

*Reflections on
My Call to Preach*

*For
Nettie Lee*

*Reflections on
My Call to Preach*
Connecting the Dots

FRED BRENNING CRADDOCK



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Preface

When first I was asked by Chalice Press to write a small volume on *The Call to Preach*, I was comfortable with saying “Yes”; the subject was as familiar as my own life, and the twelve months to prepare the manuscript was enough and to spare. Then a problem arose; the subject was as unfamiliar as my own life. At the end of twelve months, I had not one sentence. Difficulties bred difficulties.

When personal memory is one’s primary resource, one has to accept that remembering is not repeating. More than retrieval of deposited events is involved. When a boy’s tomorrow is related as yesterday, the firmest commitment to honest reporting must not claim disinterested accuracy. Even in a pledge to the truth and nothing but the truth, reader and writer acknowledge that memory leaks and twists.

The temptation to silence is almost overwhelming. For example, the material is very personal; who will read it, and where, and why? Once the words are released, all ownership is relinquished. Private words become public words at a price: the loss of intention. Added to the temptation to protect oneself is the felt need to satisfy the reader with recollections that are readily portable to the reader’s life and experiences. “Very helpful” is a response devoutly to be wished, but honesty resists tugs toward rewriting one’s life. And very early in the writing it becomes inescapably clear that this is not about me alone. I was, and am, a member of a family. I had parents and siblings. I had friends, and schoolmates, and teachers. And there was the church with its fellowship, its teachers, and its ministers. Memories of them are vital to the story, but who wants to inflict pain even when adhering to the worthy purpose of “telling it like it was”?

Perhaps the strongest temptation is to write of certainty when there was no certainty. A vision, a voice, an extraordinary constellation of events to silence doubters and those who constantly repeat “what a coincidence”: that would be helpful. Who wants to tell a story that is little more than a modest witness to the modesty of God?

In these pages I have attempted to be honest about my early life and respectful of those whose lives touched mine. If this recital prompts a reader to lay aside the book and to lay a new claim on his or her own history, risking an encounter with God in the process, then I will have been amply rewarded. In that hope, I trust you with these words.

My gratitude to Cyrus White, President and Publisher of the Christian Board of Publication, who patiently encouraged me past my hesitations, and to Pablo Jiménez, the Chalice Press editor who first contacted me about the project and would not leave me alone, calling into being what did not exist. And my thanks to Tammy Blair, more than a secretary, who converted my handwritten copy into a manuscript acceptable to the editor. Any errors in the book are as much mine as the rest of it, and I share ownership of them with no one.

Fred Brenning Craddock
Cherry Log, Georgia
September, 2008

Introduction

There are three times when one can know an event: in advance of it, as in rehearsal, or as in a classroom in preparation; at the time of the event, while it is going on, as in a wedding, or as in a baptism, or as in a military skirmish; or following the event, when it is over, in reflection on it, as after a sermon, or after a debate, or after a trip. Each perspective has limitations, but the one offering the most understanding is reflection or memory. Memory suffers from unwarranted criticism. Of course, we have all known since Psychology 101 that memory leaks and twists and even erases the unpleasant. We know that remembering is more than a simple transaction of deposit and retrieval. Memory is more like a flowing river, being affected by the land through which it moves. And once we accept that remembering is more than, and different from, repeating, then we are ready to embrace memory as a primary source of understanding, of identity, of hope.

I say this to alert the reader to the fact that the following pages are memory sketches, notations on recollections, and as such bear the traits of all remembering. The perception is offered as the reality, without historical documents to confirm or to contradict what is narrated. In preparation for writing, no research was done; with the majority of these episodes there was none to be done. Of course, I could have gone to a library or a courthouse to get the proper spelling of a name, to confirm the accuracy of a date, or to be sure of the number of children in a household. But I didn't; these certainties would add nothing to the story. Besides, historical research is difficult to restrain. Once begun, it grows, consuming time and offering attractive

detours. Before long one is into genealogies, which take us to Adam and Eve and the question, what was I doing that brought me here? It seemed wise not to go down that road.

I did at the outset have a conversation with the oldest living member of my family, a cousin in her mid-nineties, in order to get confirmation of a certain name. The conversation failed; she suffers from dementia. I should also acknowledge two other “research” efforts. Within a year of this writing I enjoyed a brief reunion with my two surviving siblings, Al and Roland. We were at Al’s home, which is not many miles from our birthplace. The location itself prompted remembering. At one point I tried to steer the conversation in the direction of our father. The trip stalled out rather quickly and so we moved in another direction. The third attempt to undergird my memories with verifiable information was going with the two of them to the three places we had lived in the growing-up years. Of the two houses in town in which we had lived, one remains, but, were it not for the address, we would not have known it was once our home. The trip to the farm where we were born was depressing. The house is gone, all the out buildings are gone, the land is not cultivated, and instead of cotton, corn, and tomatoes are briars, weeds, and underbrush. My research ended. Photographs of grandparents, parents, and siblings exist, of course, but none of them informed my search. The reader will have to be content with my memories; there will be no footnotes. But no matter: nothing here is offered as normative, nor enviable—maybe not even portable. I certainly hope there is nowhere in these pages any implied claim that an experience of mine, or the sum total of them, constitutes the way one is called of God. No one’s experience circumscribes truth; much that is true and of God occurs while I am asleep, totally unaware.

These efforts at recall focus on the first eighteen years of my life; that is, up until I arrived at college in preparation for Christian ministry. I chose to confine myself to these years because they were formative. Just how formative the early years

are was recently confirmed to me on a visit to Toronto. I was there to preach and the host church quartered me elegantly. I enjoyed the hospitality of a hotel for retirees, retirees who could afford the luxury of the place. Every guest had every need anticipated and cared for, in style. Dinner was formal—in dress, in tableware, in food, in service. During these splendid meals, luxurious and abundant, I noticed many guests took from their tables small packets of sweetener, salt, pepper, and cream. They stealthily put these in pockets and purses. I was stunned. On the day of my departure, I called my observation to the attention of the manager. I didn't want to be a snitch; I wanted an interpretation. He smiled, said he knew, and every two weeks, when guests were at dinner, workers went into the rooms and cleared out the contraband. "You see," he said, "all the guests here, in their early years, experienced the Great Depression." Obviously, all the later years of prosperity did not fully erase the uncertainty, the economic privation, and the fear of hunger. I have enjoyed sixty years of full and fulfilling ministry but, no doubt, the early years have left their footprints on me. If I could call up those years, I told myself, perhaps I could locate persons, places, and events that God used to direct my life toward ministry.

But it has not been easy, in part because of my chronological distance from those years. One can add to that hurdle that many powerful experiences of persons, places, and events come between today and my childhood and youth. Such memories tend to dwarf earlier ones. Old black-and-white flickering film is no match for High Definition and color. And I am sure some person or place or event of the earlier years now lies hidden behind larger, more vivid episodes, beyond memory's ability to retrieve.

Of course, not every memory can be entertained and included in this narrative. Not all qualify, but having said that raises the question of how *any* memory qualifies. If I hold "Called to Preach" as a magnet over my early years, then I would find what I was looking for. Some of such circular thinking

is probably unavoidable, but I think I can honestly say I am open to discoveries, positive and negative, clear and vague, persuasive and contradictory, and therefore able to maintain respect for God's speaking and God's silence. I certainly do not want to bend the stories of my life to make them fit a desired pattern and move my life to an inevitable end. I have called this exercise "Connecting the Dots," but the reader should know that I do not know where all the dots are. To this day, "God called" and "I decided" are experienced as two sides of the same coin. I did not know in my first eighteen years, but since have learned the truth of Paul's unusual word to a church: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12b–13, NRSV).

The pages that follow, therefore, record my memories as I sit on my own shoulder, but I do not at any time sit on God's shoulder. To do so would be to view life's fabric from the pattern side. To use a common analogy, the underside of embroidery is a tangle of threads with no discernible design; the upper side bears the pattern: clear, intentional, and meaningful. One lives one's whole life viewing the underside, but trusting there is design not yet in sight. For some, faith is so strong that those believers claim glimpses of the design. Only a person who sits on God's shoulder has such a perspective. As you will notice from these pages, I do not sit there. But you will also notice that I believe God is active in the shaping of my life. Of that I have no doubt.

1

Before I Was Born

“My name is Brenning Craddock.” So I responded to the woman helping to herd college freshmen through orientation. “Your name?” she asked, not even looking up, her voice quite indifferent. “Brenning Craddock,” I repeated. “Beg pardon?” “Brenning Craddock.” “I’m sorry?” “Brenning Craddock” “You’ll have to spell it.” “F-R-E-D.” She felt my disgust and said, “Next; your name please.” Thus began the life of Fred Craddock.

Actually, I was already Fred; Fred Brenning, as was my father. Although bearing the same name, our identities were different in the family and in the community: he was Fred; I was Brenning. My three brothers and I all used our middle names; William Walter was Walter, John Alvin was Alvin, Louis Roland was Roland, Fred Brenning was Brenning. Granted, sometimes my name was a problem. “Brennen” some said; “Brennan” some wrote. A close friend named his firstborn “Brennan,” after me, he said. Even my daughter named my first grandson after me. “Brennan,” said the birth announcement. “But, Laura, that’s not my name.” “I know, but that’s the way everyone says it and

spells it.” Oh, well, it was sometimes a burden to me, too. “Be sure you write your full name on your paper before you turn it in.” I did, but again I was the last one out to the playground.

As a child, more than once I quizzed my father about our common name. My questions were two. One, why was I, the fourth child and third son, named after him? Why not Walter, my oldest brother? After one of his usual cock-and-bull stories (I think it involved a revelation from a passing hobo), he said the midwife assured him that the first child would be a boy, as was obvious by the unborn “riding high” in the womb. The boy would be named Fred Brenning Jr. When Momma brought forth her first born she was not named Fred but Frieda. Daddy said he and Momma dropped the plan for a Junior, returning to it when it was my turn to be born.

Question two: In a family that named children after relations, why was he Fred Brenning? I never heard of a cousin Fred or grandpa Fred or uncle Fred. As for Brenning, I never heard of anybody anywhere in the world named that. It seemed weird. I braced myself for a story, and I got one. This one seemed true, but he was such a masterful storyteller, all his tales seemed true. Usually I didn’t care whether his stories were true or false; they did their work, creating alternative worlds in which I could live. But I had something at stake in this one; this was my name we were talking about. For some reason it seemed important to me: was there somewhere at sometime a person who was the source of my name? If so, who was he? What did he do? What kind of person was he? Did I carry in my mind, my body, and my blood something more of this person than his name? I needed to know. I couldn’t ask Grandmother Craddock; she was dead. Nor Grandfather Craddock; he, too, was dead. I asked Momma. She was a latecomer to the Craddock clan, knowing none of them until she met my father, but did she know if what he told me was true? I could believe her. She had an uncanny ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. I had many times been impaled on her sword of truth: “Did you go swimming in Sugar Creek? Did you lose your report card?”

Is this all the change Mr. Cook gave you?" She and the truth were inseparable.

"Is what Daddy told me about his name and mine the truth?"

"Yes."

"But how do you know it is not one of his stories?"

"His mother told me. She named him. She ought to know."

I was satisfied. Almost.

Before I tell you the story, I need to explain the "almost." You see, Grandma Craddock's maiden name was Collinsworth. I realize that is a fact without significance to most of you, but it is of immense significance to every Craddock who came from Wales to settle in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. The Collinsworths and the Craddocks, neighbors in rural Crockett and Gibson Counties of West Tennessee, prospered as landowners and farmers, intermarried, and continued to prosper. Then the feud of the early twentieth century tarnished both families. No need to explore here the causes; it is enough to say two deaths were ruled accidental, one self-defense, and one shrouded in mystery. A gunfight in the Territory of New Mexico took the life of a Collinsworth. Court records there closed the books on the case: an escalating dispute between neighbors, a "fair" fight; no one was charged. No Craddock was mentioned.

Deaths ended but animosity and colorful stories did not. Thirty years after the feud I took a train to Columbia, Missouri, to visit my brother Walter, a journalism student at the university there. On the return trip, the elderly conductor refused to accept my ticket. "Why? No question was raised when I purchased the ticket." "We don't stop in Humboldt," said the conductor. "Why not?" "Too dangerous" he said. "I don't understand." "If the Craddocks don't kill you, the Collinsworths will." I took out my wallet, showed my identity, he sat down, explained that he was making a joke. Early in his career on the railroad, he always got the latest news about

the feud when the train stopped in Humboldt. “No offense intended.” “None taken.”

The feud, the stories, even the memories are gone. I once attended a party with a Collinsworth girl. My wife is related by marriage to the Collinsworths. Hostilities, even suspicions, have ceased. But in the early 1930s, raising a question about what a Collinsworth told a Craddock, and vice versa, was not surprising. But my mother was certain: what Grandma Craddock (nee Collinsworth) told her about the origin of the name Fred Brenning was the truth. Here is what Momma said Grandma said.

Daddy was born in the evening of December 5, 1888, and his name was waiting for him. It had been since his conception. Grandma was a faithful member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. She was especially serious about John Wesley’s accent on sanctification, which translated into strict moral and ethical instruction in the home as well as the church. As the mother of one daughter and several sons, Grandma was determined to bring them up in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Whatever else such nurture and admonition involved, it certainly included no alcohol, no tobacco, no card playing, no dancing, no profanity, no lying or stealing, and, of course, strict observance of the Sabbath. Even this partial list of “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt nots” makes it clear Grandma would need wisdom, encouragement, and, to put it bluntly, backup. A friend at church suggested a book she had recently read which would re-enforce the Bible, inform, and perhaps inspire her sons, including the newborn in her arms. The book was written for boys, and was about a special boy. That special boy was named Fred Brenning.

Grandma acquired the book, read it with appetite and approval, and tried (successfully? unsuccessfully?) to get her older sons to read it. So impressed was Grandma that she told Grandpa that when their next child was born, and if it was a boy, he would be named Fred Brenning. Grandpa offered no objection although he very likely never read the book. All that

Momma related to me about the book was that it was a biography of a boy who was rescued from wild and unruly companions by a Sunday school teacher, concerned relatives, and several itinerant preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The boy eventually heard and responded to the call to preach, a call to which he was faithful, overcoming many obstacles and hardships along the way. He became widely known, in and out of the church, and much admired. Based on my mother's report, it is no wonder Grandma became enthralled with Fred Brenning and wanted to pass his name and, hopefully, I am sure, his many Christian virtues, to her son.

I do not know if Grandma entertained a prayerful hope that her son would grow up to be a preacher like the first Fred Brenning. She may have, but if she did, she never voiced that hope to her son. At least, that is what my father said. On one occasion, when I was a pre-teen, I raised the subject with him.

"Did Grandma want you to be a preacher like the man after whom you were named?"

"I never was a member of the Methodist Church."

"I know that, but did she want you to be a preacher of any kind?"

"If she did, she never said so to me."

"Did you ever think about being a preacher?"

"I never gave the notion a moment's thought. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know; I was just wondering."

I do not recall ever again raising the subject. I did learn later of a series of wounds inflicted by the church on Daddy's family that seemed more painful to him than to the other family members. In due season, as an adolescent my father joined a church (The Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]) but remembered pains made his membership something less than one of full commitment. I will talk more of this matter at a later time when I explore my relation to my father. But not now.

I was satisfied by the story of the source of the name Fred Brenning and I put the story to bed. As a child I was proud

to be named for my father who was named for a preacher. As a youth, I was silent about it, even on one occasion denying the “rumor” in a circle of friends who were ready to lay on me nicknames that would convey their lack of admiration for a preacher. To be called “Rev” or “Preacher” was the last thing needed by an adolescent boy of fragile ego struggling to be “in” with those regarded as “in.”

However, I was pleased years later, after I had almost completed my career as a preacher, to have the connection between my life and the preacher of my grandmother’s book resurface, and in a surprising and confirming way. It happened in Cullman, Alabama, where I was engaged in a preaching-teaching event at the invitation of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I think the year was 2005—but, if it was, in fact, 2004, who cares? My slippage is not life threatening. A feature of that event in Cullman was a luncheon for ministers from the city and across the state. It was a pleasant occasion, with everyone present being pleasantly surprised to see someone else present. One of my several surprises was the attendance of Robert and Kay Stegall, who I thought were still ministering in Little Rock. They were newly retired and happily at home in Florence, a nearby city. Robert and Kay were natives of my hometown, Humboldt, Tennessee, and so we had a bit of catching up to do. In the context of our banter—half-news, half-gossip—our conversation took a most surprising turn.

“Oh, Dr. Craddock, I have a book that belongs to you,” said Kay. “It’s in my purse. Just a minute.” She quickly returned with her purse. “I’m glad I remembered to bring it; I intended to. When we were packing to move from Little Rock I came across a small box of books, which had been in the front closet for several years. A neighbor who had retired and was returning to Kentucky brought them by, explaining that since they were religion books they might be of interest to us. I thanked her, put the box in the closet and forgot them until we ourselves were packing to move. Only this one interested me. I showed it to Bob and he said you might know of it.” At that moment

she handed me a small, dark, and obviously old book. The title: *Fred Brenning*. It was *the* book.

Bob and Kay, sharing with me hometown, home church, home schools, knew me as Brenning and my father as Fred. A book bearing both names would surely be important or at least of interest to me. They accepted my fumbling words of amazement and gratitude as I related a brief version of the role of the book in the life of my family, even though neither I nor my father had ever actually seen the book. Kay said, "I'm glad I saved the book; now it is yours." Bob said, "I tried to read it, but, frankly, another story of a boy growing up to be preacher did not interest me." A few more minutes of giving and receiving gratitude and we said our goodbyes.

This had to be the book, but, of course, I had to examine it carefully, to read it, to be absolutely sure that this was the book that moved my grandmother and that gave my father his name and me mine. *A True Story for Boys* was the subtitle, Timothy Trimmer the author. The copy I held was from the seventh printing. The date was 1877; my father was born in 1888. It was published in Nashville, Tennessee, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. On the back of the title page there is a note from the editor which reads, in part: "The Author, in making us acquainted with Fred Brenning, writes about a religion that was experienced and enjoyed—about a call to preach that stirred the soul as with the voice of God—about a young itinerant's trials that must have been felt to have been so well described."

It is not likely that you will ever see this book or read it; that is not a matter of importance to either of us. It might, however, be of interest to you that several facts from the life and ministry of Fred Brenning bear a striking resemblance to the life and ministry of Fred Brenning Craddock. For example, Fred Brenning was "noticeably short in stature"; I am 5' 4" on a good day. Or again, Fred Brenning was a product of Sunday school; I was more influenced by Sunday school teachers than by preachers. Or again, Fred Brenning began his ministry in

the Southern Appalachians; so did I. Again, Fred Brenning began as an "Exhorter"; so did I. (An Exhorter was something of an apprentice preacher, whose usual duty was to listen to the sermon and then exhort the congregation to live out the message presented. Sometimes the Exhorter prepared the listeners for the sermon by teaching an appropriate lesson from the Bible. On some occasions, often created by emergencies, the Exhorter preached.) Fred Brenning's first preaching station was in a village called Oak Post; mine was in a village called Post Oak.

I will not bother you further with more resemblances, coincidences, and parallels. I need a little time to ponder.

