

THEY CALLED HIM
"RABBI"

ELDER CALVIN EDWIN
MOSELEY, JR.

The Original Teacher of Preachers
at Oakwood University
(1934-1951)

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R I S I N G

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Demopolis? First hearing the name, you may think it sounds so un-Alabamian. In fact, for me initially, it was a throw-back to “Acropolis” in the Bible book of Acts chapter 22 where Paul delivers his famous speech on a high elevation of Mars Hill in Athens, Greece. Somehow, I suspected the words “Demopolis” and “Acropolis” had a kindred history. True enough, both are of Greek origin and wear the identical suffix (“polis” meaning “city”), thus Demopolis so named for “city of the people” while Acropolis being the “high city” focal point of the famed Mars Hill in Athens. It was not too much of a stretch for me to derive from their etymology a prediction of sorts that a son would be born in a city of the people in Alabama and rise to a destiny of rare service for God in high places. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Demopolis census reported a 2,606 population which rose to 7,377 by 1960, then continuing to at least 7,000 into the twenty first century through 2014, the largest city in Marengo Country.

There Calvin Edwin Moseley, Jr., was born on January 6, 1906 to Lillie Belle (Dixon) Moseley who was a mid-wife and to Calvin Edwin Moseley, Sr. who worked at the plastering trade. Slightly over 2,500 in population at the time, Demopolis situated itself at the confluence of the Tombigbee and Black Warrior Rivers in north Marengo County just below the equator of the state toward southern Alabama. Founded between 1817 and 1821, after the fall

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of Napoleon’s Empire and named by French expatriates and other French migrants who settled in the United States, the city’s name was chosen to honor the democratic ideals behind the people-centered endeavor.

Early history of the area reveals an ethnic “coat of many colors” embodying native Americans, African Americans, French, German, Spanish, Swedish, English, and Irish. While Calvin, Sr., was of obvious African descent, Lillie Belle his wife bore clear clues also of European lineage with forebears from England, Germany, and Ireland. Her father happened to be German Jew whose tombstone inscription found by Calvin’s younger brother Earnest reads, “James Hughes Dixon, born in Berlin, Germany.” Mr. Dixon managed to father two families, one white and one black who functioned as separate groups but fully aware of each branch. Calvin, Jr. and brother Ernest and their immediate offspring remember that grandfather Dixon was known to them as “Santa Claus.” Lillie Belle was one of seven children born to her mother and father. This maternal side of the family (father James Hughes Dixon and three of his sons) were painters and paper hangers. Two brothers of father James operated the largest grocery business in Demopolis. A sister of Lillie Belle “inherited” a drug store and two food stores at the death of her husband which were then managed by her six sons. On the paternal side of the family, father Calvin, Sr. had an aunt who became a school principal while another close relative owned and operated a barber shop—all in Demopolis, city of the people. In other words, examples of industry, diligence, and work among relatives provided role models and motivational backdrop for brothers Calvin, Jr. and Ernest to aspire and rise above the ordinary.

This is not to overlook racial tensions and social sensitivities of the Demopolis environment. On occasions, Calvin, Sr. and mother Lillie Belle as husband and wife found it the better part of wisdom that she take a seat in the back of their jalopy due to her very light skin complexion while her husband sat up front at the

steering wheel posing as a chauffeur “driving Miss Daisy.” Apparently, however, the atmosphere seemed sufficiently peaceful and livable that descendants would value perpetuating their heritage. Decades later, Calvin Edwin, Jr. and wife Harriet would attend “The Weiss-Sledge Family Reunions” a biennial gathering (which to this day into the twenty-first century) continues their family camaraderie and remembrances. But let us not get ahead of the Calvin E. Moseley, Jr. story.

Calvin, Jr. had not only a younger brother named Ernest but also a sister who died in infancy. Although Calvin and Ernest enjoyed a rather normal, carefree, fun-filled, energetic boyhood, their parents taught them very early the value and virtues of honest labor. Nevertheless, to them and their young peers, four seasons comprised their year: seasons of “marbels,” “tops,” “kites,” and “baseball.” Yet, in the Moseley household, making a living was very serious business. Having learned the plastering trade from a Seventh-day Adventist church brother named Ed Jones, the father of Calvin, Jr. and Ernest passed on to them the ability to plaster while also encouraging them to stay in school and complete their academic education. Father Calvin spurred them along this two dimensional track despite his being a “teenage dropout” or maybe because of it.

That two track pattern of school and work had been set for Calvin, Sr. himself before his two sons were born. When in high school, he met his future wife, Lillie Belle Dixon.

Their budding romance burst into full bloom, and both considered themselves sufficiently mature to marry which they did—he only nineteen and she a “sweet sixteen.” Now for sure, Calvin, Sr. would need to throw his plastering skill and growth of income into full gear, face the responsibilities of manhood and maturity, and support the joy of marrying his “school girl sweetheart.” Passing through the threshold of marriage, however, its thrills and merriments notwithstanding, Calvin, Sr. faced the reality of dwindling work opportunities in Demopolis brought on by slowdown of the

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construction market. Like all serious plasterers, he would move from place to place—wife and sons in tow—to wherever his trade would bring gainful employment. Though not a religious man at the time in the sense of having a formal creed, one thing for sure, his family came first, a standard whose principle (though probably unknown to him) clearly reflected the Biblical precept of Paul the apostle who says in 1 Timothy 5:8, “If anyone does not provide for his . . . immediate family, he . . . is worse than an unbeliever.” (NIV)

Continuous search for employment led the Moseley family across the Alabama state line to Meridian, Mississippi, fifty-six miles west where abundant work rose to a respectable level. Here Calvin, Sr. set up residence and headquarters for his life and labor. The Meridian move also launched his sons’ formal education in a private parochial school. Calvin, Jr. later said the private educational program developed for him a deeper interest in religious matters which he found continual delight in rehearsing to his parents the Bible stories learned.

That interest for Calvin, Jr. grew and with it a vivid imagination triggered by a film he viewed of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. How impressed was he of the dramatic scene? The six year old persuaded his younger brother Ernest of three to allow his hands and feet to be tied to a wooden cross which he and playmates had made. The group raised and leaned the cross and its victim against the wall of the house. Was it not time now for an audience?

So thrilled with their achievement, the one playing like a motion picture producer, Calvin, Jr., hastened to call his mother to behold the wonderful production. In astonishment and alarm she rushed to the rescue. The playmates of Calvin, Jr. took their flight at her forceful reprimand. Although his imagination had promise, he learned he could not always portray Biblical scenes too literally.

Whether in Demopolis or Meridian, his pace and level of learning particularly during pre-teen years placed him in classes where

he was the youngest pupil and told by classmates he was too young to compete. He met the challenge with determination and scholarship excelling in spelling, math, and geography. Another unique situation forced him to just role with the punches. His teacher and principal at the Demopolis school (before moving to Meridian) happened to be his “Aunt Minnie.” She sought to shield him from potential harassment by other students because of his scholarship at such a young and tender age. Her solution? Sweet old auntie showed her impartiality as principal-teacher by giving her nephew Calvin, Jr. lower marks and grades than he deserved. How injustice aided justice in this case, we may find it difficult to explain. Perhaps in context of “family,” considering all dynamics unknown to us today, conceivably the teacher saved little nephew from potential irreparable damage inflicted by older bullies. Well, that’s my apology. What are your thoughts? Nicknamed “Dumpty” or sometimes “Dump” due to his being stocky, maybe a bit ovoid, and well-built, Calvin, Jr. could conceivably discourage some student bullies, but Aunt Minnie was not taking any chances. Nothing distracted her watch-care over her nephew.

Reaching his early teens, Calvin’s feelings of romance began to surface. At that same time, the United States was engaged in World War I, and the spirit of patriotism soared high. Students in his class were assigned by Aunt Minnie to write a paper on war bonds whose purchase greatly helped to finance the war. Calvin put his pen to work but not on war bonds. Instead, to a female classmate he wrote: “My dear loving pretty one, as sure as the grass grows round the stump, you are my darling sugar lump.” Beginning to warm up to his subject with even more elaborate expression, all of a sudden he lost his romantic musing replaced by a heavy strap dancing heavily across his back by none other than his “favorite” aunt. Needless to say, classmates went delirious with laughter, and Calvin, Jr. flushed with shame. It became very clear to him that romance in the classroom was not the time or place. He sobered up,

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learned well his lesson, and went on to win first place in his essay on “Baby Bonds and Thrift Stamps.” His achievement, published on the front page of the Demopolis Daily newspaper, marked another milestone toward his rise to personal development and maturity. Learning priorities owed eternal thanks to an ever watchful Aunt Minnie.

Reaching the age of twelve or so, he could clearly say that among flying kites, shooting marbles, spinning tops, and playing baseball, the latter became his favorite and in due time his downfall. When he played the game confidently and daringly tossing his protective catcher’s mask aside while positioned behind the batter, one day the ball ricocheted from a foul ball tip, landed on his unprotected forehead just above his eyes, causing him to “lick the dust.” Calvin’s customary decisiveness turned him away from playing baseball and flipped his attention to other interests—one of which was music for example.

He said later on in life that one of his earliest brushes with music that really entered his conscious awareness came from a black man named Kit who was both blind and a store owner. Kit would often walk through the neighborhood singing while peddling his wares. A number of his songs were Negro spirituals sung lustily and leaving their imprint on an impressionable young mind. Calvin, Jr. often lay in bed, listening to this singing as people would come out to hear the sightless singer and coax him along by shouting: “Sing it, Kit, sing it!” And sing it he did, rhythmically counting his steps, beating time with his cane while hawking his commodities throughout the community. His tunes reached into the heart of a pre-adolescent youngster who, when not outside to witness Kit, listened through the walls of his room. Who would have guessed that the same boy decades into the future would himself show special talent, perhaps even genius, for melody and harmony, lyrics and rhythm? Who would have foreseen his musical aptitude expressed later in the halls of higher education as well as church environs all over America?

The spiritual journey of Calvin, Jr. actually began quite early when at his mother's knee he heard her portraying in song the misery of helpless and unfortunate infants and parents. One line of a song that brought tears to his young eyes and stuck with him over the years are: "Gnats and flies picking in their eyes, poor little baby needs mommie." The vivid picture of such a pitiful plight formed a background which fanned the flames of his inner desire to become a Christian. Most people in the little town of Demopolis were religious and professed to being Baptists or Methodists. Calvin was sent to Baptist Sunday School and remembered that from time to time revivals lasting one or two weeks were conducted by either the pastor or guest preachers. Front pew was reserved for what they called the "mourners' bench" where sinners and mourners would sit and show their desire to "get religion." Eventually, Calvin, Jr. as an adolescent made his way to the "mourners' bench" to "get religion and come through." Three consecutive years without success, however, meant for him that if not now maybe later he would realize a sincere relation with God for which he longed. Meanwhile, he placed religion on the "back burner." Yet his mind would frequently recall the setting and faith of those who testified to have "come through" and who sang a little song that declared: "I died one time, ain't gonna die no more." "The Lord took my feet out of the miry clay and put them on a rock to stay." For Calvin, Jr. himself, fires of conversion were temporarily banked to burst into flame at a future time of God's own choosing. In the meantime, he would continue rising and developing toward promise and fulfillment.