** John Burton Wolf, September 6, 1925. I was born in Bloomington, Illinois, in the Mennonite Hospital.

**JE:** We are recording this in the palatial recording studios in South Tulsa, of [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com). And joining us today is Clayton Vaughn, who has been interviewed for this website, [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com). Clayton is a former news anchor for Tulsa's Channel 6.

Clayton, how many years were you there?

**Clayton Vaughn:** Thirty-eight, off and on. I took a couple of sojourns to Los Angeles and to New York, but came back both times.

**JE:** And those were chronicled in our interview. You're here because of your contact with Dr. Wolf. When was that?

**CV:** I don't know exactly, other than it was shortly after he came to Tulsa and came to All Souls Unitarian.

**JE:** And—

**CV:** I met him as a news source, because here was a minister who was new to the community and all of a sudden he was talking about community issues from the pulpit, which was interesting and new for Tulsa. And I was unchurched at the time. So it was for me an opportunity to learn a little bit about what the Unitarian church was. And I joined it pretty quickly. So I've been a member there since somewhere in the early '60s, I think, was when I joined.

**JE:** Okay, let's find out, John.

Your mother's name, maiden name, and where she grew up.

**JW:** Her name was Helen Knox (K-n-o-x) Wolf. Helen Knox Young Wolf.

**JE:** She grew up in Illinois, did she?

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative). My Grandfather Young was a foundry man. He manufactured washing machines. The Meadows Washing Machine Company. He and another guy owned that company. FDR during the Depression was everybody should have a washing machine. His solution, if the government would just buy Meadows washing machines from everybody who could sell them. (all laughing)

**JE:** Of course.

**JW:** That was her father.

**JE:** Describe her. What kind of a person was she?

**JW:** My mother?

**JE:** Yeah.

**JW:** My mother was a little woman, short, and she was a powerhouse. She had started out as a school teacher at a little country school. During World War I she went to Washington, DC, and worked in what was then called the State War Navy building, which is now the Executive building, next to the White House, and was in charge of the casualty lists, or part of that process, to the point that it got her—she couldn't stand it anymore, came

home, Bloomington, and went to work for a law firm. She must have been one of the first legal aides or whatever they're called, that ever was.

This was in 1920, 1921, right as the Women's Suffrage came in. And was the secretary of the Republican party in McClain County, at a very early age she was. She was in her early thirties when she married my father. He was a veteran of World War I and was my grandfather's best friend. He worked for my grandfather in the manufacturing part of the firm.

Started dating my mother and my grandfather said, "Why don't you just marry the girl and be done with it?" Which he did.

**JE:** And your grandfather's name?

**JW:** Walter, Walter Lewis Wolf.

**JE:** Describe him, what kind of person was he?

**JW:** He was a casualty of the First World War. He had been badly wounded and had post-traumatic stress syndrome.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** We didn't know at the time what that was. He would end up periodically at a veterans' hospital in Dwight, Illinois. He wanted to be a salesman, that's what he would have loved to have been and was from time to time all during the Depression. But in the early part of the Depression he was very active in the American Legion.

And the American Legion, when the Depression really got going good in 1932-33, before Roosevelt came in, they organized a thing called the Community Gardens Project with the Illinois State Normal University Agricultural School. The American Legion put this together and they would get farmers in the heart of the corn belt to donate part of their land. And then people would go out and plant garden crops for the unemployed.

They set up a whole system there of community gardens, canneries. They went into the woods in the wintertime and cut down trees and stuff. Well, he was the director of that thing as long as it lasted, until WPA came along.

**JE:** The name Freedom Gardens comes to my mind. Didn't they do that in other parts of the country too? They called them Freedom Gardens.

**JW:** They could have.

**JE:** Yeah.

**JW:** They could have. It was called Community Gardens Project. There was a large component of Communists in Bloomington. The radicals burned down the Catholic church, the large church, the only skyscraper we had, which was eight stories high, burned it down, three or four public schools.

My father was bloodied himself when a fistfight on the steps of the courthouse—oh, they were trying to take over the Community Gardens Project. We don't realize to what extent things were at a tender age right then. That was early '30s.

**JE:** Early '30s.

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative). And before Roosevelt came in. And we were on the cusp of a real revolution in this country. If you knew it, Bloomington, Illinois, isn't that quite remarkable?

**JE:** Yeah. So then in the community, could you identify families then who were Communist?

**JW:** No.

**JE:** Those who were not? Or did they come in from other parts of the Bloomington area?

**JW:** I don't know, I honestly don't know. My father, he was raised in Pontiac, Illinois. And his father was an immigrant from Prussia. He came to this country and became a baker. Then he enlisted in the Spanish American War, left my grandmother at home with four children, and went off to war.

My father was raised part-time in an orphanage when these two, three little boys had diphtheria epidemic. Not only was he wounded by the war but he was also wounded by this upbringing.

One of his brothers had a cleft palate as a result of this diphtheria epidemic. So the Wolf boys would have to fight their way back and forth to school every day in Pontiac, Illinois, because he couldn't talk plain. You know how kids are.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** So they were a scrappin' bunch, the Wolf boys. He carried that over, apparently, it wasn't all one-sided. (laughing)

**JE:** Your parents, how did they influence you? Your mother or your father, did that help mold you for a lifetime?

**JW:** Oh yes. Well, my mother in particular, and her mother, my grandmother.

**CV:** Democrats?

**JW:** No, Republican. My Grandfather Young was the only Democrat on either side of the family. He was for FDR, but everybody else, both sides, the Wolf family and the Young family, were all Republicans. That was because of suffrage. She was active in the women's suffrage movement. Central Illinois was pretty much all Republican.

**JE:** So their influence on you then—

**JW:** There was never any question but I would go to college. I could be anything I wanted to be except a lawyer, she said. (all laughing) She had worked for a lawyer.

**JE:** Sure, right.

**CV:** She knew those people.

**JW:** She was tough.

**JE:** Brothers or sisters?

**JW:** I had a sister, she was eight years younger than I. My mother had no business having her. My mother had a terrible time bringing her into the world. She was a chip off the old block. She died when she was forty-six, of lung cancer.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** It was in California. But that was my only sibling.

**JE:** And her name?

**JW:** Marian, Marian Catherine.

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## Chapter 03 - 9:26

### Flip a Coin

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**John Erling:** Your education, first school you attended? Elementary school there and—

**John Wolf:** Um-hmm (affirmative). Washington Grade School. In those days, you went through the ninth grade and then you went to high school. For three years, I went to Bloomington High School, flunked geometry my third year, so I had to go to summer school. And I went to summer school at University High School in Normal, Illinois, which is next door. The Normal school had a lab school. I ended up at the University High School, which was the best thing that ever happened to me.

**JE:** Why?

**JW:** Because I had the greatest teachers. Ruth Stroud was the greatest teacher I ever had. She taught English Lit, particularly Shakespeare. She was so good she'd have the football team quoting Shakespeare back and forth on the bus on the way to games. That's how good she was. She was amazing. She just opened the world up.

**JE:** Despite the fact you flunked geometry, overall you were probably a pretty good student?

**JW:** No, I wasn't, not until then. I was probably a little dyslexic. As I went to University High School, all of a sudden, whammo, it all came.

**JE:** When did you graduate from high school?

**JW:** Nineteen fifty-three.

**JE:** Let's go back to 1941, December 7th. I think you would have been about fifteen, sixteen years old.

**Clayton Vaughn:** Would have been, yeah.

**JE:** Do you have any recollection of that day?

**JW:** Oh, absolutely. You know, I'd been in church that Sunday morning and I came home and that was on the news. My first thought was, "I hope it's not over until I get into it." I mean, that was the very first thing crossed my mind. (laughing) Because my father, having been a veteran and having grown up with the American Legion, and he was a hero to me. So I thought, "Well, that's what I'll do."

**CV:** What church had you attended?

**JW:** Presbyterian church.

**CV:** Family?

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative). That was my mother's church. My father's family were, I think, Disciples of Christ. Neither grandfather wanted any part of anything. My grandfather refused to be baptized even, Grandfather Young.

And my other grandfather, uh (hesitating sound then laughter), he was too mean to be baptized. I don't know. (laughing)

**JE:** Back to that Sunday, December 7, '41, and the days after that, you remember men signing up for the war?

**JW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** How did it affect the community? Were they nervous? Afraid?

**JW:** Uh-uhn (negative), they were all gung ho. First World War, whole communities went together when they went. My father's company was made up of young men from Pontiac, Illinois, and Aurora, Illinois, those two communities.

Well, that wasn't the way it was going to be in the Second World War because they learned their lessons. Whole towns could have been wiped—were wiped out, you know. So this time it was different. But the sense of the thing was it was going to be like that again and there would be this camaraderie, everybody was going together.

Well, they went together all right, but they separated you. But it was partly that and partly that whole period in the '20s that was hyper patriotic. I can remember as a kid marching in the Memorial Day Parades, my father and his buddies.

So this was part of it and I was going to be a part of something like that.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**JW:** That was what was crossing my mind. And I think it was pretty much everybody.

**JE:** Yeah.

**JW:** Everybody who signed up. I heard very, very little antiwar sentiment. I don't think there was any.

**JE:** You never faced the draft.

**JW:** Well, yeah, since I was too young to go at first. They put me to work at the Sunday school because all the guys had gone off to war. And at U. High, I ended up being in the university band and things like that because all the older guys were gone away.

And at the church they had gotten me teaching Sunday school when I was only thirteen, fourteen years old, which was a bad mistake because, well, I remember I had a lesson thing that they gave you. You were supposed to follow it and it had to do with the land of Abraham. And I thought, "Well, that's fascinating."

My grandfather had a set of encyclopedias and I remember I looked it up in the encyclopedia and found out about Abraham and the Ur and on Iraq, what is now. I thought

that was most fascinating, so that's what I gave the kids. And they said that was more information there. I was supposed to be disseminating, see?

One of the first cracks in my Calvinism was right then and there. But I got active.

The minister of that church, he was a mentor of mine, a guy by the name of Daniel J. Gretinger.

**JE:** And again, this was the Presbyterian church.

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative). They said, "Why don't you go in the ministry?"

So I decided to do that. I decided to become a Presbyterian minister. Went under the care of the session and the Presbytery and was pre-registered at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, all ready to go to college. So I had a deferment the first year.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** But it was in that first year that I read myself out of my Calvinism and no longer could in good conscience. So I enlisted in the navy and ended up getting a little late in and I had one year of college. But I ended up being a signalman.

First went to sea with the Armed Guard, which was navy crew aboard a merchant ship. Then when the war in Europe was over I went to Guam and was on the signal tower in Apra Harbor in Guam.

**JE:** So we're talking 1945 and '46. And then?

**JW:** Then I got out and went to Illinois Wesleyan University in my hometown, premed, because I wanted to do something useful. You know, I didn't think the ministry was particularly useful. So I couldn't hit a target with anything, in other words.

I'd read my way out of my Calvinism in college. And I read my way out of my Christianity in the navy. And I threw the Bible over the side because, well, I was reading and it said, Hebrews 11:1: Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. And I threw the Bible over the side.

**JE:** Tell us why, why did that Scripture cause you to do that?

**JW:** Because I wanted evidence, and they said, "Evidence of things not seen." Give me a break, what are we talking about here? This is faith? And I said, "You're not going to be able to hit a target. I need math, I need science. I don't need something as obscure as that."

And it took me, well, the better part of twenty years to get the Bible back after that. But then after—

**CV:** But you didn't need a rule book on how to live.

**JW:** Exactly, or a recipe book on how to live. So I went in premed and I did my undergraduate work in premed. Until one of my buddies, a fraternity brother, came back. He'd gone through medical school while we were in service, and he came back to practice for a little while, while his younger brother went on to medical school.

He and I buddied up and I used to scrub with him. The science lab, that was unbelievable because that was a quarter system, everybody was just gung ho. And I had Comparative Anatomy and Organic Chemistry back to back labs and stuff like that.

I used to go out in front of the Science Hall, there's a tree out in front of the Science Hall, and I'd lie under it and groan.

He finally said to me, "Why are you doing it if you hate it?"

I said, "Well, you know, what am I going to do?"

He said, "Why don't you think about going back as a minister?" Because we used to have these long religious arguments into the deeps of night and he had a couple of other buddies. He says, "Why don't you think about maybe take a year off on the GI Bill and go to seminary and get all these questions answered for all of us?" And he was a Unitarian, I should say. He had converted most of the Sigma Kai house to Unitarianism while he was the president of the fraternity.

So we were out drinking beer one night. We were on our second pitcher, I think. I said, "Well, who can be? I don't believe any of this stuff."

He said, "Well, the Unitarians will take anybody."

I said, "Yeah, but where do they go to school?"

He said, "Harvard or Chicago." He said, "Heads, you take a year off on the GI Bill and go to seminary. Tails, you go to medical school." It came up heads.

And I said, "Well, where you going?"

He said, "Harvard or Chicago, I guess." It came up Chicago. That was my call to the ministry.

**JE:** A flip of a coin.

**JW:** (laughing) A flip of a coin.

**JE:** Do you think if it had gone the other way you really would have stayed in premed?

**JW:** I have no idea.

**JE:** Okay. But you went with the flip of the coin. As we talk to many ministers they will always say they felt a "call from God on their life to enter the ministry."

**JW:** Uh-huh, uh-huh (affirmatives).

**JE:** So was this flip of the coin the call of God?

**JW:** No, no, I'm too familiar with him to know that. I mean, he and I have had this contest going on for better part of sixty years, longer than that, actually. And I've been known to call him an SOB from the pulpit. Matter of fact, on one occasion I did call him an SOB from the pulpit.

Two weeks after that, a tornado came through Tulsa and hit Oral Roberts. And I said, "See? Missed again." (laughing) Or as Woody Allen would say, "God is an underachiever."

So we've had this little—well, Clayton can tell you about my contest with the Almighty. So a call from God, I doubt it. I mean, I would be the last person in the world.

**Chapter 04 - 8:35****Joe Must Go**

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**John Erling:** So you went to seminary?

**John Wolf:** Um-huh (affirmative). University of Chicago at Meadville Theological School, which was part of the federated theological faculty of the University of Chicago at that time.

**JE:** How many years?

**JW:** Three years. Well, I did it in two, then I went to my first parish in Racine, Wisconsin, and then I commuted and worked on a PhD after that at Chicago. I took tutorial with a theologian there for another two years. I decided not to finish the PhD because I was going to preach not teach.

**JE:** When you were in seminary were you regarded as some kind of radical? Were you a standout? Were you controversial there compared to other students?

**JW:** No, theological education is divided in two parts. Some schools are confessional; these are the Bible schools, Bible seminaries and so forth.

But the other approach to theological education is critical as opposed to confessional. These are Harvard Divinity School, Yale Divinity School, University of Chicago, Specific School of Religion. That's a different approach to religion. They expect you to be critical. They expect you to want to ask questions.

I remember the president of the school said to me when I first went there, he said to me, "I don't care what you believe because you're not going to believe that when you leave here anyway." Which was very true. He said, "That's why we're here. If you were to leave this place the same way you came in that we would have not done our job."

**JE:** Ah, it didn't take, did it?

**JW:** No.

**JE:** (laughs) So you accepted your first church in Racine, Wisconsin.

**JW:** Yeah.

**JE:** In 1952 you were twenty-eight years old.

**JW:** Twenty-eight years old, right.

**JE:** Just a little bit about that church and the church scene, there's a Communist tie to this as well.

**JW:** Umm (thoughtful sound). Well, first of all, while I was still in seminary I had joined the Naval Reserve. Big mistake because they called me back for Korea. So instead of going into active service I decided to get a commission. I applied for a commission as a navy chaplain, and got a chaplain commission. (laughs) I was back in the navy again, albeit, the reserves.

So when I went to Racine, I was already cleared by the FBI, as it were, but I was mainly going around telling people that their kids had been killed.

**JE:** I know that was tough.

**JW:** That's what the chaplains did then.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** But this little church, I went there because they needed a minister and I'd been preaching up there as a student. It was down to about fifty-five members. A famous old church, Olympia Brown, which was the first woman ever ordained by a denomination into the ministry in this country, had been the minister of that church. It was a Universalist church, not a Unitarian church, before merging.

Her daughter had been the professor of Greek and Latin literature at Bryn Mawr and had come home to retire, after she had retired, and was president of the congregation. She got a hold of me, she was like my mother, and, in no mean terms, she was going to introduce me to the parish ministry, and did. She was a remarkable woman.

The church had some kind of a history because of her daughter being the minister there way back in the early twentieth century. It had once been a very large church and now it was reduced to a handful of people. That was when Joe McCarthy was running for senator again.

I was going back and forth to Chicago and I'd take my Shermans into the school and have the Professor of Homiletics check them out. I was having a terrible time with my conscience because I wanted to come out against McCarthy. I had fifty-five members in this little church, you know, and that would kill it. I had pretty much decided I wouldn't—and then I did. And then I ended up being chairman of the Joe Must Go Committee in Racine, Wisconsin, right off the bat.

**JE:** But didn't you have other pressure there because the son of the church's largest contributor was chairman of the local McCarthy Reelection Committee.

**JW:** That's right. The father was the deepest pocket we had, the only deep pocket we had. But I learned something then, I learned something about real conservatives. They will stick by you anyway, they'll stick by the institution. They didn't agree with a word I said, necessarily, but my right to say it was without question.

That's one thing about Unitarian/Universalist churches, you've got a free pulpit. If nothing else, if nothing else can be said for it and that's one of the reasons I was in it. I really was not a Unitarian or an Universalist or anything.

**Clayton Vaughn:** Explain what that means as a practical matter: free pulpit.

**JW:** Free pulpit literally means that I can say within the bounds of good taste, I suppose, not necessarily even that, I can say what I believe. That congregation literally turns over to me a pulpit, it's my pulpit in the Unitarian church. I even auctioned the one in Tulsa off one time through the Arts and Humanities Council auction. That's a story.

The guy that got it is a local doctor, anesthesiologist. His aunt bought for my pulpit for one Sunday, one sermon, and it was a sermon on euthanasia. Very interesting.

**CV:** A free pulpit as opposed to what?

**JW:** Well, the opposite would be a pulpit in which you had to conform to a certain creedal formula, a confession, like the Westminster Confession in the Presbyterian church. Or in the Methodist church there would be varying kinds of...it's called a discipline, I think.

**CV:** Right. And we could also add, like, if you were a Lutheran minister, if you stepped up on that pulpit and said you were against infant baptism that would be a no-no.

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**CV:** So that would not be an example of a free pulpit.

**JW:** That's right.

**CV:** You didn't have a theology to follow—

**JW:** Yeah.

**CV:** Or denomination that dictated what you believed, that's what was free about it.

**JW:** That's right.

**CV:** There's some question about whether it's even a denomination.

**JW:** No, it's an association of churches.

**CV:** Right. In the sense that there's no hierarchy.

**JW:** Right.

**CV:** From a policy standpoint.

**JW:** It's radical congregational politics, that is to say, the congregation owns the place, lock, stock, and barrel. Congregation calls its ministers, can call anybody, hire and fire, everything. But the congregation then, literally, gives its authority over to the minister to speak his mind.

**JE:** The reaction to your "Joe Must Go" sermon, was it a huge reaction? Were you nervous that, "Well, this is it, I'm going to have to move on"? Or how did they treat you?

**JW:** Oh no, just the opposite. That's how I started growing that little church. It turns out quite a few people in the community, particularly among young ex-servicemen and a few other people were attracted to it.

There was a man who ran a steel company in Milwaukee but he lived in Racine and he was very wealthy. He backed me and made it possible to do a lot of different things.

The University of Wisconsin was bringing in an extension of the university to Racine at that time. The head of that and the head of the public school library, we formed a kind of a little triumvirate and went to work doing all kinds of stuff. That was one of the things that we did.

When the Republicans got in then that was when everybody went on strike in Wisconsin. This current thing that's going on in Wisconsin right now is the reprise of what happened then.

Cole's Plumbing, JIK's Tractor, Massey Harris-Ferguson, Modine all went on strike all over Wisconsin, these were on strike. The National Association of Manufacturers had its actual headquarters in Racine. Racine had a weekly labor paper and I got right in the middle of that, the Modine strike.

I went out there to interview them, the management side of it. And I remember they took me out, some guy took me out in the middle of the factory and he said, "You ever been in a struck plant before?"

I said, "I was raised in one. My grandfather, they struck him all the way through the Depression."

**JE:** So this is in the '50s.

**JW:** 'Fifty-two, '53, '54.

**JE:** And why did they go on strike?

**JW:** The manufacturing and the manufacturer, the Republican party, they were going to war with the labor union.

**JE:** Okay.

**JW:** They wanted to get back all they'd lost during FDR, during the New Deal.

When Eisenhower was elected, of course, McCarthy wasn't then too from there, there was this huge, big reaction all over the country, but particularly in Wisconsin.

## Chapter 05 - 3:26

### Pennsylvania

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**John Erling:** You go on to another church before you come to Tulsa?

**John Wolf:** Um (thoughtful sound), to Meadville, Pennsylvania. I went there because my wife, who is a nutritionist by trade—that's where we met, the University of Chicago—she was doing her dietetic internship there. We suddenly were pregnant and we couldn't afford to stay. My annual salary at the little church was \$3600 a year, \$300 a month. If she hadn't been able to do much better than that we couldn't have made it.

But when she got pregnant, in those days women had to quit when they got pregnant. She was working at Catholic Hospital as a clinical dietitian.

I said, "You know, I'm going to have to leave Racine."

And my professor said, "Would you like to go to Meadville, Pennsylvania?"

And I said, "Well, does it have a parsonage?"

And he said, "Yeah."

I said, "Then I'll go there." (laughing) All I needed was a place to live. So I went to

Meadville, Pennsylvania, this is a little town where Allegheny College is and the Meadville Theological School originally came from there, which was out by the University of Chicago.

So I went to this little town in western Pennsylvania, nineteen thousand people, a college town, great college, and had the best time of my life ever, or ever will again. For five years it was magic at this little church. The building itself was built in 1836. The little Greek temple. The town was set up for that little church. It was just a delight.

All the heads of the departments of Allegheny College except one were members of that congregation. I just had a ball.

**JE:** Were you involved in social issues there and spoke up?

**JW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** So you were kind of laying groundwork for yourself as you came here. But that's what you did.

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** Any particular one story or something that happened?

**JW:** Well, if you can imagine, one of—the big issue was fluoride in the water, fluoridating the water. It was a Communist plot, you see, and it was supposed to soften the brains of the populace. Of course, I think, “Give me a break!”

Then I went to war with the minister of the Dutch Reform church over public school kindergarten. They didn't want to spend any money on that because we didn't need to do that because the world was coming to an end pretty soon anyway.

I said, “No it's not.”

And he said, “Yes it is.”

And I said, “I'll bet ya.”

Then I got into it with Rex Humbard, who is from Akron, Ohio, he's an evangelist—

**JE:** Yeah, right.

**JW:** ...who came to town to Allegheny College, ostensibly to use the field house for a training program. It turned out he was healing. And I said, “Uh-uh (negative), I don't believe in that.”

We lived in this little house, had two little kids, and the students would come right after church and they'd stay all day every Sunday. It was a ball. And I got them involved in this thing with Humbard. (laughing) They ended up parading into this field house. The Phi Gams came in various states on stretchers and bandages and stuff like this (laughing). It was not my fault, I didn't do anything (laughing).

**JE:** Was it your idea?

**JW:** It wasn't my idea. But then they picked on these kids, so I went to war with the college, with the president of the college. We had sort of a Dr. Mason moment. I said, “He doesn't deserve to be president of a college if he doesn't know any better than that,” and so forth and so on.

So that's how I left town (laughing). I was in the middle of this when I came here.

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**Chapter 06 - 4:50****Tulsa**

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**John Erling:** Let's bring you to Tulsa. How did this come about?

**John Wolf:** It was a tradition in the old days when the American Unitarian Association had what they called the "May meetings" in Boston. They used to say the Unitarians believed in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston. All of the churches in Boston, at one time, were Unitarian churches except one. After the Revolution, every single church, parish in Boston was a Unitarian church except one, that was Old South.

They had the tradition the ministers would come and then to help defray expenses they could preach in different places around Boston. I ended up being invited to preach in Quincy, Massachusetts, First Parish Quincy, where John Adams and John Quincy Adams are buried in the basement with their respective wives. And the guy by the name of Charles Wing—the Wings came over on the Mayflower—was the minister there.

Well, when my predecessor here in Tulsa left here, the building had recently been built two years before, he left and Charles Wing was appointed the interim minister. Well, we'd hit it off when I preached there and they were having trouble. Most of the people in the established pulpits didn't want to come to Tulsa. They didn't want to come to Oklahoma.

**Clayton Vaughn:** You said they'd just built the building.

**JW:** Two and a half years, yeah.

**CV:** Describe what the building is now.

**JW:** The original church building is now Fitzgerald Funeral Home. It had gotten so small and there wasn't any place for a church school. That's when they moved to 29th and Peoria.

**CV:** And the way that Fitzgeralds now, the church looks, was patterned much after the architecture of churches in Boston as well—

**JW:** Yes, so that is—

**CV:** ...as All Souls.

**JW:** So that is because, Clayton, at that time they borrowed money from American Unitarian Association to help build that church. And if you borrowed money from the Association you had to have a Boston architect. And guess what? (laughing) That's how we got colonial in Tulsa, Oklahoma, not that anybody really had anything against that, as it turned out, it's a lovely building, 1929 when it started. And so the congregation took another, oh, it must have been ten years before they finally got it all completely done. They used their own strength and their own hands to paint and to build the wings, coated all kind of stuff to get it done.

But that's where the colonial came from. And then John Duncan Forsyth built our building now on 29th and Peoria. Had a widow's walk and everything.

I said, "John, what is with the widow's walk on a church in Oklahoma?" You know, a widow's walk is for the sea captains wives to be looking out for prairie schooners.

Anyway, I digress.

**JE:** When you came to Tulsa where did you preach? Which church were you in?

**JW:** They had moved to the new church at 29th and Peoria.

**JE:** Okay.

**JW:** Bob had left, Bob Stone, my predecessor. But as I said, Charlie Wing was the interim. And he was the one that said, "Do you know anything about this John Wolf in Meadville, Pennsylvania?"

Well, at that very time, the Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America were merging in a meeting in Syracuse, New York. So the whole pulpit committee from here went to that confab to interview ministers. And three of the members came through Meadville to hear me. Ken Crouch, of the Crouch Davidson mob, Bisser Barnett, who was one of the Jenkin Lloyd Jones family, and Ethel Watson. Here they came and heard me preach.

Subsequently, they interviewed me in Syracuse. And then all of a sudden, I get a telephone call and I didn't want to leave Meadville then. It was Eden to me. But my wife was packed and ready to go.

**JE:** Your wife's name?

**JW:** Barbara.

**JE:** You had two children?

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** And their names?

**JW:** David and Cathy, Catherine.

**JE:** Okay. Did they follow you in ministry?

**JW:** No, my son worked for the Tulsa Park Department for many years. Retired, now has an art gallery in Claremore. And my daughter is an art therapist with Hillcrest Hospital.

**JE:** You mentioned Jones, this church was founded by Richard Lloyd Jones, publisher of the *Tulsa Tribune*.

**JW:** And William R. Holway (H-o-l-w-a-y). The two families. In Richard Lloyd Jones's case, his father was a Unitarian minister in Chicago. And in Holway, her father was a Unitarian minister in Sandwich in Cape Cod.

**JE:** I believe the church was founded in 1921 in Tulsa.

**JW:** Yeah.

**JE:** As an aside here since we brought up Richard Lloyd Jones, were you ever at odds on issues with the *Tulsa Tribune* or/and the *Tulsa World*?

**Chapter 07 - 5:43****Jones Family**

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**John Wolf:** Richard Lloyd Jones was an old man, he was nineties, late eighties, he was my age or a little older when I first came. So I got to know him. And his wife, Georgia Jones, who was a great woman, she was arrested with Margaret Sanger on the streets of New York City for her Planned Parenthood back in the early '20s. She was a force.

The Joneses used to pretty well dominate that congregation and I wasn't going to be dominated, obviously, so we came to an agreement right early on. Jenkin used to argue with me, occasionally. Well, he wouldn't be in church but I said, "Well, how did you hear what I said then?"

"Well," he said, "I heard about it."

I said, "Would you like to have a copy of the sermon?"

"Yeah, all right."

So we'd go at it. Well, he loved that. He would stop by my house on Sunday nights sometimes to argue with me about my sermon. So we struck up a kind of relationship because of that.

And, of course, Bisser, his sister, his sister, we'd stayed with them because she was a real church woman. But Barnett owned Brookside Bank just down the street from the church. That was a great relationship.

And then Richard Lloyd Jones III, who the airport is named after, he was probably my greatest support. He was a Democrat (laughing). Remember, Clayton?

**Clayton Vaughn:** A renegade, yeah.

**JW:** Yeah, he was a renegade. You remember the time one of them came out for Republican candidate and the other one came out at for the Democratic candidate? Had two editorials in the *Tribune*.

**John Erling:** (laughing)

**JW:** But anyway, I had this relationship. And then over the years, you know, married the daughters and christened the babies and buried the dead. You know how that works.

**CV:** But it's not to suggest that the congregation was Republican.

**JW:** No, but half of it was.

**CV:** And the other half?

**JW:** Were Democrat, much to the great amazement of everybody.

**CV:** That's almost unheard of in the Unitarian world, isn't it?

**JW:** Oh, I would think so.

**CV:** Yeah.

**JW:** Well, in New England, they were all Republican up there. We're talking about the salting stalls, the old Boston brahmas, they were the Unitarians up there and they were pretty much rock river Republican up that way.

**CV:** Yeah, but the modern church—

**JW:** Modern church, yeah.

**CV:** ...had a reputation for being liberal and almost any congregation could go into it.

**JW:** Yeah. But this church at one time, that in the time when Nixon was elected, other than that we had in that congregation every chair of every candidate running for president, including George Wallace, in that congregation. Nixon was the only candidate we didn't have. We had the Rockefeller chairman, we had, I've forgotten who they all were now.

**JE:** Chairmen of their committees to elect.

**JW:** Yeah. A couple of them were state chairs and so forth. That was the kind of thing that was going on in there. Jack Short, who was a legislator, he was a senator, I think a state senator at one time, early on, he would beat me about half the time, "And when I walked out I didn't agree with a word you said, but I will fight to the death your right to say it." You know, that was Jack, every Sunday morning just about.

**CV:** He was a Rockefeller Republican.

**JW:** Uh-huh (affirmative). But that was that congregation.

**JE:** With the *Tribune* in this case, ever editorialize against anything that you said in the church?

**JW:** No. But I had an ally in the *Tulsa World*. By name, Beth Macklin, great newspaper woman. Wrote more copy than anybody else in town, I imagine.

**CV:** Ran the religion beat for thirty years, I believe.

**JW:** When I came to town, she was the executive director of the Tulsa Council of Churches. I'd gotten a call from her, she said, "Would you come down and see me?"

Now, she had a little, bitty office in the old YWCA and I went up to see Beth. She said, "Now you can't be a member of the Tulsa Council of Churches because you're not a Christian, you know. You don't believe in Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior," and all that sort of stuff. "But would you head the Social Action Committee?" (laughing) She was a round woman. She was addicted to Coca Cola. She was amazing.

I said, "You're kidding me, aren't you?"

She said, "Oh, no," she said, "I'm bound and determined. Would you do that?"

I said, "Sure. Will they have me?"

She said, "I can fix that." Well, then she left that and became the church editor at the *Tulsa World*. And my notoriety was largely due to Beth Macklin. Beth Macklin would come to church and literally take the manuscript of my sermon off the pulpit and publish it the next day in the *Tulsa World*. This is how the sermon, "The Last Days of Dr. Mason," came on. This is why Tulsa's Eggstown appeared on the front page of the *Tulsa World*.

**CV:** John, you might point out that the times that she did that were not the times that you gave sermons about hope and love and justice, but more often the times you gave sermons about what's wrong with Tulsa and how we need to improve it.

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. She'd get the parish notes and she would see what the topic was and then she'd show up. She was a good Methodist, I forgot what congregation, out in Broken Arrow, I think. But, boy, I'll tell you, she was something.

Frosty Troy asked me one time, he says, "Whatever happened to you? You used to be... you know."

I said, "Well, Beth died." (he and CV laughing)

**JE:** She took topics, sermons that she knew readers would react to, so she was selective then. It wasn't like it was every Sunday.

**JW:** No, she was looking for news.

## Chapter 08 - 7:08

### Funeral Directors

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**John Erling:** Your first sermon at All Souls, what was it?

**John Wolf:** Ummmm (thoughtful sound), can't tell you the name of it but the gist of it was we need more emotion. I'm talking to a Unitarian congregation now. Freedom, reason, and tolerance, this is the holy trinity of Unitarian. I said, "We can use a little emotion too." "Faith Without Feeling," I think that was my sermon.

**JE:** Somewhere in there did you speak out on the high cost of funerals and weddings?

**JW:** That was my first year I think I was here.

**JE:** Okay.

**JW:** Because I'd had some pretty traumatic experiences in my previous two churches of funeral practices in those days.

**Clayton Vaughn:** More funeral than wedding, right?

**JW:** Yeah, more funeral than wedding, but wedding too because florists had—what was the name of the florist—Mrs. Christine's.

**CV:** Christine's.

**JW:** I think something like that.

**CV:** Uh-huh (affirmative).

**JW:** Anyway, they had wedding consultants. They would come over and literally take over a wedding ceremony. The next thing you know, the place would be loaded with this stuff, at lots of cost.

I said, "It's not going to happen anymore. This is a colonial building, simple as it is of the essence. Well, there'll be one bouquet on the chancel and that's it."

**CV:** But essentially you waged war against funeral arrangements.

**JW:** I waged war against the funeral directors. And the congregation's always had a lot of lawyers in it. I'll bet that congregation has 125 lawyers in it today. Of course, we've got a federal judge that helps. If there's a federal judge anywhere, I don't have to tell you, there'll be other lawyers. But I had a lot of them then too. And they went for it, the Memorial Society.

We organized a Memorial Society. We went around and got one funeral home to go with us, that was Fitzgerald.

**JE:** What was it about the funeral business that you didn't like?

**JW:** They were costly and people would be subjected to the customs, embalming. They would say, "Well, you have to embalm." You don't. We found out that the law in Oklahoma at that time was a simple burial in an appropriate period of time, or something. That was nothing.

But the funeral directors had people by the throat. And I used to try to put my body between members of my congregation and the funeral director. Their instruction was to call me first. Don't call the police, don't call a doctor, call me, and I will be there right away. And I would go with them to the funeral home.

After a while, it got to the point where I didn't have to. It got to the point where I had two funeral directors, namely the one, John, I can't think of his name, he was head of the library here, he was a great guy, was at Fitzgerald Funeral Home. They did all the funerals for the Catholics and the Jews in Tulsa and Islam, and then the Muslims, and us, for a long period of time. Moore—

**JE:** Joe Moore?

**JW:** Joe was never a problem, I mean, Joe didn't like it and he wouldn't join the Memorial Society deal, but I never had any trouble with Joe. But, boy, some of them.

Stanley's, holy Moses, and Nines, oh man, we just absolutely came together like a crash in glass. But we organized this Memorial Society, made an arrangement with Fitzgerald, and then later, one of the other ones. Got the price of funerals way down and cremation.

Cremation was almost not done then, at first. So people could do that. The floral arrangements, no more, just one bouquet there.

**CV:** But your primary point though was that at a very sensitive time for survivors—

**JW:** Absolutely.

**CV:** ...that people were being sold extravagant kinds of services with expensive coffins and concrete vaults.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**CV:** All sorts of things that would drive the price of an average funeral—

**JW:** Yeah.

**CV:** ...way beyond what it needed to be. And many people bought into it because they were really thinking about something else.

**JW:** Yeah.

**CV:** And it was in the middle of their grief.

**JW:** We brought Jessica Mitford to Tulsa.

**CV:** *The High Cost of Dying*.

**JW:** *The High Cost of Dying*, she had written this book. She came, in the process of our organizing the Memorial Society. The Memorial Society movement was going across the country then, not the least reason because of her book, *The High Cost of Dying*. A lot of really healthy reforms came out of that. The funeral business changed radically over a period of time.

**JE:** But today, in 2011, don't you think some of these practices still continue?

**JW:** Oh, sure they do. We still are right in there.

**CV:** Another thing that was distinctive about what you brought to the community related to the same thing was the memorial service as opposed to a funeral.

**JW:** Yeah. The police department was very happy about this too. The memorial service, you have a burial, if you're going to have burial at all, but you have the burial first and then the memorial service follows. The burial is with the family, no processional. That's why I say the police department was not unhappy about that because these goddamn processions became a real problem, still are. You don't see very many of them any more but they are a problem.

This was part of it and I always used to say that the memorial service was more like Easter Sunday; the burial is like Good Friday. Easter follows, not the other way around. We're not there to extol the body, we're there for the spirit. And in order to do this have the memorial service.

But that also helps with no need to show the corpse, no need for embalming, no need for viewing, this kind of thing, which was part of the great expense.

**CV:** But the typical memorial service that you see at All Souls, there's not very much, if any, of dear Mom has gone to be with Jesus.

**JW:** Oh no.

**CV:** That doesn't happen, does it?

**JW:** Um-um (negative), oh, be it upon occasion people have wanted to use our sanctuary and we've given the use of it if they wanted it. But as far as our congregation is concerned, I would never think, for example, of conducting a service in which I would try to convert anybody to the Christian faith or whatever.

For me, the person's life is the text. It's the human spirit that you're celebrating. You celebrate this in the lives of the people who have known and loved them, been a part of your life.

If you want to talk about how we see the divine in the human, this is basic Emersonianism, part of the Unitarian tradition, of course, is the transcendentalist movement—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Whitman, et. al., all of these were Unitarians. For good reason. And as part of that, if you want to see the divine, look for it in the human.

**JE:** So many practices of today actually were planted—

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** ...seeded by you and your church.

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** Back there in the '60s.

**JW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** That are being affected today.

## Chapter 09 - 7:00

### Civil Rights Movement

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**John Erling:** There were other issues in the '60s, Civil Rights Movement would have been underway. Actually in the late '50s. And when you came nationally in 1964, black students from North Carolina began a sit-in at the segregated Woolworth's lunch counter. We have the Freedom Riders, as they were called, who were attacked by angry mobs along the way. So it obviously was national news.

In '62, James Meredith became the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, so it was very much on the minds of the nation. Set the scene in Tulsa as you saw it and the treatment of blacks.

**John Wolf:** The first week I arrived in Tulsa I took my beedie and my biographical stuff down to the paper. It was in the old *World Tribune* building. And an African American man, an old man, he was probably forty-five but, you know, I was young, opened the door for me and said, "Good morning, Massa."

I almost went through the deck. I wasn't prepared for this. Somebody had told me that Tulsa was a many splendored thing. It had a large internal community. We were loaded with geological PhDs. It was middle western more than it was south western in many ways, and it sure as heck was south western in the oil business at all, but was old salad too.

And nobody had mentioned there was a race riot. It took several years before somebody said, "You know, John, we don't talk about these things, we had a race riot."

I said, "We did?" But that first week, all Brookside, whites and blacks, toilets, that sort of stuff—

**Clayton Vaughn:** Jim Crow Law.

**JW:** Jim Crow Law. Second law passed by the legislature in this state was Jim Crow. Tulsa was loaded with it, barbershops, restaurants all over the place. I started May 1, 1960. Some time that next month or two, May or June, possibly July, the high school group in my congregation said, "We're going over and sit in in Oklahoma City, you should go with us."

So I did. I went with them. I met Clara Luper. Went over to that black church and got all the instruction at what you were supposed to do with the sit-ins. And we sat in over there.

**JE:** Where did you go?

**JW:** I can't remember the name of the cafeteria but there was a cafeteria over there we went, and I almost got arrested. And then it dawned on me, I should have called my colleague over there and tell him I was coming to get arrested in his town, but I didn't until later. And then I came back here.

So the Psychiatric Foundation had just opened its doors that year and they had organized a thing called the Ministerial Clergy Groups in which they met one psychiatrist or psychologist or counselor with ten ministers, trying to get some backing from the ministerial community. 'Cause Freud was as big a no-no as Darwin, you know, in Tulsa. So they were attempting to get the clergy—and I joined the clergy group. Geo Carris was the head of that group and I was in his group.

Also in that group was a guy by the name of Clarence Knippa, Grace Lutheran Church, Bob Ball from John Knox Presbyterian, and somebody else, I've forgotten his name now but he was at Memorial Methodist Church, and a Pentecostal minister was among this group. And that was my introduction. They had already started, at that point, forming a kind of a organization about public accommodations ordinances. It was in this group that I was introduced to some of my colleagues in this town. They had already started.

I ended up going with Clarence and Norbert Rosenthal from Temple Israel and I've forgotten who else, we ended up in a nunnery to Benedictine Heights College, in those days. Mother Selene and Sister Mary Mark had this bunch of clergy in for an NCCJ. We sat in that living room in the convent and started a petition for public accommodation. Before we were done we got seventy-five clergy from this town supporting public accommodations ordinance, which I thought was spectacular.

That's when I first began to think, "Something about the clergy in this town is really good." Well, Beth Macklin, no doubt was a clue but that happened a little bit later. But that was a great bunch of people.

**JE:** Do you remember if there were one or two clergy who said, “No, I will not sign that?” or is it pretty—

**JW:** Oh, I’m sure there were, I—

**JE:** Okay, but you didn’t know.

**JW:** I knew the ones that were—that was the first time All Souls Church ever passed a motion by the whole congregation in favor of something in the community. The whole congregation, they voted unanimously to support it.

**JE:** Was that happening in Oklahoma City too or did that start here and then—

**JW:** No, that started here, that was ours. I remember I got into a big debate at Temple Israel with Borden’s Cafeteria.

**JE:** Borden’s?

**JW:** Whoever owned it. And we just went at it in debate.

**JE:** People from Borden’s?

**JW:** The owner.

**JE:** The owner?

**JW:** Yeah.

**JE:** And you’d have a public debate about it.

**JW:** Yeah, yeah.

**JE:** And he was stating what?

**JW:** That they had a right to exclude whoever they wanted.

**CV:** They refused service on the basis of race.

**JW:** Many years later he joined All Souls.

**JE:** Did you ever have a discussion, “Hey, I was wrong that day”?

**JW:** Oh, absolutely, yeah. That was a moment, but that was the first.

Two or three things that happened to the kids, the high school group, grabbed me. The other one was Francis Campbell and Allie Beth Martin was the librarian, head of the library. They’d had me before I even had my feet on the ground joining the United Nations Association. And I was two years running the UN week chairman here.

I remember I got Jim Hughley to come—

**JE:** The mayor at the time?

**JW:** The mayor at the time, and I never let him forget this. Years and years later, we became great friends and Jim said, “Now, John, what is this UN thing?” Anyway...

**JE:** Well, this was at a time when Oklahomans saw the UN as a Communist plot.

**JW:** Tell me about it, you bet they did. We had a little debate in the congregation because one of the members of the congregation was the head of Get the UN out of the US Committee. We had then all right there. I wasn’t preaching to the choir, I had people I could preach to in my own congregation.

Chapter 10 – 8:55

March in Tulsa

**John Erling:** Back when they were doing the marches nationally Selma to Montgomery, in fact, there were three marches in '65 that perhaps marked the peak of the civil rights movement.

**John Wolf:** Well, the one on March 13th here—

**JE:** How did that come about?

**JW:** Charles Knippa and Norbert Rosenthal and I and somebody else, we were talking about going to Selma. A couple of guys were going and did, and we said, “We’d better stay here, we need to stay here. Tulsa needs it as much as Selma does.” So we decided to have a service here, which we did at All Souls, in which, I think it was either fifty or seventy members of the clergy served as ushers.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**JW:** Over seven hundred people actually physically attended, as many as we could get in the parish hall and the sanctuary. Most beautiful thing, Vernon Avenue Methodist...

**Clayton Vaughn:** Ben Hill.

**JW:** Ben Hill gave the invocation, bringing down the wrath of God. But the best thing was Warren Hultgren, First Baptist Southern Baptist Church read the Old Testament and Father James McNamee of Madalene Parish, Roman Catholic, read the New Testament, back to back.

Norbert Rosenthal preached the sermon.

**JE:** How about black ministers from North Tulsa? Were they participants?

**JW:** Well, Ben Hill...

**JE:** Callen McCutchan, was he at the time?

**JW:** Cal McCutchan, I hate to say this, but he never was there when we needed him.

**JE:** So he was on the scene and he was here in Tulsa?

**JW:** Yeah, he was here.

**JE:** But never came?

**JW:** Uh-uh (negative). It was Andy Phillips, Ben Hill, Leroy Jordan at First Baptist Northside, and I’ve forgotten some of the rest. There was a bunch, Kurt Yonker, (laughing) good old Kurt.

**JE:** So in that service that morning?

**JW:** We had the Choir of Angels, which was black. Oh yeah, it was a very mixed service.

**JE:** So you had the service and then you marched?

**JW:** Well, the 13th of March, 19...

**JE:** 'Sixty-five, I guess.

**JW:** 'Sixty-five.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** We wanted to be able to get Beth Emunah involved. We had no trouble with Temple Israel but Beth Emunah had Orthodox Jews and they could only walk so far on the Sabbath. So we figured out a way to do it. We had the service at All Souls. Then we went to Holy Family and marched from Holy Family to the post office. We just picked the whole thing up and moved it so that they could walk it.

My God, that was a bunch of great people, just great people. We were tight, we were really tight. Later on, Clarence and I became very, very, to this day, he's still alive, ninety-five, I think he is. As I've always said, "If the Missouri Synod Lutherans don't canonize him the Unitarians will." (all laughing) Great, great man. He and I went to Israel together. He called me up and he said, "John, who you rooming with?"

And I said, "I don't know, Clarence, you?"

He said, "Well, I've got to have somebody who likes his schnapps. An old German.

**JE:** So how big of a march do you think that was? How many people were in it?

**JW:** Oh, at least a thousand. Another interesting sideline to that one was Jack Curry was the chief of police. He was not sympathetic at all but, boy, he did a great job. He saw to it, it was very interesting as we were marching down, you'd see these rednecks on the side and there'd be a plainclothesman standing right behind them. It just as plain as day. Jack had crowd control, he did a great job.

**JE:** So there had to be thousands of people watching this too in addition to—

**JW:** Oh, yeah, there were a lot of people watching.

**JE:** But there were no skirmishes?

**JW:** No skirmishes. At the steps of the Curtis Law Firm, I think, wasn't he the senator or something? Curtis Law Firm?

**CV:** Yes he was.

**JW:** He addressed the crowd. He was black.

**CV:** Yeah.

**JW:** Who was our later senator, he was just a young guy then?

**CV:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** He and I used to sit up in Clinique Williams' living room in the deeps of night arguing and screaming at one another about one thing or another. Oh, God, he later became senator. Anyway, I said, "The most segregated hour of the week is on Sunday morning at eleven o'clock in our—"

**CV:** You're not talking about Don Ross?

**JW:** Ross, yes, I'm talking, that's exactly.

**CV:** He was the state representative.

**JW:** That was it. I said, “If you’re as Unitarian as I am,” I said, “I want you to get over here.”

He says, “John,” he says, “that church is white on the outside and white on the inside.”

**JE:** What did you think about your largely white congregation and trying to bring blacks into your congregation?

**JW:** As I said, we covered the spectrum when I came to town.

**JE:** So you had blacks attending?

**JW:** Not yet. It had to have been the first couple of years, ’61, ’62, because Sally Campbell and Francis Campbell got a new doctor. He was graduated from Harvard Medical School, black. They started going to him and became friends and the doctor and his wife were looking for a church, they were shopping for a church. And Francis and Sally brought him to All Souls, whereupon a handful of people in the congregation protested. It had to have been early because Curtis Brian was still the president of the congregation and he was the first year I was here.

Curtis said, “Well, the bylaws of the church say that anybody of any race, creed, color, national origin, or sex, literally, that’s what it said, is welcome to be a member of this congregation. And if you want to change the bylaws, you can do that. You’ll have to petition to do it.”

They drew up a petition, I think, with seventeen names on it. Most of those people left the church. A couple of them still hung in there but most of them left over a period of time.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**JW:** There was that even at All Souls.

**CV:** But even up until the time that you took emeritus status I’ve heard you say that one of the disappointments about your tenure at All Souls was that despite there being 10 percent of the population of Tulsa the church never really had anything other than token representative from the black community.

**JW:** The most black members we ever had were twenty-one. At one time. We always have had black members, a few, but twenty-one was the best we ever did. That’s one of the reasons we started the Church of Restoration, is I said to Leroy Jordan out there at First Baptist Church—we’d bought this little building, originally Junior League had had it, used it for a well-baby clinic years and years before.

We got that place and moved in and I said, “If you can’t move Mohammad to the mountain you move the mountain to Mohammad.”

He said, “Great.” He was just delighted that we were coming out there.

**JE:** Did that work?

**JW:** It did for a while. Did for a while. And then the denomination helped us to screw it up.

**JE:** The denomination?

**JW:** Yeah. I had an agreement with them that we would subsidize that congregation. I think it was fifty thousand dollars a year, something like that, that we would help get it going. And then we would seed it. We would never have more white members than there were black, that was the deal. I could have gotten three hundred people to go out there but I said, "No, we're not going to do that," because we were just have enough to get it going and to make it integrated, but that's all, and that's what we did for a long time.

But then we lost the minister. He went to one of the seminaries to teach. And the next minister is the one that the denomination had sent to us and he was gay. I don't have to tell you, the homophobia in the black community is a phenomenon. It was then, still is, to some considerable extent, certainly in Tulsa. And we lost half of our black members, just like that.

**JE:** Was that apparent when he first came? Or had he been here a while? Or—

**JW:** No.

**JE:** He came and announced it.

**JW:** Almost instantly. Then it was a series of things. And then they welched on their deal to help support the thing. So we took over the whole matter then. But even so, even though we're talking about moving downtown, which may or may not ever happen, I suppose.

**JE:** Today in 2011.

**JW:** But part of the problem there is we've already got a church out there. The Church of Restoration is still there. They still have something of a congregation and they've had some remarkable people in that congregation. Dorothy Dewitty was a member there, and so on.

**JE:** Martin Luther King, when he came on the scene, he would come to Tulsa. Did you ever see him in person here?

**JW:** Not in Tulsa, I saw him in person, yeah.

**JE:** Where?

**JW:** At a location, he spoke before the American Unitarian Association one time. And then I ran into him in the hotel one time in Miami.

**JE:** Did you speak with him?

**JW:** Yeah.

**JE:** What was that about?

**JW:** Hello. (laughing) You know, that was it. He had an entourage with him. He must have had fifteen people around him.

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**Chapter 11 - 3:40**  
**School Integration**

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**John Erling:** Then in '64, of course, Civil Rights Act. And then it must have been nice to see a Public Accommodation Act and all this is taking place, and pretty soon we become integrated. Booker T. Washington was a voluntary desegregation.

**John Wolf:** Yeah.

**JE:** Were you around any of that when that happened?

**JW:** Oh, absolutely, that was a big part, and my congregation. All Souls, Church of the Madalene, Temple Israel, John Knox Presbyterian, College Hill, and Memorial Methodist, but mainly it was Temple Israel, All Souls, and Madalene Parish that seeded most of the students that went out there.

**JE:** To Booker T. Washington, which for the record, was a black high school and then—

**JW:** My son went out there, he was there at the beginning.

**JE:** Dr. Bruce Howell was a superintendent then.

**Clayton Vaughn:** Um-hmm (affirmative). Since we're talking about school superintendents, you might mention your relationship with Charles Mason. Because that's at about the same period of time.

**JW:** Well, that was two years later, '66, '67, I think it was. Dr. Mason was heard to have said that he didn't know what the word *integration* meant. So I said in my sermon in the pulpit, "The superintendent of schools who does not know what the definition of the word *integration* is incompetent and ought to be fired." That was the sermon on the last days of Dr. Mason, which Beth Macklin was there to hear and published the whole thing in the paper.

**CV:** It's fair to say you ran him out of the office though, isn't it?

**JW:** Well, yes. We had the meeting and it was two hundred people, the biggest school board crowd that ever had assembled. We challenged him on this and went to the meeting and he resigned before we got there. Beadley or something was the president of the school board then and he accused me of preaching. (laughing)

**CV:** First time. (laughing)

**JW:** Accused me of preaching. There's a picture we used to have in those days, one of the members of my congregation said, "John, you're the ugliest man I've ever seen, and I'm going to have to join this church 'cause you're going to need all the help you can get. I had a crew cut and big ears with buck teeth and I'm standing there with my arms like this and facing down the school board.

**JE:** So Charles Mason did not know what integration meant.

**JW:** That's what he said, he said that, yeah.

**JE:** So he was a segregationist then?

**JW:** I would imagine. I don't know that but I would imagine. He simply didn't want to rock the boat.

The governor, he was the hero of this piece. He said, "This is the law and we're going to obey it. Period." That made all the difference from the top right straight down.

**CV:** There was also a legal aspect to the history of the desegregation of Tulsa Holy Schools.

For example, forced bussing had already started in Oklahoma City, which had much the same kind of situation.

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** Oh yeah.

**CV:** And it was threatened here by a federal judge unless the community could come to an agreement to do it voluntarily. And that was the birth, really, of Booker T.—

**JW:** Yeah.

**CV:** ...Burrows, Carver—

**JW:** Uh, the whole magnet school idea.

**CV:** The whole magnet school idea.

**JW:** Yeah.

**CV:** Booker T. for a time was known as All Souls North.

**JW:** Yeah.

**CV:** It became a magnet school in 1975. And it had a lot of Unitarian people who had come through All Souls Church and whose families belonged to that church.

**JW:** And were really leaders in getting it set up.

**CV:** So it was supported in a number of ways.

Chapter 12 - 4:57

Vietnam War

**John Erling:** In the '70s, you did come out against the Vietnam War.

**John Wolf:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** Was there a congregation reaction to that? Did you have lots of discussion about it?

**JW:** Oh yes. We had forums. Clayton did the war prayer service.

**JE:** You invited Clayton because?

**Clayton Vaughn:** I'd done a little news tour in Vietnam interviewing local and area military people.

And bringing the video back to show on Channel 6. I spent about a month in-country.

**JE:** So then you invited him to share your free pulpit?

**JW:** Yeah.

**CV:** Only that one time. (laughing)

**JE:** There had to be strong reaction within your congregation about this.

**JW:** Well, also, when I arrived here and they had moved from downtown, All Souls had the first public affairs forum in Tulsa. It was called the Ark. That was because they had two of every kind. They didn't have pro and con, both sides of the question. And that was something which was a long tradition.

Mike Monroney, when he was senator here, had his annual report to the Unitarians. Well, it was the Ark then when Mike came because we gave him the whole thing, but it was that kind of thing.

**CV:** Frosty Troy did the same thing.

**JW:** Frosty Troy, yeah. So we had this public affairs forum that went sometimes Sunday evening, sometimes on Sunday mornings. We had a two-hour church school, which was one of the great things that church initiated, as far as I know, in our denomination where they started at ten o'clock and went clear through to till noon. So that made it possible for the adults to come. And we had the public affairs forum on Sunday morning.

I don't think there was a turn we left unstoned, I mean, (laughing).

**CV:** Just for the record, it ought to be noted that All Souls is unique in the Unitarian Universalist Association because at various times over the years it has been the largest church that bears the name Unitarian. You think about how that happened in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and it's a remarkable thing. By pledging units, by attendance, by church school attendance.

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**CV:** And I don't know whether John agrees with this or not but we've talked about it. As a matter of fact, I've heard you preach it so I guess you do. But the two primary reasons that people end up at All Souls are that they are unchurched and looking for a place to go. Or they want their children to have a liberal religious education as opposed to a church school.

And you might talk, John, about how that worked out in terms of the church school being used as a model all over the country now.

**JW:** Literally it was to be religious education, which is not just a Bible school. Well, one of the reasons we started a children's choir and the whole children's choir's program because one good way to teach culture, different cultures, different languages, is through music. You know, you can get kids singing in Italian. You can get them singing in Hindi, whatever, but it's that whole approach to religious education.

I mean, the stories of the world, as far as creation, not just Genesis. The beginnings of earth and sky. All kinds of approaches as to how people think about faith. Coming from all different faiths. We wanted a place where Jews could come, Muslims could come.

It was very interesting when I first came here. The earliest that I ever remember, some of the Muslim community used to meet downstairs in what's now called the President's Room. We have then and have now, usually fallen away members of Islam, fallen away Jews, fallen away Christians. We're the featherbed for falling away of all kinds of people. But it's open to people who are interested as they can be, I mean, are fascinated with religion and the study of religion. They want to argue about it. They want to talk about it. They want to find out about it. So it's that same approach, instill this kind of curiosity into kids and keep it alive.

And it's very interesting what happens to them when they grow up, for the most part. I think Clayton's daughter is a good illustration in point. They become very, very literary, curious people.

**JE:** Your daughter, how did that happen?

**CV:** She's in her mid-thirties now. Has lived in New York. She's the vice president at Random House. Went to Yale and Wharton and she ended up on the board of All Souls Unitarian in New York City. And married a Mennonite, incidentally. So it's one of those things I think John is trying to suggest that affects someone during their entire lifetime. Both of my children, who were raised in that church, cite their participation in the children's choir as one of the most influential things in their lives.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**CV:** Who would have thought it?

**JE:** Yeah.

**CV:** But, I mean, Wolf thought it.

## Chapter 13 - 9:45

### Oral Roberts

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**John Erling:** One of the largest Unitarian churches in the United States is here in the heart bed of Oral Roberts' town, we all know it, the buckle of the Bible Belt. Why do you think this Unitarian church was so large.

**John Wolf:** Well, not the least reason has to do with that the fact that religion, organized religion is very important in this part of the world. When I first came to Tulsa my colleague in Dallas who was my senior by many years wrote me a long letter about what I would be required to do and how I best would do it. And among other things he said, "When I was in New England I could preach a sermon on why I am a Communist, and afterward they'd say, 'That was a fine sermon this morning, Dr. Abel,'

and so forth and so on.” He says, “Down here I split an infinitive and they’re talking about it for three weeks.”

And this is the way it is down here. I mean, we live at the buckle of the Bible Belt, but religion’s important. The church is important. First thing you’re asked when you move to town is what church you go to. And that’s not true in New England up there and it’s not true of many other places in the United States but it’s true here. And church is important here. So that’s part of it. That’s a big part of it, I’m sure.

The fact that there is a strong, well, like, Oral Roberts, for example, and when I first came, Village Ames Hargess. I mean, these were foils. Now Oral and I had a good relationship for a long, long time, partly because of the Jones family, because of the old folks, Richard Lloyd Jones and his wife, Georgia, lived in that Frank Lloyd Wright house over on Birmingham.

And right around the corner, Oral Roberts and Evelyn lived, and they were very nice to those people. So the Jones family had a kind of an appreciative relationship because of that.

And Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the editor of the paper, and Oral, played off one another.

**Clayton Vaughn:** As you played off of Oral with the phrase, “Babylon on the Arkansas.”

**JW:** (laughing) Yeah, well.

**CV:** Used a number of times.

**JW:** And a few other things I was wont to say.

**CV:** Pretty beautiful.

**JW:** Well, a time when the Almighty, he screwed up something again, I thought, so I said something about it, the tornado hit Oral instead of me. And I said, “Missed again.” And old Oral never did get over that.

And neither did the bishop, Carlton Pearson. He said, “I used to drive by your church and just, just, you know, ’cause the devil would have been there, you know.

**JE:** Did you and—

**JW:** But Oral and I were friends.

**JE:** Did you have theological discussions?

**JW:** No, because Oral was a mugwomp. The minute you’d get into something he’d go, “Ahh, I don’t know anything about that, you know,” and that sort of thing and he would slough it off. Oral was more interested in joining the Chamber of Commerce and promoting Oral than he was anything else in this town. Oral didn’t have any services here when I first came to town. He had his headquarters and that sort of thing but he never had any revivals here.

**JE:** Before you came he has talked about—because I interviewed him, he did have a tent meeting here that went—

**JW:** Well, that was earlier.

**JE:** Earlier on, yeah. But he still had his theology, what he believed. And did you challenge him about what he believed?

**JW:** Oh, sure.

**JE:** And then he would just be passive about it?

**CV:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** He was all, "I don't want to go into all that," or something like that.

**CV:** The question though that keeps coming up relation to All Souls and yourself and Oral Roberts and all that that stands for, or that he stood for, is what the Pentecostal movement in America and in Tulsa, Oklahoma, whether that's a plus or a minus? Or is a minus? What are some of his problems?

**JW:** Well, my feeling about Oral, I was always very, very interested in what he was doing and with faith healing. This goes back to what I was saying about Meadville, Pennsylvania, and I got into it with Rex Homburg and his faith healing business down there, and his exploitation of people from the coal mining country of West Virginia and this kind of stuff.

I was not too happy about this kind of appeal, you know. And I was sociologically speaking interested, if nothing else.

Ernst Troeltsch was a German sociologist who years ago established what is referred to in the trade as the "sect type church type evolution." Like Methodism in this country started out with guys running around on horseback preaching out in the boonies. And the early Baptist movement were largely sects gathered by a preacher here, a preacher there.

**CV:** Kind of good riders on top of the Boston Avenue Methodist Church.

**JW:** Sure, exactly.

**JE:** Say that again.

**CV:** But there are statues of circuit riders—

**JW:** Uh-uh (affirmative).

**CV:** ...on the top of the Boston—

**JW:** Brooklyn—

**CV:** ...Avenue Methodist Church.

**JW:** Yeah, and—

**CV:** And they're Methodist circuit riders.

**JW:** But over a period of time the generations passed and the second generation, and sure by the third generation, they wanted an educated clergy. They wanted an established clergy. They want an established order of some kind, discipline, the Methodists would say, at all, from a sect goes into a church.

Well, the Pentecostal movement in this country was moving from a Pentecostal sect type organization, breaking off from the Assembly of God movement and stuff like that

into a church. And Oral was right on the cusp of this thing. The Oral Roberts University, to me, was Ernst Troeltsch in capital letters. This was going to be where the Pentecostals were going to go and get their educated clergy and start in seminary. And they were going to educate their kids and so forth and so on.

What does he do? Joins the Methodist church. I said, "Oral, why would you do a dumb thing like that? You are right there on the edge of how the movement will bend."

"Well, mdmdlasld (mumbling noises)."

And I really believe that he missed it. He missed it.

**JE:** He missed, he missed writing it because he joined the Methodist church to become so called more mainstream, I suppose.

**CV:** Right.

**JE:** To broaden his appeal.

**JW:** Yeah.

**JE:** To even more Christian churches.

**JW:** Historically speaking, sociologically speaking, he was a Pentecostal who was taking the Pentecostal movement from a sect to a church. And he was providing the conduit to do that. The Oral Roberts University was the premiere—well, there's one over in the Assembly of God, what's the one in—

**JE:** Springfield?

**JW:** Springfield.

**JE:** Missouri.

**CV:** John Brown.

**JW:** Yeah, John Brown's another.

**JE:** Yeah.

**JW:** But Oral way, way, way past any of the rest, and he missed it. If he had stayed there he could have helped it go. But a terrible thing happened to him when Marshal Nash, son—

**JE:** Right, that would have been extremely—

**JW:** ...and his daughter were killed in an airplane crash.

**JE:** Right.

**JW:** Subsequently—

**JE:** You talking about his son?

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** Ronnie?

**JW:** Ronnie was a member of my congregation, he and his wife and his children. Oh, he'd come to church, I said, "What are you doing here?"

And he said, "Well, I had to find out what kind of a place my children are going to."

**JE:** And then Ronnie took his life.

**JW:** And then Ronnie took his life. He was gay and a lot of other things.

**JE:** I might say, elsewhere on this website you can hear Oral talk about that and he talks about Ronnie. So I would urge those who are interested in that topic, they can go hear Oral talk about it openly.

**JW:** Yeah. His grandson, the gay, spoke at All Souls this last summer.

**JE:** I was there to hear that.

**JW:** I thought it was a marvelous thing.

**JE:** Right.

**JW:** I don't know if you thought it.

**JE:** I did.

**JW:** I really thought it was a—

**JE:** Randy is his name.

**JW:** Anyway, nobody, in my opinion, loses a child and is ever the same again. He lost two, both of them horrendous and he was never the same man after that. It went from “expect a miracle, something good is going to happen to you,” to “the devil's in the woodwork.” There was, and a deep blackness just appeared.

And then, of course, the whole movement started to go to seed with one thing and another.

**JE:** He did use you to raise money, however.

**JW:** Oh, he certainly did. He had clips of me. I told him one time, I said, “You know, I raised more money than you, than anybody.” I wanted 10 percent, I thought I had a finder's fee. (laughing)

The clip he used was when they had the service to dedicate the university, they brought Billy Graham.

**JE:** Yep.

**JW:** And Billy Graham had said that he hoped that Oral Roberts University, which was dedicated to semination of Jesus Christ and his salvation would not go the way of other universities who had also been so dedicated. Like Harvard and Yale and Rutgers and Princeton and others.

And I said, “Well, if Oral Roberts University turns out to be a real university the Unitarians will have it in twenty-five years.” (laughing) Well, that's when he, he, this man did not get it, you know, send money.

**JE:** If you don't send us money, John Wolf will take us over.

**JW:** (laughing) He said I was going to get it in twenty-five years.

**JE:** (laughing) Right.

**CV:** Almost did too.

**JW:** Anyway.

**CV:** (laughing)

**JW:** The worst mistake I ever made I ended up somebody talked me into debating some fundamentalist in one of the public schools here. And it was a hot, hot summer and it was packed. I just absolutely blew it, it was so bad. I told Oral after that, I said, "I've learned one thing. A reasonable man never debates irrational and expects to come out alive."

## Chapter 14 - 11:00

### Pro-Choice

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**John Erling:** Another issue that you spoke out was you fought for the women's right for an abortion.

**John Wolf:** Oh, yes, from the get-go. This became an issue because I certainly, and others like me, believe in pro-choice. And I'm no fan of abortion but I've been a parish minister for sixty years and more and I know what people go through.

In my second parish in Meadville, Pennsylvania, I did some counseling in those days, and women who had either had an abortion or been butchered in the process, my view and my premed background too, I think every person has a right to medical care. Certain a woman does. Any variety of kinds of things can happen to her in pregnancies and has a right to a decision.

And I'm also married to a woman that if I had any other idea I would not wake up tomorrow. Far as my wife is concerned, men have no business even having an opinion on the subject.

**Clayton Vaughn:** But that was also one of the issues. That may have been the best example of public disagreements—

**JW:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**CV:** ...and protests with the church and with you, perhaps in your ministry. I mean, I remember protestors on the parking lot.

**JW:** Oh, yes. On one occasion, that was when NARAL was being founded, the National Association of Abortion Rights, an organization here in Tulsa. They were meeting in our parish hall. That's another thing about All Souls, if they won't have you any place else, you can meet there. So they were having a meeting and I was in a board meeting or something at the other end of the building and walked out through the parking lot. I thought, "Well, I'll go over and make an appearance and say, 'I'm glad you're here and you're welcome,' and so forth."

Well, I met these people out there and this guy proceeded to give me the reading of Scripture, you know. And I took the Bible away from him and read the Scripture back to

him. I pointed my finger, "Thou art the man!" and started beating him over the head with his Bible and chased down the parking lot.

The janitor, who happened to be African American, a member of our congregation at the time, was standing by the kitchen and saw me doing it and said, "What were you doing to that poor man?"

I said, "Well, he had my Bible and he was quoting against me." Because the one thing I really get upset about is somebody who thinks they know more about the Bible than I do. (laughing).

So anyway, long story short, the first time the congregation voted unanimously was the public accommodation ordinance that I mentioned to you earlier.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** The second time was pro-choice. It's only done it twice, where the whole congregation has voted.

**JE:** So where did it go from there then?

**JW:** The most interesting thing, Pat Malloy Sr., Tony Ringgold, and somebody else. I can't remember who, they are three of the rascals. They're the three-judge panel from the 10th circuit [US 10th Circuit Court of Appeals and District Courts] met here in Tulsa. There was Dr. Somebody from Grove that had performed abortions, he was an osteopath, and they had sent him to jail. He'd served his term of several years.

When he got out, he sued the state for his arrest on this issue. It got to the federal court. Malloy and Ringgold and this gang had this case. I was called as an expert witness on the Bible by these rascals. Malloy, who is a Roman Catholic, Ringgold, was Unitarian but Jewish background. And what the issue was, Did Bathsheba and David have an abortion, you know? David saw her over the parapets and they got together and she was pregnant. Now what happened? Did she have a miscarriage or is it abortion?

And I said it was an abortion. And I forgot what his name was but he was the presiding of the three guys and I knew him because he happened to be a college fraternity brother of mine. He was a member of Boston Avenue Methodist and taught Bible crafts over there. But anyway, he agreed with me. (laughing) It was collusion, I'm sure. He wanted somebody to come up and read this into the record. Well, the point, that was quite incidental other than the fact that I was there.

Turns out though, had there not been Roe vs. Wade that would have been the precedent setting decision because they found in favor of this doctor. That would have been the legal precedent.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** Some years later, not that long ago, it was before Pat died, a woman from Mount Sinai, I think, Hospital in New York was doing research on abortions before Roe vs. Wade and

what this was all about and what we did here. Because for a long time I was the conduit for abortion.

Herald Hill, a professor in the Religion Department at TU, and I and several others, I had through my discretionary fund at the church several people who contributed large amounts of money to provide abortions for young women. And did.

**JE:** So when you said you were a conduit, that's what you meant? Young women would come to see you.

**JW:** Well, it mainly went through Herald, I'd get the money to take care of it. Occasionally they'd come through me.

**CV:** Planned Parenthood started there, didn't it?

**JW:** No, you know, among other things, I was chairman of the board of Planned Parenthood. Then I was on the national board of Planned Parenthood just before this period. It had to be before because one of the other members of Planned Parenthood board, the national board, was a Roman Catholic priest. He was president of a college in Rochester, New York. He would not have been on the Planned Parenthood board had the abortion issue come alive yet. Because he was on the Religious Advisory Committee with me on that thing.

He and I, as a matter of fact, used to go out and toddy together and drink together. We ended up in a hotel room one night after we'd seduced a good Methodist pastor from Texas. Introduced him to bourbon. He and I ended up in his hotel room on St. Patrick's Day Eve, drinking some rye and ended up in the St. Patrick's Day Parade the next day. (all laughing)

Anyway, that's a beside.

**JE:** But you digress.

**JW:** Right. Digress.

**CV:** Does control over your own body have to do with ending your life?

**JW:** You better believe it does. Sure, you get to admit it, he's already into a euthanasia.

**JE:** Which we can follow up on, but Planned Parenthood, per se, in Tulsa?

**JW:** Clarence Knippa followed me as president of Planned Parenthood. He and I and one other who was a Disciple for Christ minister whose name I have forgotten, we got the board of Planned Parenthood here. Estelle Antell was the director at the time, she was Jewish.

We decided that we weren't going to abortions, Planned Parenthood was not going to do abortions. If there was any chance for federal funding we didn't want any part of it because it was too iffy. Plus the fact, United Way wasn't going to have any truck with it.

So we decided we weren't going to do it. So Clarence and I and a couple of other people, we started Reproductive Services, we started that. Separate, completely. Clarence and I had a meeting of the OBGyn Society in Tulsa County. A bigger bunch

of Neanderthals you cannot possibly imagine, except for two guys, in those days. There wasn't a woman among them.

We'd tell them what we wanted to do and we wanted their support. And, boy, oh boy. We also went and visited Bishop Beltran when he came to town, to welcome him to our diocese because we wanted to make an agreement with him. "We will not raise the abortion issue, we will not fire it up, if you won't."

**JE:** And? His reaction to that?

**JW:** He didn't think it was funny. But he didn't and we didn't. Now as it turns out, there were constant picketing of Reproductive Services, bomb threats and all kinds of things that happened to that place.

**JE:** How about yourself personally? Were there threats against you?

**JW:** Oh yes. I used to keep it. I don't know what ever happened to it. I had a stack of threatening letters and all kinds of stuff.

**JE:** Phone calls?

**JW:** Oh yeah. It was always about something.

**JE:** So it wasn't just abortion, it was about other things too?

**JW:** Oh no, no.

**JE:** Every stand you took.

**JW:** Well, back in the days of United Nations, they accused us of having Communist cell meetings in the basement of All Souls. And I said, "We can't have it in the basement because we don't have a basement. You're more than welcome in the sanctuary though."

**CV:** (laughing)

**JE:** Did you ever really be nervous about your personal safety and your family? Looking over your shoulder?

**JW:** Never did. Not really, never did.

**CV:** These people are cowards, they're not going to take you on.

**JE:** Were there any other ministers in town who said, "John, I agree with what you're saying but there's no way I can say it myself"?

**JW:** Oh, well, yes.

**JE:** They'd confide almost in you.

**JW:** Oh yes. I mean, Warren Hultgren said to me one time, he says, "Wolf, every time you call and you get me to put my name on a letterhead I lose six hundred members." (all laughing)

Brandon Scott, he's one of the hundred Jesus scholars and he's on the faculty at TU, said to me one time, he said, "You're the conscience of Tulsa, All Souls."

John Drewing said the same thing out at St. Johns. He said, "You take the lead, stick your neck out. We'll follow." Thanks a lot.

**JE:** Right.

**JW:** The Missouri Synod, you know, is really fundamentalist, I mean it is literal. And most of it it's Deutsch. Their seminary in St. Louis, at one point, it had a president by the name of Preuss (P-r-e-u-s-s, I think). He decided they weren't fundamentalists enough and was going to insist that the Bible be taught and so on and so on and so on. Fired part of the faculty of that seminary.

Clarence Knippa, among others, started the thing called Seminex, Seminary in Exile. This is Clarence Knippa now. This man had more guts than Carters' got pills. And he set up Seminex, he and some others. He was president of Planned Parenthood and helped start Reproductives of Missouri Synod Lutheran. Roomed with a Unitarian in Israel. That was Clarence Knippa, great man.

**JE:** Does that synod have any leverage on him or they just let him do his thing? They don't have a real—

**JW:** They tried everything they could think of. They put bot(?) [time 10:42]. This congregation, Grace Lutheran Church, all power to its name, at that time backed him.

**JE:** Right.

**JW:** They loved him, as well they should have. It's not that way anymore.

## Chapter 15 - 9:00

### Suicide

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**John Erling:** Back to Oral Roberts losing his son, Ronnie, to suicide. Your thoughts about the right to take your own life. I'm hesitating here because I interviewed Boston Avenue Methodist Muzon Biggs.

**John Wolf:** Muzon, yeah.

**JE:** And he says that he was a counsel to Oral Roberts when that happened. That Oral called him and he was one of several counsel to him.

For those who listen, maybe they've lost children, parents, to suicide. In your view, how are we to view this?

**JW:** Very first funeral I performed when I got to Tulsa was for a member of the city council who blew his brains out in the Mayo Hotel. I've forgotten his name now, and I did the service. As a matter of fact, it was at Moore's, Peoria. And I said that I could understand what may have been wrong but there was no sin in it. Things may have happened that we'll never know but there's no sin in it. And I believe that.

I do not believe it is a mortal sin to take your own life. I think that is again what I refer to as sixth-century theology. Of course, I think pro-life is twelfth-century theology.

**Clayton Vaughn:** Didn't you organize something called the Hemlock Society?

**JW:** Hemlock Society, yeah.

**JE:** Tell us about that.

**JW:** Well, the Hemlock Society, or a Chapter of the Hemlock Society would provide people with the way to do it, with drugs. And would give you prescriptions for doing it and you'd go to Mexico and get them, in those days. And would support people.

You know, did I ever tell you when I put my pulpit on a—

**JE:** You mean when you auctioned it off?

**JW:** When I auctioned it off.

**JE:** And the guy who got it, who bought your pulpit—

**JW:** Was a guy by the name of Divine. His last name is Divine. He's retired. He was an anesthesiologist, I believe, at St. Francis. We had just started our television at All Souls. We got a grant from OSU, Stillwater OSU, and he did, I think it was ten or twelve programs on euthanasia with him and different other people. It was one of the first kinds of things in the country. That series. So that was really early on because we started television in the middle '70s.

The Hemlock Society had its meetings at the church. Then Dixon Burns was a OBGyn here in town for years and years and years. He was my wife's doctor. And Dixon, when he retired, went into Medical Ethics and was on the faculty at North Carolina and University of Illinois and lived here part of the time. He had researched the law, albeit an MD, but he had researched the law to parade rest.

He and I did a series at the library, the public library here and at Bartlesville. We were lucky to get out of Bartlesville alive. (laughing). He gave the history of suicide law and so forth and I gave the pastoral side of the thing. Why and in what ways.

For example, I am personally acquainted with panic attacks. It is the most horrendous thing, it is not describable. It is so bad, ahh. The nearest thing I could come to it probably would be waterboarding, something like that, it is so awful.

**JE:** This comes to me as total surprise. You personally have experienced panic attacks?

**JW:** Yeah.

**JE:** A man who has always been at the center of many controversies out there would never believe that you would be of some nature—

**JW:** Oh, it's a physical thing. It's not a psychological thing at all, well, mine was related to I had six bypasses and an "atrial fib" before that. As Ingrid would say, "I worked far too hard."

It was a Christmas Eve. The family had all gone home and I was there. I was in and out anyway. I was in the recovery after bypass surgery.

**JE:** What era? What times, '70s, '80s?

**JW:** 'Ninety-three. And fortunately, there was an old World War II nurse on duty. You know an old World War II nurse because she still had a cap and she called other nurses by their

surnames. And this thing hit me. I came out of this thing as I'm terribly claustrophobic and I had this awful feeling that I had this thing still in my throat.

I punched the button, she walked in, took one look at me, she says, "I know what's the matter with you," walked out, came back and put this thing—just knocked me colder than a clam. And I thank God I had somebody like that right there to take care of it.

**JE:** And so was this the first time then that you'd ever experienced a panic attack?

**JW:** Yeah.

**JE:** So she just knocked it out of you.

**JW:** Just knocked it out of me. Later on, I knew people who had agoraphobia, for example. One of our neighbors was agoraphobic and I could never understand quite why she couldn't deal with this until I had an experience like this.

One of the doctors in the congregation, an internist, Muslim, by the way, Egyptian, when he first came to town I'd gotten him his first patient. I was out making parish calls and this woman was sickening and she didn't have a doctor. I called him and he came.

Many, many years later, I went to see him. He was in hospital for something. And he said, "I've just been to hell," and he'd had one. He was trying to tell me about it and I didn't quite get it until I had one of my own.

**CV:** But you were raising the issue of panic attacks in relation to taking your own life.

**JW:** I can understand why anyone would. It's something so horrendous that you'll do anything to stop it. If you have the means at hand. There is that kind of thing.

There are other things, not the least of them being what people go through now with Alzheimer's, where they're no longer going to be in control.

**JE:** I'm trying to think, you would know this. Where is it in the Bible that we should not take our own life?

**JW:** In Leviticus in there's one place.

**JE:** What does it state?

**JW:** I can't remember that exactly.

**JE:** Isn't there another place that's more famous?

**JW:** There's a psalm too.

**JE:** And that says?

**JW:** I've forgotten that too, but the gist of it is, this is God's decision, nobody else's.

**JE:** All right, so then you've certainly had that argument thrown up against you. And how do you square with that?

**JW:** Martin Luther. It's the Word of God, stupid, it's not the words of God. The words of God means you interpret the Bible literally, I mean, text for text, word for word, you know, is to be taken as law. The Word of God is the revelation that there is that in the nature of things, which squares with who we are: the Divine and the human, and the human and

the Divine. God with us, Emmanuel, Incarnation. However, revealed to us if you're a Jew through the law; through Jesus Christ if you're a Christian. A man, which is an abomination to a Jew.

Norbert Rosenthal and I used to scream at one another in the parking lot of St. Francis Hospital in the middle of summer, talking about the incarnation, you know. We just had a wonderful time.

But what is a revelation? It's the law.

No, it isn't. It's in us. So forth and so on. It's where Clarence and I had a fundamental understanding. He was a Fundamentalist but a Fundamentalist in the Lutheran sense, not in the evangelical sense.

So a quote like that, like any of a variety of things like homosexuality and all this kind of stuff, you have to take them contextually for what they are. Don't take any absolute word. Thou shalt not kill, for example. So? What does that mean? Well, you've got libraries dedicated to interpreting what that means. True biblical scholars do not take the Bible that literally. They can point to these things but it's not authoritative. In other words, the Bible's not a recipe for behavior. The Bible is an insight into the nature of the human condition and a profound one, a many-splendored one because it's a library. The Bible is really a library of books.

## Chapter 16 - 2:07

### Change of Mind

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**John Erling:** You took strong positions on many, many issues. Was there ever a time you would change your position?

**John Wolf:** Oh, my God yes.

**JE:** On an issue, let's say.

**JW:** I'd change my position.

**JE:** Name one.

**JW:** Well, that's a good question.

**Clayton Vaughn:** Military service.

**JW:** I defended the military chaplains, see. But I'm still a naval chaplain and I'm still raising holy Ned with a couple of my compatriots, not the least of them my old chaplain at St. Francis Hospital, an old Irishman and I who detest the way veterans are being treated.

**JE:** Okay, explain simply in—

**JW:** Well, as I said, I said when I threw the Bible over the side, it was Hebrews 11:1 and so forth.

It took me twenty years or so to get it back. For a long, long period of time I was a raging scientific humanist. I'm still a raging scientific humanist. I'm an atheist and an agnostic and a theist and a Christian and a Jew. I have a little trouble with Islam.

**JE:** You have all those beliefs in you?

**JW:** Uh-huh (affirmative). And in part, I got the Bible back. When I first started preaching I had a heck of a time, I couldn't do the twenty-third Psalm. I have a real problem with the Lord's Prayer, because if I understand that fellow, he didn't like public prayer at all. And said as much. "Teach us to pray," and if you know anything about Jewish prayers, they're l-o-o-n-n-g-g, (laughing) terminable things. And this is not only not long, I think he spat it out. I think he said, "All right, I'll give you a prayer. Wham, wham, wham, wham, wham. Amen." That sort of thing.

Changed my mind a lot of times about that. But if I were to bury a Baptist kid on a battlefield, hell yes, I'd preach it and mean every word of it.

Have I changed my mind about race? Uh, no. If anything, I'm more adamant now than I ever was. I see racism where before I didn't see it and should have.

## Chapter 17 - 5:13

### Student Advice

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**John Erling:** Students who will be listening to this of all walks, maybe those who plan to go into some form of ministry, are there words of wisdom that you impart to them?

**John Wolf:** Well, I, I would do it again, I can tell you that. Particularly, the one thing the Unitarian church afforded me was great freedom. And then to be able to stay with a bunch of people for decades, teaching and preaching if you've got a congregation to preach to. It's a love affair. People know you and you know them.

The difference and incentive probably had with the preacher and conquered that snowy day he went to church that time and said it seemed like this guy never experienced anything. Well, to really preach is to pass through the fires of thought everything that's happened to you. Everything you know, everything you see. It's open, I mean, in no other profession can I imagine everything I read, everything I know, everything I learn, it all applies. Everybody I meet, every story I tell, you know, all the stories I know. Where else are you going to have that kind of intimacy, that kind of exchange between one human being—not one human being, many human beings, you know.

I got lucky one time when I was in Meadville, Pennsylvania. That was before there were super highways going back and forth between Pittsburgh so it took two or three

hours to go to the airport. And I ended up with Erich Fromm, the famous psychologist, psychotherapist. So I got to spend a little time with him. And he was telling me, “Well, you cannot do—it’s got to be one on one.”

I said, “No way. A congregation is even better because there’s a group dynamic as well as a personal relationship that goes on here that is unparalleled, I mean, I can’t think of anything else because you’re surrounded with architecture. You’re surrounded with music. You’re surrounded with poetry, and the whole culture comes to bear.

Now where else and in what other profession? But it has to be this open one, it can’t be the closed one because then it becomes dogmatic. You say, “God is love.” What does that mean?

I remember one of my last sermons at that congregation is “I’ve Had About All of the Love I Can Stand.” (all laughing) God is love—what does that mean? That means that the relationship between one person and another, one people and another is not dogmatic, not legalistic, it is not proscribed. It’s the trouble I have with the Republican party, for example, is they keep trying, you know, if we could just get rid of the government everything will be all right. The fundamental relationship is one to one or people to people, that’s what that means.

**JE:** Yeah.

**JW:** And that’s worth talking about.

**JE:** You spun off, you did the one in North Tulsa but you spun off Hope Unitarian Church, which is South Tulsa.

**JW:** Yeah.

**CV:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** Which is a viable church today.

**JW:** That was done because the original plan when they moved it from the downtown church to Peoria, the planning for that church was for a congregation of 750. But we got over 1,000, we were rapidly moving well beyond. They had said in the long-range plan that when it got to be 700, 750 then they would start another church. So that’s what we did. That was the long-range plan so that’s what we did.

I remember it was Ted Kowalski, we went to a planning at Western Hills Lodge for over a weekend and the membership committee had a separate meeting and they came up. And she said, “We’re going to have a baby.” That was another church.

**CV:** What’s your response when somebody walks up to you and says, “Should I join this church?”

**JW:** Only one way to join, support it.

**CV:** And, “I don’t believe in God.”

**JW:** Neither do I, probably. What are you talking about?

**CV:** I’m talking about that, “If you’ll tell me what kind of God you believe in, chances are I don’t believe it either.”

**JW:** That's right.

**CV:** Is that a legitimate response?

**JW:** That's a legitimate response, yeah. God, the word *God*, as I say, there was a time when I wasn't going to use it because theological language was loaded. And it's like poetry, it points to something else. And you try to define it, it's no good any more. God is simply a sign for something that we have no good explanation for.

**CV:** That's probably why the Jews don't pronounce it.

**JW:** It's exactly why they don't pronounce it. Exactly.

**JE:** You had another quote: Nothing is as immoral as a moralistic man.

**JW:** In my opinion, this is the popular interpretation of Adam and Eve, why they got, you know. They could tell the difference between right and wrong. Anyone that can tell the difference between right and wrong as if they were God has had it. There is nothing that's as immoral as a moral man.

## Chapter 18 - 4:55

### Is There a Heaven

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**John Erling:** What do you see now as a life for you in the beyond? When you leave this earth, what happens to you?

**John Wolf:** I have no clue, any more than I ever. I used to have a story I used to tell, stolen from one of my colleagues. I remember it was at the time of Kennedy's assassination and I was talking—there was something wrong with what I did. And I couldn't figure out what it was. I mean, there was something missing in the sermon. Everybody thought it was a wonderful thing and all that, but for me, I had not gotten something right.

And I got this thing from one of my old professors, what he had done, in Worcester, Massachusetts. The second parish at Worcester. The first thing he did was talk to the kids. That's what I hadn't done. And he said, "Supposing that everything was just backwards. Supposing that instead of when you were born, you know, you're all wrinkled and red and you're blind and you don't have any hair and every day you get a little older and pretty soon you can see and you can hear and you get hair and you're going and it's smooth and everything. Until, well, you keep getting older, and pretty soon you can't see and you can't hear and you're all wrinkled up and you lose your hair and you're gone. What if it was just the other way?"

Supposing you started out old and went on until you got younger and younger and younger and you're a little baby and you're all wrinkled and you can't see and you're no hair and you're gone. You wouldn't be afraid of that, would you?

And that's what he did. We used that from time to time with the kids. Mainly, don't be afraid. It's as much a part of life as life itself. We just don't know. I don't know.

**JE:** You don't know if there's a heaven?

**JW:** Oh, I'm pretty sure there's no heaven anymore than there's a hell. I mean, that's mythology, and that's fine, I mean, there's a lot of good things you can do with that. But that there is such a place.

When I was a little kid I used to lie on the back porch and look at the sky until I would scare myself. Go out further and further and further and further and just scare the daylight out of myself. St. Paul said this and I got a little problem with the God of the heavenlies. (laughing). He said, "I've got to have something that I can understand." This is basic White Heddian. If you want to understand the universe, study an individual, study human emotion. If you want to understand human emotion, study the universe. It's all the same thing, there's no supernatural, it's all of one thing, natural.

If that isn't a big enough miracle for you, I can't help you. The one thing I'm sure of is that whatever else we are, we're part of whatever else there is. We're going back there again, I'm going back there again, wherever it was I came from or where I wasn't anybody. I wasn't me.

**CV:** (laughing)

**JW:** I'm still not me, most of the time, you know. What I have been there for, the Good News, the gospel, there's nothing to be afraid of, nothing to fear. What we are, we are, and you want to find out more about that, you want to find out as much about it as you can possibly absorb.

There's a line in the memorial service, "We gather and celebrate the spirit and the things of the spirit as they were made known to us in the life of John Wolf. And give thanks for all the gifts of life, which through his life we've received. And I hope that in the time of his death he may strengthen our hold on life." To me, this is what the pastoral ministry is about. This is what the gospel is about.

I believe that Jesus was against religion. I think he hated religion. For him, religion was the enemy. As he said, "Follow me, my burden is easy." What's the burden? Religion. "I came to relieve you from all that crap. I'll reduce it to a couple of things: Love one another; love God; and that's it." Don't load me up with a lot of other crap.

People ask me if I'm a Christian. I say, "Well, now, okay, just tell me what you think Christian is because I've got a couple of verses there and I've got a couple of stories about that that I would like to have you interpret for me. And then we'll find out what you think a Christian is."

**Chapter 19 - 1:33****How to Be Remembered**

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**John Erling:** We finally ask, how would you like to be remembered?

**John Wolf:** Hmm (thoughtful sound). Well, the first thing I know is I won't be remembered at all. (laughing)

**JE:** That's—

**JW:** In the long pull.

**JE:** You're very humble but you will be.

**JW:** ?? [time :11] man is.

**JE:** But how would you like to be remembered?

**JW:** Well, that I did some good. I was there when somebody needed me. That I wasn't too much of a burden and that they never find out who I really am.

**Clayton Vaughn:** (laughing)

**JW:** Because that's between me and him. That's why we have this problem.

**JE:** You have this continuing daily dialogue with him?

**JW:** Oh, daily? Hourly.

**JE:** Sometimes anger, sometimes love, sometimes all emotions that you're dealing when talking to God.

**JW:** You name it, been there, done that, got the T-shirt. (laughing)

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative). Right. Well, I want to thank you, John—

**JW:** Well—

**JE:** This has been very, very interesting. And thank you, Clayton, for joining. I appreciate it very much.

**CV:** I—

**JW:** He couldn't get a word in edgewise.

**JE:** Well, none of us are supposed to. You were the one who carried it and I appreciate it. Now your voice and thoughts can be forever listened to on this great technology that we have.

**JW:** Uh-huh (affirmative). But by the way, that's another thing about God, everything God created is biodegradable.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JW:** The only things that you can't get rid of are made by humans: plastic and internet. (all laughing)

**Chapter 20 - 0:33****Conclusion**

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