Chapter 7

One asks, “What will happen to me?” Another, “What is right?”
And this is the difference between a slave and a free person.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“To Break the Fetters of Conformity”
Allenwood Federal Prison

On Christmas Eve, 1958, Maurice McCrackin was not trimming the Christmas tree or hanging stockings from the mantel. Instead, the fifty-three-year-old minister was entering the Allenwood Federal Prison Farm to begin serving a six-month sentence for contempt of court related to his war-tax resistance. Allenwood, located on the Susquehanna River in central Pennsylvania, was a prison farm connected with the U.S. penitentiary at Lewisburg. Formerly it had been an army barracks, and the men there slept in dormitories on army cots.

McCrackin found himself stimulated rather than depressed by the challenge of the environment. One favorite maxims is “Doing beats stewing,” and his prison journal makes it clear that he followed his own advice. His prison journal is remarkably lacking in self-centeredness and self-pity. It is filled with the lore and routines of prison life and especially with stories of the prisoners’ lives and their relationships with each other. McCrackin was an active and sympathetic listener at Allenwood and remained a pastor and a peacemaker in prison; this activist approach made his prison time easier.

McCrackin knew that he had made the right decision in refusing to pay war taxes, even though the act of conscience had brought him to Allenwood. He was ready to pay this price and was a bit annoyed when he learned of some backdoor attempts to secure his release. In a letter to friends he urged them not to undermine his imprisonment. “For a year and a half I have been under severe attack, which finally resulted in my imprisonment. I have gone through a good deal and am ready for conscience’ sake to endure more. I pray that without interference I will be allowed to take the course I believe to be right.”

In contrast to his stance in the Cincinnati jail, McCrackin decided to cooperate to some extent in everyday prison routines at Allenwood. He wore the white prison garb and agreed to work in the kitchen, cutting butter into individual patties. This work he judged to be useful without being in any way exploitative.

As the January snows covered the forests and fields around Allenwood, McCrackin began adjusting to the tedium of prison routine. He was happy when the routine was broken up by letters and books sent by friends and supporters. In his absence, U. S. Fowler, the Congregational minister who had joined McCrackin’s parish after he turned down for membership by a segregated church elsewhere in the city, was conducting services at Cincinnati-St. Barnabas, and others were stepping forward to take on new responsibilities. McCrackin’s part was to write and send them a weekly meditation, which served to maintain their sense of community with him even as he endured this painful separation.

McCrackin was especially happy to receive letters from others who had gotten into trouble by trying to remain loyal to a higher law. One such letter came from Clarence Jordan, the Baptist minister who had founded Koinonia Community in Georgia. For years Jordan and Koinonia had been under attack because of their policy of racial integration. On occasion shots had been fired at the community from the highway and dynamite exploded in their midst. McCrackin’s life and troubles had become closely linked with Jordan’s after he had visited the community and then worked to raise funds and other forms of support for the interracial cooperative. Jordan enclosed a
he had written to McCrackin celebrating the triumph of a free conscience. The midsection of this poem praises McCrackin:

You are free of hatred and bitterness, those diseases of the soul which blight and blast it and mar its Creator’s image.

You are free of the blood of multitudes which is spilled by our weapons of destruction.

You are free to love whomsoever you will.

You are free to walk without shame before your fellowmen.

You are free to pray honestly to God.

Mac, you are free.

And I want to be free too.

I’m sick and tired of my bondage.

I want to break the fetters of conformity, the chains of iniquitous traditions, the shackles of social pressure.\(^2\)

Of course, Jordan himself had also broken “the shackles of social pressure.” McCrackin was deeply moved by this poem, coming as it did from another person who had suffered for putting his beliefs into practice.

As the days passed, McCrackin found himself less preoccupied with the reasons for his imprisonment and more focused on his new environment. He grew ever more convinced of the thoroughly corrupt nature of the prison system. Reflecting on the arbitrary censorship of his mail (two books on Quakerism, the *Story of Quakerism* and *Friends for 300 Years* were temporarily withheld from him), he wrote, “In prison they not only take possession of the body but try to take possession of the mind as well.”

McCrackin was disturbed by the effects this corrupt system had on all of the human beings in prison—the administrators and guards as well as the prisoners. He began to see “the evil of the system which takes men, humiliates, embitters them, uses them in slave labor and causes them to do with full sense of moral justification things they would not do in normal society.”

A minor incident sheds light on this process. One day a prison guard, called “K” in the journal, inspected McCrackin’s bed. The guard looked at the adequately made bed and yelled, “You can tighten up that blanket. You better be learning and getting ready for tomorrow’s inspection.” McCrackin, disgruntled, tidied up the bed a little, but the guard persisted: “Come on. Fix the bed! You can do better than that.” McCrackin’s bedmaking could not satisfy the guard, no matter how meticulously it was done. Later, he pondered how to respond in the future to petty harassment:

Again this proves the point that protest, if it is to be made, must be made a total one against the system and be one of complete non-cooperation. To have given “K” an argument would
have launched him on a tirade. It would not have been understood, I imagine, by the other men who feel it is always an achievement in dignity to go ahead and without argument do what you are told, showing yourself bigger than the officer who is riding you, and that you can never win anyway. I think I need to be better prepared for a similar situation and know well ahead of time what I will do—either go ahead and follow the orders without showing any resentment, or quietly but firmly and without anger be ready to tell them you won’t follow instructions and tell them why.

It was difficult not to express anger at such provocation, especially when prison officials worked hard to elicit it. After refusing to allow Miriam Nicholas, a friend and member of West Cincinnati-St. Barnabas Church, to visit on the grounds that she was not on the official correspondent list, a prison official said to McCrackin: “You are bitter and resentful.” McCrackin wrote in his journal, “I assured him I was neither, and he said, ‘You’ve got to be.’ I told him I had no bitterness or resentment against him or any of the officers but there were regulations I didn’t agree with.”

McCrackin attempted to respond as he imagined Gandhi or Jesus would, recalling Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps* and his own understanding of Gandhi as one who sought to bring out the best in those who opposed him. Gandhi, the Hindu, was better than most Christians in following Jesus’ command, “Love your enemies, pray for your persecutors.”

The corruption and harassment he saw and experienced caused McCrackin to question the purpose of prisons. He began to understand that prisons existed for punishment only. Any claim of rehabilitating the prisoners was pure sham. He wrote in his journal:

Nothing is being done to rehabilitate or help the men in the restoration to society. Under these conditions they become more and more bitter. For this reason they will be less able to adjust later than they are now. The system is purely punitive and the talk of rehabilitation is sheer propaganda.

His strong identification with his fellow prisoners allowed McCrackin to establish close relationships with them. He was especially drawn to a group of prisoners from West Virginia, despite their arrest for bootlegging and his own antipathy to alcohol. From them he learned that after the coal mines had closed down, they and their families had barely subsisted on small welfare allotments. Attempting to ease their poverty by making moonshine, they were caught, convicted, and sentenced to Allenwood. Now they worried about how their wives and children were surviving the winter back home. McCrackin described the process of befriending them:

I seem to be getting the confidence of more and more of the men. I’m sure that some at first thought I might preach to them or in some way judge them for what they have done. I’ve been very slow to pass any kind of moral judgment, have done a lot of listening and shown no shock whatever might be said. I remember what was said and try to find opportunities of becoming closer to the person. It is my hope that later on we may again get on the subject, and by then I would know him well enough to be more frank in giving my ideas, trying hard to word them so that it is clear they are my feelings, and not that I think he was a so-and-so . . . for having done such a thing or for entertaining such an idea.

McCrackin mixed easily with whites, blacks, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and others within the prison, as he had on the outside. Once when he was discussing the integration of the prison with a group of his fellow inmates, the subject of body odor came up. McCrackin said that he thought the myth that Negroes smelled different from whites had been demolished. Yet, McCrackin said, he’d
heard that the Chinese believe they can smell white people. “Well,” said a black inmate, “I can smell you, Mac.” The exchange led to friendly laughter. This openness had an amazing effect on some of McCrackin’s fellow prisoners, as one journal passage in particular demonstrates:

“Rchiney” and I were talking at breakfast, March 5. He said that someday he would surprise me and show up at my church on some Sunday morning. He went on to say, “You are the first white person whom I have met who seems to me completely free from bias; it’s good to meet a person like you; it keeps a person from being disillusioned. You accept me as a child of God for whom Christ died.” There is nothing that moves me as much as to have a Negro person make a statement like that.

It was not long before McCrackin could write, “The men here are good company and many are becoming very good friends.” Soon they began to trust him with their innermost thoughts:

Last night he [a prisoner] said, “You may have wondered at first about me. I wasn’t too friendly with you. I guess I let others influence me when some were saying, ‘Look at this preacher who hasn’t paid his taxes for ten years and he only gets six months!”’ Now his mind is burdened with the injustice of a government that will do what it is doing to those who won’t fight in war and who won’t pay income taxes to support war.

Many prisoners expressed sympathy for McCrackin and rage at the injustice of his imprisonment. “Reuben” put it bluntly:

It makes me boil when I see what the government is doing. It’s like Hitler’s Germany. ... It’s a G— D— shame that the government makes such a spectacle of itself by putting [someone like you] in jail for their religious beliefs. This is pitiful!

McCrackin became more and more impressed by the prisoners’ humanity and even their spirituality. A prisoner called “J. G.” came by and started to talk to McCrackin about Catholic beliefs and certain passages in the Bible:

He had his Catholic Bible with him. I turned to the Sermon on the Mount to see how it compared with the Authorized Version. J. G. began reading it and when he came to “Blessed are they who are persecuted,” he lifted his hand and jerked his thumb in my direction as he went on reading. He said, “You shouldn’t be here, and have this humiliation. It’s against what our country stands for in the Constitution. This is what they have done in Russia against religious people and the church.”

A black prisoner with a drug habit told McCrackin, “The two most important things in life are to have faith in God and faith in each other.” Remarks like this eventually led McCrackin to write:

In a devotional reading this morning, I found confirmation of an idea which has been growing on me, not a new one to be sure but [one] which has been spelled out more for me as the years go by and that is the hope of the world lies not in the educated and sophisticated but among those who are illiterate, unknown, the neglected and rejected of the world.
He could not help but contrast the humility of these men with the self-righteousness of those in more respectable positions, particularly the members of the church hierarchy who were trying to destroy his ministry:

The folly of concluding that a Christian automatically finds salvation by professing the name of Christ and that a person who fails to do so is lost, has become absolutely clear to me during the struggle of the last two years. The words of Jesus now have clear meaning, “Not every one who saith unto me “Lord, Lord” shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who doeth the will of my father who is in heaven.

Although most of his colleagues within the Presbyterian ministry had sought to reprimand him for his stands, many Jews had rallied to his support and participated in the Committee for Freedom of Conscience. “I believe that a far greater percentage of Jewish people have entered the Kingdom than Christians,” McCrackin concluded. “Christians give lip service to the values which the Jews practice.

McCrackin had reason to question the charity of his fellow Presbyterians. He knew that his imprisonment had hurt West Cincinnati-St. Barnabas Church and the Findlay Street Neighborhood House financially, and he regretted that the responsibility for working out the resultant problems now fell heavily on the church’s governing board and the board of directors of Camp Joy. Among other things, city officials were registering their disapproval of McCrackin by threatening to cut off the water supply to the camp, whereas they had previously furnished the water at no cost. And pressures brought to bear on the board of directors had divided them. At one point U. S. Fowler wrote jokingly to McCrackin: “Roll over, Mac, I’m coming in there to join you! I need a rest, too!” McCrackin could not help but resent the lack of support his people were receiving from the larger church, just as he was personally hurt by the rejection he had experienced:

Except in isolated cases of individuals, neither in the Diocese or Presbytery was there any grasp of the principle of Freedom of Conscience nor any genuine commitment to the brotherhood principle. When Governor Griffin, Peter Outcalt and M. G. Lowman began their attack, I encountered another attack from the then key leaders of Presbytery. No support came from the Division of Social Education and Action of the General Assembly nor from staff members as individuals. Nor was there any support from the office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly. It can be said unequivocally that during the entire siege no moral support came from any official organization of the Episcopal or Presbyterian churches. Apart from our own congregation, the Neighborhood House Staff and Advisory Board, such support and understanding came from a few individual Protestant friends, from the Jewish and Negro Community, from the Unitarian and Universalist church leaders, from Fellowship House and from the NAACP. To believe for a second that those who have joined in the attack or who have remained silent have found salvation and these others are lost is as absurd an idea as any that could be entertained. Not those who say “Lord, Lord,” but those who do the will of the Father in heaven.

This passage reveals how abandoned McCrackin felt and how the proceedings against him had caused him to redefine his faith. Insights gained from his conversations with prisoners were confirmed by his reading of Howard Brinton’s *Friends for 300 Years*, the story of the Quaker movement, which prison officials at first had refused to give him, labeling it subversive. It *was* subversive within the prison context. According to Quaker tenets, each person has a certain measure of Inner Light. McCrackin appealed to this Light in the men around him, and that helped him in talking with
them. Brinton suggested that whereas the Bible was primary to Protestantism, the Spirit was primary to Quakerism. McCrackin found in this affirmation of Spirit support for his own stand in behalf of the primacy of individual conscience. “Conscience,” wrote Brinton, “is the measure of Light given us.” It encouraged McCrackin to think that his example might expand the measure of Light in others’ consciences.

The Quaker pacifist heritage was also comforting to McCrackin as he sat in jail for war-tax resistance. He thought often of Brinton’s words: "The common argument that the pacifist can apply his principles only in an ideal society is untrue. We are not commanded to love our enemies only when there are no enemies, nor to overcome evil with good only when there is no evil." These were mighty thoughts to ponder as McCrackin waited out the spring of 1959 and wondered whether he would be released when the six months were up if he failed to pay his $250 fine. Prison officials constantly hinted that he might never get out. McCrackin did not know what the future would hold: perhaps his Christian ministry would end in prison.

Had McCrackin agreed to pay his fine, he would have been scheduled for release on Friday, May 29. As that day drew closer, neither McCrackin nor his supporters knew whether he would be released or not. By this time he had served five months and four days at Allenwood, not to mention the time served in the Cincinnati jail. Hoping for the best, Ernest Bromley arrived at the prison on May 29 to pick up his old friend. Finding the front gate open, he walked in.

“What are you doing here?” asked a startled guard.
“I heard that McCrackin was getting out today, and I came to get him.”
“Well he’s not—and you’re not allowed in here, so get out the way you came in.”

Bromley, unruffled by this response, walked out the same gate. Prison officials watched him closely as he returned to his car. When he opened the trunk of his 1949 Plymouth to get out some picket signs, the prison superintendent himself strode up, ready for another confrontation.
“What are those picket signs in there for?”
“Well,” said Bromley, “some other friends will be along pretty soon and we’re going to stage a little protest here, since we were expecting that McCrackin would get out today.”
“There’s no need,” said the worried superintendent. “You can come in and get him.” The superintendent hastily returned to his office, assuming that Bromley would go around to the visitors’ entrance.

Rather than follow official protocol, Bromley walked back in through the open gate, inquiring of some inmates where he could find McCrackin. They in turn sought out McCrackin in the kitchen, where he was patiently slicing up butter. McCrackin dropped what he was doing and met Bromley in the visiting room. There the superintendent, again perturbed at the violation of prison rules, interrupted their reunion. McCrackin had some paperwork to complete and his belongings to pick up before he could actually leave.

A somewhat anticlimactic exchange between jailer and jailed followed as prison officials tried to get McCrackin to sign a pauper’s note stating that he was unable to pay his fine. McCrackin refused, and mumbling something incoherent, the superintendent let him go anyway.

Just as Bromley and McCrackin were leaving, Wally and Juanita Nelson arrived at the prison from Philadelphia with Betty Zimmer and David Gale, an activist who had helped sail The Golden Rule into the U.S. Pacific atomic test area. These friends drove into Lewisburg for a festive celebration over lunch.

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Later that day Bromley and McCrackin set off for Ohio, McCrackin telling about the men he had met on the inside, Bromley speculating on the effect of the imprisonment on West Cincinnati-St. Barnabas Church. It had been a long day for both of them, and they were weary. Near Cambridge, Ohio, they slept a few hours by the side of the road rather than rent a motel room for so short a time. McCrackin wanted to arrive home by noon on Saturday so that he could catch his breath before conducting his first church service in six months.

Maurice McCrackin instinctively knew that he was a changed man when he left Allenwood Prison, but the nature of the transformation was not yet clear to him. He knew that those inside prison walls were not all dangerous or evil men; most were very poor. He also knew how hard it was for them to keep their self-respect in institutions that systematically belittled them. And there was a great aching in his heart over the difficulty of communicating any of this to people on the outside who had not experienced prison first hand.

As one of the prisoners, “Benny the Dip,” said to him, “When you get out, you won’t be preaching the same kinds of sermons, will you?”

On Saturday, May 30, McCrackin returned to the Dayton Street manse and rejoiced that his sister and many of his friends and parishioners were there to welcome him. Still, the home felt much emptier without his mother and his aunt.

The next day, the Reverend McCrackin led the Sunday service at West Cincinnati-St. Barnabas Church. That Sunday’s four-page order-of-service opened with the lines: “We welcome back to our fellowship and service our pastor who, for faith, ‘chose to suffer with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.’”

McCrackin began his sermon by expressing boundless joy at being back home with his community, saying, “This is the day the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

The rest of his sermon was based on Psalm 37. Like so many passages from the Old Testament, Psalm 37 exudes feeling and power and is raw with the hurt of those who have been wronged: “Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.”

The text offers justice in a world where justice is a rarity; it promises, like the Sermon on the Mount, that the meek shall possess the earth and the just will triumph: “And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday.”

In addition to offering comfort to the suffering and downtrodden, Psalm 37 contains a warning to those who have caused suffering. There is a harshness to this psalm that differs from McCrackin’s usual message of forgiveness and love for enemies, but it gives a glimpse into his pain and his hopes in late May of 1959. Inspired by such a text, McCrackin might have emphasized what he had just been through. Instead, he emphasized the forwardlooking aspects of the text.

“It is not enough,” said McCrackin in his sermon, “merely not to fret over evildoers—even though there is plenty to fret about.” Rather than single out those individuals who had imprisoned him, McCrackin focused on the larger societal problems that needed attention: radioactive fallout, the poisoning of food supplies by strontium 90, and the threat of nuclear war. These problems, he said, are the evils of our age, and all who sanction them are evildoers. People, he continued, cannot readily be categorized as saints or sinners. Many of the men he met in prison might be labeled “evildoers,” but he found them not so different from those in the “ranks of administration.” Indeed, McCrackin’s vision went beyond individual morality toward communal responsibility: “All of us, who have rejected and stigmatized, all who have added to their disillusionment and contributed to their despair . . . are the evildoers too.” Similarly, all those who acquiesce to the buildup of nuclear arms are evildoers. Thousands of people, though kind and humane individually, participate in small aspects of the nuclear program without wanting to acknowledge their responsibility. Paraphrasing
Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, McCrackin explained how the state involves so many citizens in the crime that nobody feels responsible:

> The rulers of the state always endeavor to involve the greatest number of citizens in the participation of the crimes which it is in their interest to have committed. ... Some demand the crime, some propose it, some determine it, some confirm it, some order it, some execute it. 

The church, he added, too often gives moral and religious sanction to what citizens carry out in the name of the state.

McCrackin concluded his sermon by citing the case of Claude Eatherly, the Air Force major who piloted the *Enola Gay* over Hiroshima. Eatherly was a tragic figure, trained to follow orders without questioning; he played only a small part in the development and unleashing of the atomic bomb, never blaming the state for the deep guilt he felt afterward for his part in killing over 100,000 Japanese. He later suffered enormously, committed crimes, attempted suicide, and was eventually declared insane. McCrackin cited a *Christian Century* editorial that stated, “Eatherly suffers because he realizes more than the rest of us do the enormity of the deed in which he shared.” The church, he pointed out, cannot be of help in resolving the torment of the age as long as it is unclear about its opposition to the use of atomic weapons. Thus McCrackin chose in this sermon to dwell on the reasons for his stand rather than on the prison experience and his personal suffering.

Indeed, McCrackin’s decision to stand by his conscience in 1958 and 1959 and to pay the price for it against the combined pressures of church, courts, prisons, and public opinion was the kind of action he felt Psalm 37 was vindicating. His insistence on living by his own truth impressed Allen Brown, an attorney who worked with McCrackin in later confrontations with the state. McCrackin’s stand, Brown said,

> became in minuscule a repeat of what I think is the central theme of the whole twentieth century—the clash between collective conscience and individual conscience—and we just don’t seem to understand. . . . that once you opt for a collective conscience you opt for no conscience, because the collective conscience soon yields to preservation of power.

McCrackin’s homecoming sermon reflected his implicit understanding of faith. His theology was not static, but it maintained a consistency over the years and was revealed in his sermons, his writings, and, perhaps most clearly of all, in his actions. The Reverend McCrackin believed that God’s kingdom is a vision of all people living in harmony with one another. This kingdom is meant to be worked toward in this life, with Jesus as our model of how to do the work: suffering with the poor, delighting in all people regardless of their worldly status, teaching by doing rather than by indoctrinating, submitting to persecution rather than mindlessly conforming. Over the years McCrackin’s theology moved away from a literal understanding of the Bible and toward more openness to truths revealed in other ways, but he remained constant in his understanding of Christian commitment. For him it meant respect for all life and consistent action to support that respect. Consistent action took two basic forms in his life and in his sermons: loving all those whose lives he touched, while dramatically resisting what he viewed as illegitimate authority that manipulated and distorted individual lives.

Many of the speakers and authors who had influenced McCrackin’s early life shared a focus on sociological issues. Sherwood Eddy and Kirby Page wrote a series of inspirational biographies called *Creative Pioneers* about people who had attempted to establish humane working conditions and political reform. The subtitle alone suggests the breadth of Eddy and Page’s vision: *Building
a New Society Through Adventuresome Vocations and Avocations on the Frontier of Industrial Relations, the Political Movement, the Cooperative Movement, Race Relations, and Socialized Religion. They included in their books some advice to ministers that McCrackin certainly followed. This advice included working on “extra-church action”—actions outside and beyond what are normally considered the functions of a church—according to one’s convictions. Page and Eddy worried that ministers must depend on consolation and support from the few who understand social vision instead of counting on the support of the majority within the church. They wrote:

There is little virtue in blowing off some prophetic truth just for the sake of salving your conscience or proving to yourself that you are faultless. But if a preacher talks to the people where they are, to their felt needs, and does so lovingly and inspiring, he will so gain their respect that he can in time say absolutely anything he wants to. He has earned the freedom of the pulpit—and one should earn it before he uses it...I believe also in extra-church action. The minister, for his own soul’s sake, must act according to his convictions almost regardless of the Church, or he fast loses them.11

Thus Eddy and Page set forth many of the values of McCrackin’s ministry. By attending to the basic needs of his people, the Reverend McCrackin would “earn the freedom of the pulpit” to speak the truth fearlessly to his congregation. That seemed to be exactly what McCrackin had done by going to prison and was now doing on those first two Sundays back. There he was, an exconvict, more beloved than ever by his people.

In fact, McCrackin took very seriously the old-fashioned notion of setting an example. He would never touch an alcoholic beverage because he was encouraged at a very young age to think of drinking as sinful. But he also saw in his neighborhood and in prison how drink and drugs had multiplied people’s problems. He feared that a troubled or weak person working hard to give up alcohol might be tempted simply by seeing him take a drink. Besides, he reasoned, the money spent on producing, advertising, and buying liquor was badly needed for other things.

As seriously as McCrackin took his own moral responsibility, he was careful not to make the same demands of others. His sermons were full of examples of people living courageously, but he stopped short of threatening individuals who failed to do the same. In fact, McCrackin felt that the horrors and potential disasters of this life were bad enough without the threat of hellfire and brimstone afterward. He felt that a loving God would never condemn his children to torture. References to eternal damnation in the Bible seemed inconsistent with Jesus’ teaching, and he felt that they must be later additions. In a letter to a person who had asked him why he denied the concept of hell, McCrackin explained:

A father or mother, unless disturbed or mentally sick, would never hold their children’s hands in a burning flame, no matter what they had done or however much they had disappointed them. How then could God, so infinite in His love and mercy, do this to one of his children?12

McCrackin did believe in the afterlife of the spirit, however, and considered resurrection to be at the heart of the Christian message:

Easter proclaims that God is the source of energy. It proclaims that this energy is love. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. God so loved the world that He would not let our hopes be locked in a tomb of doubt and despair. Through God’s energy, Jesus, whose life was love, left the tomb. He appeared to His friends often enough and long
enough for them to be convinced that even though they would no longer see Him physically, they could now be sure that His love, His transforming, renewing, redeeming love would stay with them forever.  

“People vary in their spiritual sensitivity,” preached McCrackin in the 1940s, “in their power to see, behind the physical, the invisible. We suffer from spiritual insomnia.” Some sort of return to our spiritual dimension, he thought, is what happens at the time of death of our physical bodies. He never used the word “die.” He always said, “So-and-so passed from this life” or asked, “Is so-and-so still among the living?”

Concern for the individual was at the heart of most of McCrackin’s sermons, including the one he gave the second Sunday after his return from Allenwood. Having put his experience in a theological context the week before, he now offered a sociological critique and talked at greater length about his prison experiences. Interpreting and making use of his own suffering and observations in prison, he emphasized the ways in which prisons dehumanize inmates, as when an Amish man’s beard was shaved off or guards read and mocked prisoners’ personal mail. He showed by statements and quotations how the state conspires to cover up its own crimes of stealing and murder while singling out the poor and uneducated to punish for lesser crimes. The churches were “slumbering” on this issue, he concluded, when they should be initiating reforms, from improving the food in prisons to providing counseling. (Several years later he would propose a half-way house for prisoners returning to society.) His only reference to Jesus came at the end, when he exhorted his congregation to be among those to whom Jesus could say, “I was in prison and you came unto me.”

McCrackin’s early prescriptions for spiritual growth were much more limited than the grand sweep of compassion he eventually promoted. In a sermon given during his early ministry in Kirkwood, his main point had been that we should not put our faith in material things, or be self-centered. The best way to overcome sorrow is to “carry the cross of someone else.” In ominous prophecy of the rejection he would one day suffer at the hands of his colleagues, he had said, “We can endure opposition if it comes from people we don’t know, but hardest to endure is the lack of sympathetic understanding of your intimate friends.” McCrackin now knew this kind of rejection firsthand.

With the passing of the years, he had less to say about intemperance and made fewer references to the centrality of family life. While he concerned himself less with ecumenism at an organizational level, he lived out the unity of God’s people on a day-to-day pastoral level. Many of his early emphases were replaced by criticism of governmental excesses and promotion of causes that needed support. References to the Bible and the regular use of it were fewer. Increasingly, McCrackin came to depend on particular cases of moral courage to drive home his message about honoring one’s own conscience rather than blindly doing what the culture promotes.

The authenticity of McCrackin’s sermons was matched by their utter consistency. Even in the 1930s, his sermons contained all the elements of the approach to Christianity that he was to live out in the later decades of his life. Always the model of Jesus’ life and teachings was at the core. In one sermon given in the 1940s, McCrackin explained that Jesus taught us that life’s greatest privilege was giving fuller expression to the Divine within ourselves and in others. “Jesus saw this God-like quality in others and it was his life purpose to form it into flame, to draw it out, to make men see their kinship with God.” Always he was concerned about poverty and exclusion. Always he identified with the downtrodden or rejected, and increasingly that came to mean people of color. He was concerned about how people treat each other personally and globally. That meant that he saw no way for Christians to respond to war other than to oppose it. The strain of unconditional pacifism runs through his sermons from the 1930s on.
McCrackin liked to balance these somber themes with humor. Initially he had relied on commercial resources, collections of such aphorisms as ‘The way to get rid of our enemies is to make them our friends.’ Over the years he put together his own collection of memorable words from conversations, speeches, and his own eclectic reading. He duplicated packets of these quotations and offered them to anyone who expressed an interest.

One of McCrackin’s favorite sayings, used both in sermons and in conversations, was Peter Ustinov’s “It is not *ourselves* which we should take seriously, but our responsibilities.” Or light-heartedly McCrackin might say, “A fanatic is a person who believes strongly in something you disagree with.” The homespun mix of materials in McCrackin’s sermons provided inspiration for everyday living and ample images to stretch into. By avoiding abstractions, McCrackin communicated through his sermons with all kinds of people while offending almost no one. Some heard the biblical injunctions and others heard the social message; some few realized the connection between the biblical and the social. All were struck by the honesty that radiated through the words because they had been lived out in McCrackin’s own life.

It was clear that the prison experiences of 1958 and 1959 had not broken McCrackin’s spirit; in fact, they had strengthened his resolve and shown him the depth of his own spiritual resources. He no longer feared recurring depression; and he no longer needed respectability in the traditional sense, for he had a base of support both within and beyond his congregation. He was confident in his ability to act on the demands of his conscience and more sure than ever of his commitment to the disenfranchised around him.

**Notes for Chapter 7**

1. This unpublished work, which is inconsistently numbered and dated, was typed in the back room of the prison library or in the television room and consists of about eighty pages, single-spaced, every inch of the paper being used. Unless otherwise stated, the prison journal is the source for quotations in this chapter. McCrackin Collection, Cincinnati Historical Society.
3. Even in his private journal, McCrackin was reluctant to spell out “God damn” because he perceived it as a blasphemous epithet.
5. Interview with Ernest Bromley, June 1986.
13. Sermon, 1979. This interpretation was written during the 1979 energy crisis, making the metaphor of spirit as energy all the more meaningful.
15. One such resource was Paul Holdcraft, *Snappy Sentences for Church Bulletin Boards* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1929).