

# Peace and Justice

An Occasional Newsletter of The Charles M. Jones Peace and Justice Committee of the  
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Charles and Dorcas Jones

## FAITH, GRACE, AND HERESY: A View From Inside the Storm

- Joe W. Straley 5/14/2002

*"All our word and thought pictures of God are but children's drawings. All our imaginings are but fable and parable."* -  
Charles M. Jones

*"Help us to grow in grace and in knowledge of thee."*  
Terminal phrase of every prayer by  
Reverend Charles M. Jones

In one of the sermons preached in Chapel Hill, Reverend Charlie Jones asked a number of questions:

*Why should only a poet say,  
"Though the cause of evil prosper, yet  
'tis Truth alone is strong."?*  
*And only a historian say,  
"Whom the gods would destroy, they  
first make mad with power... the mills of God  
grind slowly but they grind exceeding fine."?*  
*Or only a Biblical writer say,  
"What does the Lord require of Thee but  
to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly  
with thy God."?*  
*Or only a keen observer will notice that  
"When it is dark, you can see the  
stars."?*

Had we asked Charlie about his image of the Almighty he would have said as he once said in a sermon,

*There is a power which is not our own,  
expressed so well in the words,  
"The whole world groaneth and  
travaileth in pain until now...in the earnest  
expectation of the manifestation of the sons of  
God.",*

These words appeared in one of his prayers,  
*We are thankful for those who in the  
mystery of life could find their path; those  
who in darkness lighted a lamp to enable  
others to see; those who could bring to*

*utterance the sacred insights of the spirit; who  
have made plain life's nobler way.*

These questions, these words and the thoughts that lay behind them summarize the ministry and the guiding philosophy of the Reverend Charles M. Jones, the first minister of the Community Church of Chapel Hill. But before being called to be our pastor, Charles was Minister at the University Presbyterian Church of Chapel Hill and I was an "Elder" in that church.

I learned about Charles Jones and the ambiance in which he worked in a very incremental fashion; to tell the truth, I was a slow learner.

Shortly after my arrival in Chapel Hill in 1944 I recall walking across the UNC campus with my friend and colleague George Henry (Joan Garnett's father-in-law); we were discussing our impressions of life in the South generally and in Chapel Hill specifically. I was on the entering edge of the learning curve and was asking some very naïve questions. As a newly arrived person from the "North", I had much to learn and a lot of suspicions about the worth and the integrity of Southern values. George, on the other hand, was speaking enthusiastically and optimistically about the role the

University of North Carolina was playing and would play in the emergence of a great society in the South. He based his optimism on the liberal atmosphere at UNC and our great President, Frank Porter Graham.

"But, George, if this area is so enlightened and progressive, why do I see no black faces among the students and the faculty?" I asked.

"Oh, come on, Joe," he responded, "It will be a long, long time before Negroes will be admitted to any 'white' University in the South but I am prepared to bet that the University of North Carolina will be the first."

*Hello, reality! Hello, Southern part of Heaven!*  
I moved an inch along the learning curve.

And approximately 20 years later events showed that George was right on both counts.

A few months after my conversation with George Henry, I learned more about my adopted home and its assumptions.

One day in the Fall of 1945 I boarded a bus bound for Durham and found myself seated next to a dignified woman dressed all in black; a mourning ribbon was attached to her dress. She was the stereotypically refined Southern lady straight from the pages of *Gone With The Wind*. Later I learned she would wear the black dress and the ribbon for the rest of her life in memory of her deceased husband. We rode together without discussion for at least 10 minutes. Finally she broke the silence.

"I saw you in church last Sunday," she said.

"Yes," I responded, "It was the first time I had attended the University Presbyterian Church." The lady in black was silent for quite a long time but finally she came forth with that which was on her mind.

"Didn't you think that that sermon was a bit, er, radical?"

"Gee," I answered, "I was so taken with the low key of his remarks and how young the preacher looked, I barely remember what he said. However, I don't remember anything very 'radical' - he was talking about justice, wasn't he?"

"Well, he keeps going back to the same old topic. He sees nothing but problems with our 'nigris'. He just can't leave that subject alone. That kind of talk will produce nothing but trouble," she affirmed.

*Hello, South! Hello, the racial divide!!*  
I moved another inch along the learning curve.

My conversation with the lady in black had a tremendous effect on my view of things. Here was a fine Southern lady who wouldn't knowingly hurt a fly trapped in the historic assumption that black is black and white is white and never the twain shall meet. And here was Charles talking to her and to the South about these assumptions in his steady, earnest tone of voice and showing that he expected to do more than talk! Charlie was my sort of guy; I would place my "spiritual" development, whatever that meant, in his hands.

I had flirted with the University Baptist Church and had been favorably impressed by the messages of the Reverend Kelly Barnett but, if one was to judge the messenger by the message and by the people who were angered by the message and by the enemies he makes, then the Presbyterian Church was the place for me! I joined the Presbyterian Church shortly after; in 1949, I was elected to its governing board. Lets face it, I knew nothing about Presbyterianism and in the weeks that followed, I demonstrated that I am a slow learner!

I remember so well my introduction to the office to which I had been elected. The occasion was my "ordination" as Elder. At the time it seemed to be the very essence of a non-event. How wrong I was!

The incumbent members of the board were seated when I arrived approximately 5

minutes late; the session had already been called to order. I apologized.

"Hey, folks," exclaimed Charlie "Here is Joe Straley; Joe, I want you to meet Ray Gould, Tom Stanback, Roland Giduz, John Graham, Wallace Caldwell, Gray McAllister, Earl Wynn, Milton Van Hecke, , . Joe is our newest convert!"

We talked. There was some light-hearted banter. We settled down and listened to what Charlie had to say. He described the church, provided a one- or two- liner description of our responsibilities, and told us, the newly elected, what this Presbyterian Church believed and hoped to accomplish. He asked if we were comfortable with this. All of the newly elected nodded affirmatively; I don't remember that any of us had a question.

It sounded great to me but Charles had made things too easy for us; we had not taken the official oath required of all Elders and Deacons at the time of their installation.

Recently I had occasion to open the present version of the *Book of Order* and read the official oath, presumably the affirmation that Charles did not ask us to make; It asks the candidate to answer "YES" to a number of questions starting with the following:

*Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?*

Both before and after that ordination event I heard Charles preach on the sanctity of the human spirit, the oneness of all religions, the importance of questioning authority in a democratic society and the quest for truth which lay at the basis for religious growth. I suspect that Charles did not want to ask us to pledge to the concept of 'One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' while he preached the 'Oneness of all religions.'

In April, 1952 a Judicial Commission was formed by Orange Presbytery to investigate the University Presbyterian Church in

Chapel Hill and to evaluate the rumors which were making the news in the state and "putting the church in a bad light." Along with elected officers ("Elders" and "Deacons") from other churches in the Presbytery I was in attendance at one of the Commissions' public meetings. We were on break and I was in a queue to the bathroom. The person ahead of me, an Elder in one of the other churches in the Presbytery, wanted to talk about Charlie Jones.

*"That so-called 'ordination' was a joke," he said, "Charlie Jones had to know that that was no proper ordination of new officers in this here church. If he thinks that that chit-chat constituted an ordination into the Presbyterian Church, he will have another think coming. Why didn't he just open the Book of Church Order like he was supposed to and have those guys repeat line by line the prescribed text for ordination? You can't be a Presbyterian if you are not prepared to follow the Book of Church Order!"*

Charlie later would say that his little ordination sermon constituted all that was expected of the officers, that it contained the essence of the thoughts in the *Book of Church Order*, and that had the new officers repeated the language of the official ordination they would not have understood their role nearly as well, etc. "Alibis, alibis!" shouted the inquisitors.

Among the "rumors" which had been circulating were the following allegations:

- That officers had been improperly installed or not installed at all.
- That the spiritual needs of UNC students were not being met; in fact, that the students were being led down a Communist primrose path.
- That in one of his sermons he had stated that it was not important to him whether or not one believed in the virgin birth of Jesus
- That in some informal gathering he had

referred to the Lord's Supper as a "cocktail party."

- That Charles had helped arrange an interracial picnic and that Charles had invited a group of labor leaders, mostly black, to lunch in the basemen of the church
- That a white female student had been seen walking with a Negro on the UNC campus.
- That the FBI had written to the Chapel Hill Chief of Police declaring that Charles Jones was at the bottom of racial tensions breaking out in the Chapel Hill area.

We, the officers (the "Session"), had already been through a lot by this time; the Judicial Commission had put an extraordinary amount of effort into their assignment. They had many closed meetings during that year (1952) but in addition on several occasions they met in sessions open to officers of the various churches of the Presbytery . I think I attended all of these open meetings.

Meetings were held in rural and urban churches throughout the presbytery. Charlie was on leave but on those occasions when he was available, I was Charlie's chauffeur.

At one of the open meetings of the Judicial Commission, UNC President Frank Porter Graham, also a Presbyterian, made an eloquent, though possibly too long, speech in support of Charles, his character, his actions, his theology. "Take this man from Chapel Hill and you take my right arm," he thundered, "His work and his spirit is what the University of North Carolina is all about! He is a champion of the Fellowship of God and the Brotherhood of Man!"

On October 8-9, 1952 the Judicial Commission came to Chapel Hill and interviewed members of the church board. We were asked a lot of questions about theology. I definitely flunked on some of the questions; for example, I had never heard of

something called the "God Head"; one of these days I shall go to the library and find out what it does mean. I think I did better on some other questions: on questions of the relationship of Man to God, on the divinity of Jesus, and the like. These questions excited me. I had an opinion about all these matters, in fact, I was on a roll with these questions. Later, I learned that my interrogator described me as "very clever" ; I was so dumb that I took it as a complement!

Throughout this period we had nearly total support from the congregation at the University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill. For example, on December 14, 1952 when the final report was read, Dr. Wallace Caldwell offered a motion expressing confidence in Reverend Jones and requested that the Commission withdraw its recommendation; this motion passed by a vote of 156 - 14. Even in their final report the Judicial Commission acknowledged that ". . . this congregation is united by common affection and regard for its pastor, . . . "

In spite of all this support in Chapel Hill for Reverend Jones the officers (the "Session") could read the handwriting on the wall; we were doomed.

On March 22, 1953, a bit over a year after a few dissident members of the church had filed a petition which initiated the process, we met with the Judicial Commission in Chapel Hill to hear their report. I recall so clearly the tension as we sat there awaiting their arrival. Finally they filed in. We sat like statues to hear what they would have to say. The Chairman of the Commission, Reverend Z.T. Piephoff, wasted no time.

"We, the Judicial Commission of Orange Presbytery have examined the operation of this church and the conduct of the Minister. We shall start with the Board; none of you are Members of the Board and, in fact, never have been," he declared.

"But, sir," I exclaimed, "I was elected by the congregation and have served in that capacity for two years. By what logic can

you say that I 'never have been an officer in this church'."

"You were never properly installed," he rasped.

The Commission then stated that they had not examined whether or not the allegations I have listed above were correct; rather, they declared that these reports definitely "constituted a pattern." The report concluded by saying that this pattern clearly indicated that the Reverend Charles M. Jones had fallen short of honoring the vows he made at his ordination; hence should be relieved of his duties.

We still hung onto a straw. The Judicial Commission had reported to us but not to the Presbytery. Perhaps we could win in an open meeting with the very people who had set up the Judicial Commission. By some miracle the Presbytery might at the last minute reject the report.

No such luck.

Charles rode with me to the Covenant Presbyterian Church in Greensboro on February 9, 1953 where the last real hope died. Here we learned that Charles was finished as a Presbyterian minister and that he would receive from the Presbytery a letter of introduction to the denomination of his choice, well, any denomination other than Presbyterian. Charles was very silent all the way home and I was not of much help. For over two years he had looked at every grim situation and had found a silver lining. He mentioned no silver lining that day.

The Jones case didn't quite end there. We, the officers, decided to appeal to the Synod for relief; we asked for a trial. Henry Brandis, M.T. Van Hecke, John Graham, Frank Porter Graham and others did a marvelous job of preparing for this last stand. We wanted to smoke out the opposition and force them to deal with the rumors, to permit Charles to face his accusers, to distill from all the quarrels and innuendo about theology the essence of the case against the Reverend Charles M. Jones.

There was a brief flicker of hope when the Synod said 'OK, we shall have a trial.' This hope was dashed when the Synod denied our plea to hold the trial at the Synod level rather than in the Presbytery level. Charles declared that he could not get a fair trial in Orange Presbytery and conceded defeat. He announced his resignation from Orange Presbytery in letter addressed to the congregation on June 21, 1953.

Gloom settled in among Charles' many friends. But, like the observer who noted that one sees the stars best when the night is darkest, suddenly everything turned around! Where there had been despair suddenly there was hope. I was out of town, teaching in Summer Session at the University of Connecticut, when on August 1, 1953 a group of Charles' friends and other seekers for truth met to form the Community Church of Chapel Hill! They directed Ray Gould to write to Charles and ask if he would come to Chapel Hill as our first pastor.

Charles never mentioned the ordeal he experienced at the hands of the Presbytery in any of his later sermons in Chapel Hill nor did he discuss it in private conversation. I recall but one exception: I don't remember just what precipitated this comment but in his characteristic manner when he wanted to make a point, he lowered his head slightly, looked off into the distance, tugged at his right ear and murmured, "You know, that Commission, I guess they were right. I had no business being in that church."

In a M.A. theses written by Edward Johnston (University of Virginia 1973) it is noted that even before the investigation began, "Jones literally had become a free man theologically who was not imprisoned by traditional statements about religion."

Charles asked so many times for the Lord to help us "to grow in *grace*," yet I have never been able to write a definition of this beautiful word. But if I should ever have to provide a definition, I will only point to Preacher Jones and say "There it is!"

Charles believed in teaching by example.

# Charles M. Jones

Charles Miles Jones was born on January 8, 1906 in Nashville, Tennessee. He attended Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee and Columbia University in New York City; He prepared for the ministry at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia and by working side by side with laborers: In a rayon mill in Tennessee, in an automobile factory in Detroit, and in a restaurant in San Antonio.

Charles began his ministry in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1932, served as Minister at the Presbyterian Church in Brevard, North Carolina from 1936 until 1941, and was called to the University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill in 1941.

Almost immediately upon his arrival in Chapel Hill, he established relationships with University students that endured throughout his lifetime. One such group, the *Snuffbuckets*, continue to return to Chapel Hill to this day. It was the *Snuffbuckets* who, seven years after his death, founded *The Charles M. Jones Fellowship for Human Rights*.

Although Reverend Charles Jones and Chapel Hill seemed an ideal match he soon became a controversial figure across North Carolina largely because of attention bestowed on him by his views on racial justice. Actions and events which to some demonstrated his commitment to love and brotherhood became, to others, fuel for criticism.

Responding to an alleged "uproar" across the state, the Orange Presbytery appointed a Special Judicial Commission which, on November 21, 1952, after a year-long investigation recommended that Charles resign "for the welfare of the church". Although the congregation supported Charles to the end, no acceptable appeal channel was available. Efforts to secure a trial in open court failed; Charles resigned on June 21, 1953.

On August 2, 1953, Charles accepted a call to the newly formed Community Church of Chapel Hill; he served with integrity and distinction until his retirement on October 30, 1967.

Reverend Charles M. Jones died on April 6, 1993.

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**READ AN EXCITING AND COMPREHENSIVE BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES M. JONES  
GET READY TO CELEBRATE THE 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING IN 1953 OF  
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH OF CHAPEL HILL**

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**Faith, Grace and Heresy:  
The Biography of Reverend Charles M. Jones**

by Mark Pryor

This book documents the life of the man and the minister that was Reverend Charlie M. Jones. Tracing his story from a childhood in Tennessee, this book is a look at Chapel Hill's most troubled times through the eyes of one its most inspirational leaders. Written by Mark Pryor, a journalist and grandson of Jones, this biography is insightful, funny, inspirational and historically significant.

To read it is to understand how a man of unusual charisma, conviction and courage can help blaze the trail into a brighter and more just world.

*Faith, Grace and Heresy* is the most comprehensive available account of the issues which led to the founding of the Community Church of Chapel Hill. It is a must to those who wish to understand the powerful forces which contested for the loyalty and the emotions of thoughtful individuals during those troubled years. Readers will recognize that this book is not ancient history, rather that many theological and social issues remained unresolved by the civil rights struggles of the '60's and are on our doorstep even today.

Checks (\$21.00) for the purchase of this important book should be written to *Mark Pryor*. You may pick up your copy at the Community Church or arrange to have it sent to you by calling Joe Straley at 942-1694. *Faith, Grace and Heresy* also is available on the web, at [www.BarnesandNoble.com](http://www.BarnesandNoble.com) or at [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com).

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