

Dr. Calvin Miller Interview



*As a pastor, professor, author and poet, Calvin Miller has impacted many lives. Now at 72, Dr. Miller looks back on his life in his memoir *Life Is Mostly Edges*.*

Noble Creative: What made you decide to write your memoir?

Calvin Miller: As I say in the book, we don't have a big window of time to do this. I'm 72, so what happens is you need to write them while you still have enough of your mind to remember your life. And at the same time while you have the skill to say it.

Now hopefully I'll go on living for a good bit and maybe there can be an epilogue to the book in 10 or 15 years, but you can't depend on that, you know? It's a time thing mostly. I wanted to do it for a long time, but it just seemed like the right time.

NC: You've been a pastor, professor, author and poet. Where do you think God has used you the most?

Calvin Miller: Probably my writing has been the number one thing. It gets out to all the world. It always amazes me; I spoke to a little literary group up in Huntsville, Alabama, yesterday. I didn't know any of them, but they all came to the meeting with books they had bought across the years.

I can't help believe but that would be true in virtually any community I would go to, that there would be some people who own some of my books. As many people as I pastored—and I had a pretty good sized church—writing was the way that I was supposed to bless the Lord or have Him bless me.

NC: Looking back on your life, when did you most feel God's abiding presence and when did you feel it least?

Calvin Miller: It's kind of like I say in the book; it's the edgy times, it's the times when you are on the brink, you don't think you are going to make it, it looks like you're going to perish. Those are the times when you reach out eagerly to cling on to something when you're on the edge.

I think the things that draw you to the edge of yourself and your sanity sooner or later become those moments that you prize as the moment of change, the moment of insight, the moment of pleasure, ultimately.

NC: You've been a pastor a long time. What advice would you give to young pastors?

Calvin Miller: I'm hoping this book will help them with that. I do think in all fairness that it has gotten a lot tougher. When I began my ministry back in the 1950s, it was just easier. There was a little respect for the office. Not that pastors haven't always had a hard time in trying to please their constituency. Nonetheless, there was always a kind of [respect for the office].

As I say in my book, "The parson was the person of the parish." He had the answers, he knew the Word, he knew God, he was sort of a cultural center for everybody in times of needs and a respect went with that. But by the end of my ministry of 35 years—my pulpit ministry—I began to see that that respect was just not there anymore.

It still is true that people with problems generally see a minister before they see anybody else. That's still true. It always kind of amazed me when people go to a doctor who says, "You need to have your appendix out," they listen. But they go to a pastor who says, "You need to trust God," and they generally don't.

I think the statistics are that eight out of ten pastors who graduate from divinity school, within 10 years, eight of those are not in the ministry anymore. That's a frightening statistic. And I noticed just since I've been working at the seminary, guys who used to come to the seminary all wanted to be pastors. Now only about 20 percent of people entering seminaries want to be pastors. I think they flee from it because they've either known a pastor, they maybe had a parent who was a pastor. They love God, they want to serve God, but they just look at it and think, "Man, can I stand it? Can I live through it?"

NC: You talk a lot about your mother in the book. What kind of influence did she have on your life?

Calvin Miller: Well, I think a most almighty influence, probably. I think mothers do that anyway. Anybody's mother who is a good mother becomes sort of a number one point in their lives. I think that's true even for pastors who have fathers, which I didn't.

When you don't have a father, I think what happens is you really begin depending on your mother. You listen to her, you remember her sayings. And then when she died, I felt this incredible sense of loss. The counsel is gone. That one thing that one feels for one's wife or one's mother that they're always in your corner, that was gone.

She became the lens through which I saw the world. She was there from the beginning, so she caused me to focus and to see as was proper.

NC: Out of all the books you have written, which one is your favorite and why?

Calvin Miller: The number one book in terms of sales is "The Singer" from InterVarsity, and it may always be. The memoirs, I don't know how many people read them. I think these memoirs can be read on several different levels. The one group that would probably profit most from it are people who are staff members or pastors in churches. I think that's the number one reader who would profit most from the book. But there are other things in the book that just talk about family life. I think those anybody can learn and at least relate to what we went through. So I would say right now I'm sweltering under the joy of having this new book out, and it's exciting.

NC: Not having your father around for most of your growing-up years, what sort of challenges did that pose for you and your siblings?

Calvin Miller: When I started reading the Bible, I would wonder why such a fuss was made over widows, especially in the New Testament. It just seems like Paul talks about the widows. The first problems in the church in Jerusalem developed around the widows, Grecian widows or Jewish widows. I can understand that.

It seems to me that my mama was a widow most all the time I knew her, but certainly was a divorcee who lived alone. All those years she never had any help. And it seemed to me that if we ordered a ton of coal when the winter was cold, we got $\frac{3}{4}$ of a ton. And there was no one to go to bat for us. People took advantage of widows.

I can see why the Bible challenges people in the church to remember the single mothers, single parents. I really do believe that to me that was really an important kind of a concept—to believe that someone who battled as a great warrior, my mother did for her family and struggled to get her fair share of anything for her family.

NC: What do you see as some of the challenges for the American Evangelical church in the next 10, 20, 30 years?

Calvin Miller: I think our greatest foe, not just to the church but to the culture as well, is just prosperity. The current shattering of all dreams related to Wall Street. I'm wondering, if when we get it back as best as we can put it together if it will ever be what it was. The world is awakening, and they're saying why should six percent of the people be allowed to devour more than 50 percent of the world's consumer goods? That's where we've been. I think that's probably going to perish. I guess I believe that the big challenges for the church have been a culture that's lost in prosperity.

Christianity is flourishing better now in South America and Africa because I think those cultures are more needy. Whereas in America, in spite of the big mega-churches of America, actually the church is declining in attendance every year—and rather radically so. We don't hear much about it, but the truth is—George Barna says—in the last 10 years we have lost 12 percent of our attendance. If we do that the next 10 years, we will have lost 25 percent. Then I think the rate of atrophy grows exponentially. I think you begin to die at a faster rate.

I've noticed big churches in the Bible belt where I live, but interestingly, most of them are not as big as they were 10 years ago. And when you are really big, you can lose a thousand members and still have a couple thousand left and you still seem big. But you're not as big as you were. And I think that's going to be the challenge: Can the church find vitality when it adapts to the secular because we are endowed with secular values, and we can't seem to move away from our love of stuff.

NC: Do you think that's, in a way, a good pruning period for the American church?

Calvin Miller: I think it is because as I say in my book and in fact what the book is all about is generally nothing really happens until we're on the edge, until we can't figure that out—because life is mostly edges. When we get to the edge where we can't figure it [out] anymore, we cry out and we reach out to God and we develop a depth of spirit we didn't have when things came easy.

NC: What are you doing now?

Calvin Miller: I am working. I will usually work a little bit along on something, but I haven't found a thing that I just really want to do like I wanted to do that book. It was so all-consuming for two years. I so enjoyed seeing the finished product. Writing is a work for me. It's a work of love, but it is an effort. So I just haven't got plowed into anything that I'm ready to submit to a publisher, and maybe I won't for a year or two.

NC: Are you still teaching at Beeson Divinity School?

Calvin Miller: I do teach some, but I lecture all over. It's amazing the seminaries that write me letters now. This fall I'm doing six different lectureships in colleges and seminaries, mostly about preaching because of my book on preaching. It's wonderful to be able to be older and to have a sense of perspective about the pulpit that at least makes younger pastors, apparently, want to listen to me. It's a nice thing.

NC: Looking back on your life, anything you'd do differently?

Calvin Miller: One of them is I would pay more attention to my chief mentors. I would reward them. In many ways I didn't before. Starting with my mother. And with other people who spent so much of their time and counsel and love for me. I would go back and be nicer to them. I would treat them like they should have been treated. I wouldn't pass them by so quickly.

I think I would do more inter-culturally. When I was a pastor for 35 years, I rarely ever left the parish.

I would take people, and I would go to places and do missions far off. Not because I think I can help those people but because something wonderful happens when you are with people who love God and they are a different color and they've got different problems—and somehow the Kingdom of God really grows.

What I love about Jesus is His globalization. This amazed me about a man who never left his hometown very far. He recreates all these disciples who shortly after His death are off to the [far] flung world beyond Him. That amazes me that fishermen wound up in Rome, because He globalized who they were; He made them bigger.

That's what I would do.