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a remarkable ministry and a remarkable God'

Revd Canon J. John

GERALD COATES

# PIONEER

A BIOGRAPHY BY RALPH TURNER



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# Commendations

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Without any question, Gerald Coates's contribution to faith and the landscape of Christianity in the UK has been extremely significant. He has brought to us all a warm, intelligent and lively faith that has led many to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. Long may his ministry continue!

**Lord Carey**

**103rd Archbishop of Canterbury 1991–2002**

Honest, inspiring – the raw, readable story of a true pioneer. Don't miss it.

**Jeff Lucas**

**Author, speaker, broadcaster**

Gerald's influence on British Christianity over the last forty years has been extraordinary. This is an account of a remarkable man, a remarkable ministry and a remarkable God.

**Revd Canon J. John**

**Speaker and broadcaster**

Gerald Coates? You either love him or hate him but you can't ignore him! As a close associate and friend for decades, and one who knows him better than most, I can commend his story as one which will challenge you, make you smile, encourage you and help you to find the grace to continue on the journey the Lord has set before you – read and be blessed!

**John Noble**

**Author and father figure of the House Church Movement**

Gerard Coates is an extraordinary Christian leader. This perceptive and elegantly written biography by Ralph Turner captures the man, his faith, and his outstanding achievements in the Pioneer churches. With both detailed and broad brush strokes, Gerald is colourfully portrayed as a servant and hero on the great canvas of God's glory.

**Jonathan Aitken**

**Former cabinet minister, author, prison reformer and Christian writer**

I have watched Gerald lead with grace and prophetic insight, walk through sometimes challenging situations with a steady focus, and be used of God in remarkable ways. As a pioneer he has sought to blaze a trail of obedience to what the Holy Spirit revealed to him, and in so doing has sometimes 'rocked the status quo in some circles of the church . . . but then true pioneers always do!

My good friend Ralph Turner, a very able minister in his own right, has done an excellent job of sharing many of Gerald's adventures in God. May you, as I have, be challenged and inspired to take up the mantle of true pioneers and make an impact on our generation for the Kingdom of God.

**Jonathan Conrathe**

**Founder, Mission24**

Gerald Coates is an inspiring leader and Christian pioneer. He has played a central role in so many dynamic and visionary projects which have built up the Christian church in this country. He has been very kind and encouraging to me over the years and I have great admiration for him.

**Revd Nicky Gumbel**

## **Vicar, Holy Trinity Brompton**

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Gerald has been a close friend and mentor to me over many years. I will always be grateful that he instilled in me a desire to pursue a radical, alternative expression of the Christian faith. Thanks to him my quest continues . . .

### **Noel Richards**

#### **Singer/songwriter**

Gerald Coates has been one of the most influential leaders within the new churches and far beyond, for many decades, and in many nations. This highly readable and pacy description of his own faith-journey will encourage and inspire you, with huge numbers of stories of personal transformation, vision and challenge to our wider world.

### **Dr Patrick Dixon**

#### **Chairman, Global Change Ltd and founder of international Christian AIDS agency ACET**

Gerald and Anona have been a part of our lives since we met the young postman from Cobham at the first West Watch Leaders' Retreat mentioned in this book. For this outspoken, radical house church leader, starting up in a tiny house in Tartar Road, Cobham to have enjoyed intimate friendship with successive Archbishops of Canterbury will come as a shock to many readers. Read on to be even more surprised!

### **Peter and Linda Lyne**

#### **New church pioneers, New Zealand**

I remember meeting Gerald once and telling him that he was a bit of an icon. I'm not sure if he thought I meant it! But I meant it most sincerely because Gerald has devoted himself to ensuring that church mission stays relevant, gospel-focused and dependent on the leading of the Spirit. He continues to puncture the darkness. Where others keep quiet, Gerald speaks out. And I love him for that!

### **Rachel Gardner**

#### **Founder, Romance Academy**

I have known Gerald and Anona Coates for thirty years. Although Gerald and I are polar opposites in many ways, Louise and I have loved and appreciated them both. This book will delight those who know Gerald and cause those who don't know him to want to know him.

### **R.T. Kendall**

#### **Author, Bible teacher, Minister of Westminster Chapel (1977–2002)**

Over the years, the life and ministry of Gerald Coates has not been without its controversy. However, when the history of the twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Church in the UK is written, Gerald will be recognised as making a profoundly significant contribution to the life, shape and culture of the body of Christ. I, along with so many, have been privileged to know him and Anona, not only as colleagues, but also as friends who have both enriched and challenged my life and ministry.

### **Steve Clifford**

#### **General Director, Evangelical Alliance**

At two critical junctures in my career, the Lord used Gerald Coates to speak into my life very directly and specifically. These kept me on track with my calling when I couldn't see a way forward. Gerald has

prophetic gift unlike any I have personally witnessed. I've since been blessed to get to know him as a good friend too.

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**Stuart Hazeldine**

**Film director, *The Shack* (to be released autumn 2016)**

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A BIOGRAPHY BY RALPH TURNER

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# Dedication

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To Jessica and Abigail, our first grandchildren and, by God's grace, part of the next pioneering generation.

**Ralph Turner**

# Thank You

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As always with a task like this, there are so many to thank.

Firstly, thank you to Gerald and Anona for their time, patience, hospitality and red wine. It has been a privilege to share your lives over this short time. And, of course, an immense privilege to be able to write your story.

Grateful thanks to all who agreed to be interviewed, who replied to emails and who spoke on sky calls: Jonathan Aitken, Steve Clifford, Rachel Gardner, Christian Guy, Stuart Hazeldine, R.T. Kendall, Billy Kennedy, Bill Latham, Jeff Lucas, John Noble, Cliff Richard, Noel Richards, Noel Robinson and Paul Williams. Thanks too, to Peter Lyne, Terry Virgo and David Matthew – three pioneers who helped with my original Masters dissertation on the house church movement. Many of their thoughts and insights have found their way into these pages.

Thank you, as always, to my wife Roh, who meticulously read through the text, correcting my clumsy sentences as she went. And grateful thanks to my 'typo team' who read through two versions of the book and corrected numerous errors. If there are any left, I feel sure it's my fault! Thank you team: Ali Parke, Pauline Stevens and Chris Kelly. Special thanks to Gill Searl for the translation of the German website relating to 'Calling All Nations'.

A shout-out and thanks for the support to KingsGate Leicester, possibly the best church in the world.

And thank you to Malcolm, Sarah, Liz and the team at Malcolm Down Publishing for your support and belief in the project.

**Ralph Turner**

## Books by Gerald

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*What on Earth is this Kingdom?*

*Gerald Quotes*

*Divided We Stand?*

*He Gives Us Signs*

*An Intelligent Fire*

*Kingdom Now!*

*The Vision*

*Non-religious Christianity*

*Sexual Healing*

## Books by Ralph

*Working for God*

*God-Life*

*Cheating Death, Living Life – Linda's Story*

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## Author's Note

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Gerald Coates. Born 25 November 1944. Husband. Father. Christian pioneer. Prophet. Networker. Church leader. Passionate worshipper. Provocateur. An amazing life.

Gerald Coates. Aged 17, 12 May 1962. Riding a motorbike. Too fast. Didn't see the debris in the road. Didn't respond in time to the burst tyre and hit the curb. Thrown through the air. Nearly every bone in his body broken. Unconscious. Four hours to live. May not make it.

But he did. And we can be grateful he did. It was that event from Gerald's teenage years that began the journey. Recovering in nine weeks, when nine months had been predicted, Gerald too was grateful. He knew God had saved him. He knew it was for a purpose.

And it's that purpose that is laid out before you now. The well-known quote says: 'History repeats itself. Has to. No one listens.' My hopes and prayers with this book are that readers will listen (well, read anyway) and learn – that as a result of Gerald and others with him, they will understand the foundations their churches are built upon, understand the battles that were won, and understand and move on, move forward to all God has for His Church.

History doesn't have to repeat itself. Gerald's story is one of passion and sacrifice, controversy and unpredictability. He and others went through the learning and the pain so we don't have to. Building on the legacy he and others have laid, today's church can continue to grow, continue to see lives changed and continue to affect the nation and the nations.

Along the journey we will meet some amazing people: some famous, some less known, but all important to the story.

I've interviewed Gerald and Anona extensively for the book, as well as speaking to many friends and colleagues. But it's my book. Hopefully not sycophantic, nor critical. But true.

At the end of his earlier autobiography, published in 1991, Gerald writes, 'What fights, controversies and tests of faith were up ahead were not clear. They will probably warrant another book!'

Well, here we go . . .

**Ralph Turner**



## AN ORDINARY BOY?

Meet Mr and Mrs George Coates of 28 D'Abernon Drive, Stoke D'Abernon, near Cobham, Surrey. They have three children, a dog of dubious pedigree called Rex and a cat called Sooty (no guessing as to colour!). George has done well for himself, moving down from Middlesbrough whilst serving in the army. He's now Works Manager in an engineering and plastics firm. His wife Evelyn stays at home looking after the three children and tending to the beautiful flowers that always seem to populate the garden. The two of them listen to the *Light Programme* on the radio in the evenings. They don't read much, but when they do, it tends to be the *Daily Mirror* or the *Daily Sketch*. Plus there's an occasional visit to The Plough as a treat.

Roy and Miriam, Gerald's younger siblings, both love football. Roy wants to be an astronaut when he grows up. Miriam's ambitions are more modest – a career in the Civil Service appeals to her.

Then there's the oldest: Gerald.

Gerald hates football and has no desire to be an astronaut. Or to work in the Civil Service for that matter. That sets him apart as different straight away. He's not particularly academic, failing his 11 Plus. Keen to learn though. And creative, like his dad. A good observer of people. A quiet kid; thoughtful. Very thoughtful. You'd often find him in the garden at night looking up at the stars, sensing – knowing – that there must be something more to life than the 1950s day-to-day routines of D'Abernon Drive.

The Bible says God chooses the ordinary, even the foolish, to accomplish His purposes. He may have been thinking of Gerald.

'Ordinary' may well describe Gerald's school years. There is little in his early years that points to the outgoing orator of later years. He sits quietly in class. Stands on his own in the playground too. He's late to be picked for the football matches ('Oh well, we'll have Coates then!'). And he doesn't mix much in the school hall at lunchtime, whilst taking an early dislike to school food, especially lettuce and beetroot. All that the school meals do is highlight the benefit of his mum's excellent cooking!

Not able to get into his local school, he has to take a bus each day to travel the three and a half miles to Fetcham Primary School. By the time he gets there, he's already tired. And not being local to the school limits his friendships – especially as his best friend and neighbour Bryan Price has been sent by the authorities in the other direction to a different school.

These cold mornings waiting for the number 462 bus may well plant a seed of impatience and intolerance with bureaucracy from an early age.

Stargazing also plants a seed. There is a God. There has to be. To Gerald's 8-year-old mind, it is natural to think in this way.

His early awareness of God may have been further promoted by visits to Miss Smith's Sunday school. A devoted teacher, unmarried and passionate about sharing her faith, her early influences on Gerald are plain to see. Not that he was the perfect Sunday school pupil. Announcing to Miss Smith that the class were getting her a Christmas present, she responded in kind by giving generously from what must have been her own meagre resources at the time. Gerald panics. His bold words have not yet been backed up with any action. The class find a large orange; wrap it in tissue paper and cut out a picture from a Christmas card. It is hard for Miss Smith to hide her disappointment.

For Gerald, a lesson learned. Exaggeration can get you into trouble. And as history will show, it doesn't always follow his newly learned advice.

# Shoplifting

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Exaggeration is one thing, stealing another.

It started simply enough. Mr Weston, the shopkeeper, is doing his usual grumbling act. Newspapers are heavy – all broadsheet-sized in those days – and it is taking him a while to carry them over to their rack. Gerald realises he only has enough money for two of the Liquorice Whirls. Sherbet Fountain is just in front of him. A penny too much. Well, why not . . . He slips it into his pocket, pays for the liquorice and quickly leaves the shop. Heart beating, he's aware he's done wrong. There's guilt at first. But not for long.

He can't help telling his friends. They are in awe of him. He actually dared to steal from Mr Weston's shop! The story grows and gets exaggerated. And it's not long before the school bully, Peter Carlton, is challenging him.

'Call yourself a shoplifter? Prove it!'

So he does.

He likes the attention he gets as a result. He's a hero. He's a gang leader. He even teaches his friends how to shoplift and not get caught.

Gerald becomes proficient at stealing – Rolos are his favourite. It's not just the attention from friends that pushes him. It's the sensation of doing something wrong that pushes him. Despite his shyness and his natural fear, he finds something that takes him to the edge of his world. He loves the thrill. Something daring, something outside of his modest home and normal family.

The more he succeeds, the more he pushes himself; 11-year-old Gerald is finding thrill seeking addictive.

The move from hero to guilty culprit doesn't take long though. His boasting to his friends about not getting caught doesn't last long. A plainclothes police officer catches Gerald.

'Gerald, is this true?'

His father is standing over him in the lounge, back home. Mum has been sent to the kitchen to manage Roy and Miriam. The detective stands in the corner of the room. Gerald's aunt and uncle happen to be there too. The shame of having them witness his punishment stays with him. Gerald doesn't know where to look, what to say. He's shuffling from one foot to the other, staring at the wall. Anything but meet his dad's eyes.

In some ways it's a relief. He's been caught. He doesn't have to live like that any more. No need to keep up the façade with his friends that he enjoys what he's been doing. The whole thing has got out of control.

There's another reason for the shoplifting. Gerald was born in the war years, and right through the early 1950s there's strict food rationing. When sweets begin to appear in local shops, it's a novelty. Young Gerald has never seen so many before. He's never had the opportunity to taste them. There's an attraction to stealing beyond the immediate thrill. It's not an excuse for what he does, but it certainly is a reason.

He remembers the day he gets caught, of course – his father makes sure of that. Gerald can't sit down for a long time!

It's more than the sore backside though. There's a tussle going on within this young boy. He knows he's done wrong. Mixed with the remorse, there's genuine relief at being caught. He's also aware that he doesn't want to do it. In this 11-year-old boy, there's an awakening of guilt and an awareness of the need to do what's right.

However, doing what's right still isn't always first and foremost in Gerald's mind. As a young teenager

he takes a job at a café on an occasional basis. The owner isn't the most pleasant of people. He is forever telling Gerald to work harder, wash the dishes faster, and to be careful not to let the black and white gingham curtains get too near the water heater in case they catch light.

To Gerald's mind, there is no way that the curtains can ever catch light, unless someone deliberately pushes them into the aperture where the pilot light is.

Why did he do it? Teenage inquisitiveness, to see if they would burn? Deliberate sabotage, not realising the consequences?

Well, burn they do. It takes a lot of water to put out the fire in the kitchen. At least the owner is right after all. The curtains can catch light!

## Shyness and Boldness

The bravado of the shoplifting and the odd behaviour in burning the curtains don't exactly point to an exemplary young Gerald. There's not much in Gerald at this time that highlights leadership potential. Nothing that suggests he will ever be seen on a stage, behind a pulpit or holding a microphone. As a young teenager, there's still a natural shyness. He's occasionally bullied at school and generally avoids being the centre of attention. Most of the time, he's happy to go along with whatever his friends suggest, letting them take the lead.

Most of the time.

Occasionally something comes along that overcomes the hesitancy. Unlike shoplifting, there's a legitimate thrill that begins to grip Gerald. Acting.

At his new school, Cobham Secondary School, Gerald takes on the role of Nanki-Poo in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* with enthusiasm – and clearly some ability, having been selected by the teacher for the role from a large number of auditions. School drama, reflective perhaps of some of the late dramas in his life!

The quiet kid has found his voice. The adrenaline rush that accompanies this new-found love of acting propels him forward in other areas of school life too. He begins to realise life can be fun, and he's determined to enjoy it! A new boldness begins to take hold of him.

Gerald eventually rises to the dizzy heights of Assistant Head Boy. In spite of a mediocre set of exam results, he clearly carries something that is recognised by his teachers – an increasing ability to lead, an ability to communicate and, seemingly, despite the initial shyness, an ability to stand out from the crowd. After all, this is a boy, small in stature, someone who hates football, dislikes sport generally and prefers the 'patter song' of the Major-General in *The Pirates of Penzance* (another early success) to the latest pop records.

The early teenage years see Gerald growing in confidence. He naturally wants to stand up for those that are bullied. He genuinely cares for people. And this compassion is met with an increasing passion to make a difference. Not least because just as he enters his teenage years, there's a moment. A moment that means he will never be the same again.

## God Encounter

Aside from the influence of Miss Smith, there is little awareness in the younger Gerald's life of the existence of a God who is real and personal. He still stands under the stars at night, wondering about life and creation, but with parents who have no faith there is no witness to anything other than living life in an aspiring middle-class kind of way, linked to occasional appearances at the parish church for weddings, funerals and Christmas.

This is about to change.

~~Ray is Gerald's cousin. It's 1956 and Ray lives in Cobham. Not far, but for a 12-year-old Gerald,~~ seems miles away. It is too far to walk, so it is out of reach, and there is little contact with Ray until he unexpectedly calls in one day.

'Gerald,' says Mum, 'Ray has something to suggest to you.' The suggestion is a boys' camp. Ray is part of a local archery club and all the boys are off to a camp at Salisbury.

Gerald appreciates the fact his cousin has thought of him, although if he knew the real reason, he may not have shown such appreciation. British Railways (as it is known at the time) is offering significant travel discounts for parties of seven or more. Ray has a party of six!

Gerald says 'Yes' before he has thought through the consequences. Typical Gerald of course. Leading with the mouth. Two weeks away from home for a 'home boy' is quite a challenge. Add to that the shyness, and he begins to wish he hadn't so readily agreed.

In fact, by the end of week one, he is sure he shouldn't have agreed. It can be lonely in a crowd, and with no one paying much attention to Gerald, he seriously thinks about packing his bags. But he holds on, and week two turns out to be much better.

Some better weather and trips to Salisbury Cathedral and other landmarks banish homesickness. There's archery during the day, and meetings in the evening. Gerald is concerned by the meetings. This is something vaguely familiar. Miss Smith's Sunday school comes to mind, except that the songs are livelier and the talks more grown up. In fact the talks are what get to Gerald. There's a sincerity, a certainty about the speakers, many of them young men little older than Gerald. How can they be so sure about their faith? How can they seem to know this God who cannot be seen?

## Caught Out

And then he's caught out.

Gerald has been pretending. If you said you had a Christian faith, you were left alone. But if you weren't sure, grown men in khaki shorts pursued you with difficult questions! And Gerald has been pretending.

Mike, his tent leader, sees through it though. 'Gerald, are you a Christian yet?'

'Er. Yes. Oh yes!'

Not to be put off, Mike continues, 'And when exactly did this happen, Gerald?'

'Oh. Erm. Well, it happened at St Mary's Church in Stoke D'Abernon.'

Mike seems satisfied for the moment. But Gerald isn't. He knows it is a lie. But what to think? Could this be real? Is there a God who loves Gerald that much? Is Jesus real? Did He really die for the wrong Gerald has done? Is it possible to know God and have a personal relationship with Him? These evening talks are hitting home. And big questions are being asked.

There's a lot of turmoil and unhappiness as a result. Gerald hates putting up a front. Hates that he doesn't really know. The boys his own age with a faith seem happier than he is – more self-assured. Strangely, this religion thing doesn't seem to turn them into fanatical Bible-bashers either. No sign of them becoming suddenly holier-than-thou; no halos above their heads; no sudden requirements to dress in a three-piece tweed suit and carry a large black book under their arm. Real faith.

Mr Lodge, the site owner, has two sons. The longer the camp goes on, the more Gerald notices the boys and their living faith. The way they talk, their confidence, their obvious care for the younger boys. To this impressionable 12-year-old, they become his heroes! He looks forward to seeing them; tries to spend time with them. If there is to be an organised hike, Gerald is careful to keep in step with them.

When they gather for the evening meetings, he's sure to sit with them. It is the remarkable freshness of their faith that gets to Gerald. — is is real. He can see it is. But Gerald isn't admitting his own need for change just yet. More unhappiness.

And more meetings in the big tent. Sitting on the straw bales makes it seem all the more real. — is is some stuffy church building with candles and pews and stuff. — is is just boys on a camp. And it is God Through Jesus. Changing lives. Changing Gerald's life.

That is it. He knows he needs to change.

'Mike. Er I . . . I want to be a Christian.'

'But I thought you were, Gerald. That's what you said.'

'Well . . . I'm not so sure. I'm not sure I did it right!'

So there, under the stars that Gerald has stared at through his earlier childhood years, he asks the creator God of those stars to change his life. For Jesus to come into his life, to be his Lord and Saviour.

The final line of the prayer that Mike and Mr Good (the camp leader) lead him in says, 'From this day forward, please make out of me what you want me to be.' As Gerald prays, there is a sense of God's Holy Spirit already at work, already confirming the change in Gerald's life, and taking him up on the words he prays. God will indeed make of Gerald what He wants him to be.

## A MIRACLE BOY

Getting back from the camp means facing up to a new life. A starting out in a new-found faith.

The first shock is Mum and Dad. They pick him up from the station. Gerald dives in with his announcement:

'I have been born again and saved and converted!'

There is puzzlement on his parents' faces.

'That's nice dear,' says Mum. 'There's steak and kidney pie for tea!'

And that is it. No mention is made again of Gerald's triumphant announcement. Life goes back to normal.

But not at all normal. Gerald can't leave it there. If God is real and God has changed his life, there are consequences. Gerald knows that. He has to act on his faith. Wasn't that what Mike had said at camp?

The insecure boy begins to change. Once so keen for attention for the wrong reasons, wanting to take the lead but at the same time being afraid to do so. And now beginning again. More confidence. Beginning to lead, to influence, to communicate.

The Gilbert and Sullivan operettas keep young Gerald excited about school. Not so much the lessons though. He wants to learn, but sitting down quietly is hard for him. Too many questions. Too much to discover. He copes with English and art, but hates maths, science and anything practical such as woodwork.

He's out of his shyness well and truly by this time, and is finding it hard to keep quiet. He's trying out his faith as well, of course, and it's his sincerity that draws him to the attention of some of the teachers.

There is someone who at one moment is incredibly immature and at the next moment is showing genuine signs of leadership; one instant, infuriating the teachers with pranks and jokes, the next, surprising them with his genuine concern for a pupil who's being bullied. Caring, offering counsel. As a result, he eventually made Assistant Head Boy.

Studies may still be a struggle, but Gerald is finding his feet. He is aware that there is a God who loves him; more so, a God who has plans for him. Younger school children are attracted to this increasingly confident teenager. Gerald finds he is able to share his faith naturally. And people listen.

It's an up and down faith for Gerald, though. Despite the increased confidence, without encouragement from others Gerald finds it difficult to keep going. There's no help at home, of course. Witnessing him reading the Bible one day, Gerald's mother asks him why he doesn't read 'something decent' like the romantic novels his sister reads!

### The Twilight Zone

Gerald is entering what he later calls the 'twilight zone'. That lonely place between the ages of 12 and 18. A time of growing up. Learning. A time of awareness that things are changing. Puberty. A sudden awareness of the opposite sex. The feeling of being unable to talk to anyone about those changes. And the loneliness. The sheer loneliness of growing up without close friends, Christian companions, mentors or leaders.

From gazing at the stars to praying a prayer, Gerald is changing. But it seems such hard work. He feels he shouldn't be thinking the thoughts that persist. The playground talk of girls doesn't help. Nor does



the shared copy of *Men Only* magazine. Gerald is wracked with guilt.

~~His own expectations of his Christian faith are wearing him down. Aware of what he should be doing~~ he feels he is constantly failing. His ceaseless ability to exaggerate without realising he is doing thoughts in his head that shouldn't be there. Teenage responses to puberty. He feels he should do better and that his failure means he is no good to God, let alone to anybody else. Where are those brave words of commitment now? 'Make out of me what you want me to be.' Still prayed, but with an increased sense of failure and desperation, rather than with faith.

Depression. It's a description that those who know Gerald from later years would never associate with him. But that's how it feels as Gerald approaches his sixteenth birthday. There is such a battle within him. He knows what he wants to do, but feels unable to achieve it. His personal high standards have been badly compromised by his thoughts.

And more than just his thoughts. He's not a bad-looking young man, and some of the girls in his school year are attracted to him. They make themselves available to him. And he takes advantage of this.

Linda is his first girlfriend. She is not a Christian, and not interested in Gerald's beliefs, and the relationship pulls Gerald further away from his faith.

More compromise, more regret. And genuine depression. Some days feel so dark, it's hard to get out of bed. There's little motivation to go to school, and none to read the Bible. If he's let down God, how can God even want him to read the Bible or pray? Everything seems so bleak. Where is the meaning to life? Why bother with school? Why bother with anything?

He tries though. He really does. Appointing himself a counsellor at school to any friends who need help, he tries to speak positively of his faith. But most friends don't listen. And the one time he really does seem to help one of the girls, her boyfriend comes along and beats him up for attempting to 'steal' her.

As the twilight darkens the day he finds a photograph. His dad spots young Gerald in the glove compartment of the car and shouts for him to get out. Too late. Who is she? Scantily clad. Not Mum, though. A mistress? Just a photograph? Surely not just a photograph or Dad wouldn't have shouted so loudly. Maybe this is why Dad never seems to have any money; he's spending it somewhere else. Gerald is not sure what to do. So he does nothing. Of course, Dad doesn't mention it to Gerald. But he keeps his distance. Gerald's relationship with his father has never been close. Now it feels fractured for good.

At a time when he needs a mentor, a friend, someone to help him think through the turmoil in his mind, the guilt, the wrong thoughts, the depression, there's no one. His dad is ignoring him. His schoolteachers seem too remote. And his friends from camp are too far away.

## **Making Sense**

These teenage years seem to be a mix of growing as a Christian and plain hard struggle, moments of faith and moments of doubt. Especially when Gerald doesn't pass his exams. But despite the lack of success and sometimes the lack of direction and mentoring, Gerald still grows in his faith. He starts reading his Bible again. Some of it begins to make sense to him. There's some life-changing stuff in there. He's not sure how it all fits together, but as he reads of heroes of the past, there's a desire to be a modern-day hero for God; to march around the walls like Joshua; to shout and sing like David; to speak of his faith like Paul; and to live . . . like Jesus. But there nearly wasn't a life to live.

Boldness or recklessness? That's what nearly gets him killed. Why he agrees to ride the motorbike having never been on one before, is anyone's guess. Bravado again? Maybe. Or just not wanting to look like a fool? Possibly. But there is no doubting the miracle of recovery.

# Miracle Boy

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Sometimes our most important moments are shrouded in normal-looking days. There is nothing special about this Saturday morning. For Gerald, school has ended, and after a short time at art college, he is starting his first job. His lack of exam success is not going to stop him. He is going to succeed in life.

The motorbike is a challenge. And Gerald is learning to like challenges. After all, how hard can it be? His friends think he can ride the bike. Gerald may have suggested that he can. Exaggeration is still very much part of life in D'Abernon Drive.

Off he goes. Upright. Starting slowly. Maintaining the image. No helmet of course. A bit too much on the throttle. Too much of a swerve as he rounds the parked car. Into the debris at the edge of the road. The tyre busts. The motorbike approaches the curb. What was it, maybe twenty miles an hour? Perhaps twenty-five. But fast enough to cause a lot of damage.

Gerald's world slows down. In that instant he has time to regret his decision. Even time to think he may not be looking so cool after all.

And that's it. The bike hits the curb. It throws Gerald high over the handlebars. Still flying, he hits a concrete pillar. Head first. Multiple fractures. Unconscious.

And then God's hand in it all. It's a miracle. The specialist says so. Even Gerald's unbelieving parents comment on it. The initial prognosis is just four hours . . . four hours to live.

'He will never regain consciousness, Mrs Coates. You'd best say your goodbyes. Your son will not survive the night.'

Five hours later, he's still alive. Six. Seven. Seven days. Seven weeks. The miracle continues.

Unconscious for the first week, he comes round to find he is in the same ward as Stirling Moss, the racing driver, who was in an accident on the same day.

Gerald is transferred to a specialist brain unit in another hospital; it's difficult to see how much damage has been done. The initial operation on the brain and a lumbar puncture are followed by electroconvulsive shock treatment to determine the extent of the inevitable brain damage.

He's got a scar like no other – a deep dent in his skull. But that's it. Nothing else. No brain damage. A number of doctors and nurses start to call it a miracle.

The motorbike accident is a miracle in more ways than one. Not only does Gerald recover at a miraculous rate but the ambulance drivers confide that within a minute of picking up on Gerald in an emergency, they received another emergency call. The drivers explain that if the calls had come in the other way around and they had answered the other call first, it is likely Gerald would have died before reaching the hospital.

As this is written, Gerald is alive and well, now in his seventies and without any long-term effect to his health from the accident, despite the fact his skull was split open. Miracle boy.

## Pursued and Protected

The motorcycle accident isn't the only time Gerald comes near to death as a child. A little geeky, accident-prone and averse to any sporting activities, he should have known better than to try and cross a partly submerged bridge over a stream. Gerald is carried downstream and dragged into a five-foot-wide drain. His cries for help are heard by a passing shopper who manages to drag him clear.

Then there is Gerald's best friend Bryan Price. A hero.

Gerald is on a boys' camp. Someone shoves him into the deep end of the swimming pool, not realising he can't swim. Pushing himself to the top, Gerald gasps for air before sinking again. Bryan sees what is happening. Diving in, he drags Gerald out, semi-conscious by now. God seems to have plans for the

accident-prone boy.

~~By the time of the motorbike accident, Gerald has a Christian faith. But there's something about~~  
miracle, especially when it's your own life that has been saved, that speaks deeply to you. ~~ere's a new~~  
resolve. Gerald knows that from now on he needs to pursue this God that has so obviously pursued him  
– and protected him. A life of adventure awaits. Gerald always knew it did. It's just that this is  
different kind of adventure from most.

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## HAND IN HAND

Never one to settle for second best, Gerald is passionate about his re-fired faith.

There's an immaturity about his faith at 17, of course. He wants to be great. He is seeking popularity and fame as much as he understands his newly sharpened faith. But he feels different. He always has been a bit different. His dislike for football and sports generally has seen to that.

There's a new awareness, though, of being different. Of being called by God to be different. As he enters his later teenage years, the desire for fame and pleasing others begins to be replaced by a desire for God and pleasing Christ. He doesn't want to compromise, and there is a willingness to be a fool for Christ if that's what it takes.

'From this day forward, please make out of me what you want me to be.' The last line of his salvation prayer stays with him. How can he ensure that God can make the most of his life? Surely it must involve church-going? But what brand? And where?

One thing is for sure – it isn't going to be St Mary's. Long past Sunday school days, the Bible class for older children and youth is in a different building and in another location. None of Gerald's friends will go with him, so Gerald doesn't go either.

There is no pressure to attend church from anyone else. Gerald's parents seemed mildly amused by his faith and opposed to him taking it more seriously. Gerald's friends certainly aren't interested.

But Gerald's not done just yet. He's an enterprising young man, and he's heard of a Christian youth group.

### Friday Club

A two-mile bus journey to Cobham, then a long walk. It's Friday night and Gerald's been brave enough to pitch up on his own. There's a good welcome for him, though.

Mr Jeffries, inevitably nicknamed 'the Judge', is a little eccentric, but he leads a good youth group. Friday nights are times filled with table games, drinks and biscuits to follow, and then a talk. It is the nearest Gerald gets to church for quite a while. And it keeps his Christian faith alive. Though only just.

Gerald's initial enthusiasm is beginning to wane.

Friday Club proves not to be enough. There's only so many times you can sing 'Go Tell It on the Mountain' and remain interested. Gerald's attendance drops. He seems to be falling back into his old ways again. A combination of girls and cigarettes are beginning to take over. Neither proves satisfying, of course. Both leave Gerald with that often-felt sense of guilt and failure. The latter is dropped pretty quickly. The former is about to take a different shape. In fact, as far as Gerald is concerned, a very attractive shape!

### Anona

Gerald leaves school with a solitary CSE in English. He finds a job with H.L. Reid & Co., a large department store over four floors in downtown Epsom. The store sells pretty much everything, but Gerald finds himself working with the displays and window presentations. It is a job well-suited to his creative skills and he excels, becoming one of the youngest display managers within the industry.

Not that this promotion makes him too serious a young man. Known for his jokes and pranks, Gerald

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