

From the Restoration Movement to Grace

God brought me to faith in 1984, when my oldest son was six months old. It seemed that his six month birthday was a good time to stop and evaluate the kind of home in which he'd be raised. As I began to look at my life, the Lord allowed me to see how very helpless I was to create the kind of family I wanted. My dear husband had become hostile to the faith we both professed shortly after we married, so I knew that my son would not be raised in a "Christian" home. I knew that the responsibility for teaching my son about God was going to be mine alone, but my life was not one that honored God. As I evaluated my character and lack of discipline in light of the Bible, I realized for the first time that not only did I sin—sin was a natural thing for me. I was a *sinner*, and my sin was against a holy God. I was completely undone.

At this point, I was not thinking in terms of Heaven and Hell, or of other Bible terms like "saved" and "lost". I knew tremendous shame and guilt and instinctively I knew that the only hope of forgiveness lay in Jesus. After three days of tearful misery, I confessed my helplessness and my repentance to God. It was the most frightening moment of my life. I knew how little I deserved forgiveness.

God met me at that point—it was sheer grace on His part. What a relief! He gave me assurance of His forgiveness and lifted the crushing weight of my sin and guilt. I wish I had words to describe the joy and gratitude I felt. I was pretty sure I'd never sin again. (I was certainly proved wrong on that point!)

As is often the case, my heart was ahead of my head in understanding God's ways. I knew that whatever had happened was a big deal, and thought that this must be salvation. Nothing else in my life had been like it—certainly not my childhood prayer asking God to save me from Hell and my subsequent baptism. Suddenly the Bible made sense to me. I desired to be in church and to learn, and I was constantly thinking about God. I went to the minister of the church I attended and explained the experience to him, asking to be baptized.

According to the teaching of the kind of church I was attending (the Independent Christian Church, also known as Church of Christ Instrumental), what I had experienced could *not* have been salvation because there was no baptism by immersion involved. Since this church defined experience according to doctrine, the minister gave me two choices. Either my baptism just now "kicked in" even though I'd been immersed 15 years previously, or this was a "second call" of the Holy Spirit. According to his experience, it's not uncommon for lifetime Church of Christ members to suddenly "catch fire" and be called to a life of greater service than the rank and file. We agreed that baptism was not necessary at that time. I've since come to see we were in error. Our belief system didn't include a way to define the experience the Bible calls *regeneration*.

As time passed, I became increasingly involved in church activities, especially in teaching. I began teaching preschool in the Sunday night youth program. Gradually I taught more classes and expanded my administrative duties. Just before I came to my

present church in July of 1998, I was Children's Director at my former church, in charge of curriculum and staffing nursery through Jr. High for four programs a week. I led Children's Worship, was the Sunday School superintendent, ran the web site, and had only recently resigned as teacher of an adult class. My two sons were involved in all the youth activities. Church was at the very center of our lives.

Teaching the adult class was life changing. All the members in this class had been in the church 20 years or more. We were all in leadership, and we were all looking for a deep study. We decided to study the New Testament book of Romans.

I've looked back through my teaching notes to help me remember a little about my mindset at that time. The introductory lesson explains how Martin Luther just "didn't get it" when he talked about salvation by faith alone, and about his "regrettable lack of discernment" concerning works being necessary for salvation. That may give you some idea of the arrogance and error of the early lessons I taught. All that changed when we began to study Romans 4.

I remember reading that chapter in order to prepare for the lesson, and seeing for the first time (or at least, *really* seeing for the first time) Romans 4:4-5 "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the unrighteous, his faith is counted as righteousness."

These verses are impossible to explain according to the belief system I'd been taught for years. The Church of Christ teaches that saving faith equals trust *and* obedience. We are saved by faith, according to this teaching, but not until we obey. Continued obedience is required to continue in a state of grace. Someone obviously didn't explain this to Paul, who said that God justifies the UNRIGHTEOUS, not the obedient. He says it twice...the one who does NOT work, and the UNRIGHTEOUS are the ones who receive salvation (Romans 4:5).

I didn't just read this, drop everything and find a new church. I looked up the verses in every Church of Christ commentary I could find. I took the verses to my Elder and asked for an explanation, then to the minister (two of the top leaders in a Church of Christ church). Although there were many theories, no one had an answer that satisfied me. After weeks of struggle, I decided to ignore that section and admit defeat. But God kept those verses in front of me constantly. It seemed as though my Bible fell open to that section whenever I picked it up. Romans 4 kept coming up in sermons, on the radio, and in my lesson plans. For a while I'd wake up in the night—and there it would be in my head. I really began to hate Romans 4.

I still had lessons to prepare while this struggle was going on, and it did go on for months. I gradually became more uncomfortable in my teaching positions as I grew to believe that more and more of our doctrine might be in error. The Church of Christ doesn't teach inherited sin, so Romans 5 was quite difficult to explain. Romans 9 taught us about God's sovereignty in choosing people for salvation, which contradicted the

Church of Christ teaching that individuals instigate their own salvation. Romans 10 told us about the error of those whose zeal for God was not based in knowledge. It was truly miserable to be the teacher.

Again, I was in constant contact with the leaders of my former church through this whole period. At the same time they asked me not to teach any doctrine that disagreed with their position they also urged me not to disobey my conscience in teaching what I didn't believe. The leaders asked me not to read the books of the Bible that were troubling me but to take a break from study and concentrate on relationships instead. We all thought what I needed was a break and a fresh perspective.

Understanding error was the negative side of the process of leaving the Church of Christ. For several months I was out-of-step with the rest of the congregation, not believing as they did, but not having a good idea what a correct understanding of the Bible was either. God graciously did not leave me there.

In the spring of 1998, I was searching the Internet and stumbled on to an apologetics site that had a chat room. I was able to eavesdrop on folks who explained doctrine and talked about the Bible in ways I had never heard before. I was immediately fascinated and ordered some books about what they were calling the Doctrines of Grace.

In May 1998, after I'd read the books, Dr. White (the Bible teacher from the Internet) took time to explain John 6 to me, carefully working through verses 35-45. The Church of Christ teaches that the Holy Spirit has no part in the conversion process and that God cannot even hear our prayers until baptism. In John 6:44 Jesus says, "*No one* can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I *will* raise him up on the last day." From this verse, I realized it was God's decision to draw me that allowed me to come to Christ in the first place. Further, it said *all* the people God draws to Jesus will be finally saved.

It was as if a light suddenly came on—all I had read about the Doctrines of Grace "clicked". There was no question—I was going to have to leave the Church of Christ. I wish I could tell you I rejoiced to know the truth. Actually, I literally threw up every time I thought about it. I did not want to leave my church, but to stay would have been direct disobedience. I'm ashamed to tell you I considered staying anyway.

I contacted Dr. Whitney in June of 1998 after finding the web site of North Pointe Baptist Church. He was then, and has been since, unfailingly gracious. He and Caffy counseled with me and prayed during that last month at the Church of Christ and have been a great encouragement since. I spent June of 1998 finding people to take over my duties at the Church of Christ and tying up loose ends. The Whitneys were the only ones who knew of my intent to leave.

The first week in July 1998, I turned in my church key to the minister at the Church of Christ. We cried together that things had come to this point, but he let me go with his blessing. The leaders decided to let me go "see what the world had to offer," fully sure I

would return to them, like the prodigal in Luke 15. Like Lot's wife who turned back to look longingly at the place God told her to leave, I was reluctantly obedient to God in leaving the Church of Christ.

They also had some trouble letting go. I don't think the Church of Christ saw the separation as final until December, when I turned down the offer of a paid staff position. As of this writing, my older son and my Mom still attend regularly.

After 23 years in the same congregation, even the idea of visiting a new church was traumatic. My then-nine-year-old son and I will always be grateful for the welcome we received from the congregation at North Pointe. We were so frightened that first Sunday! I think we both cried that morning. He has been the real hero, being obedient and cheerful about the changes when he didn't understand all the reasons for them. As of this writing he is happily learning the Bible with his friends and is completely assimilated into North Pointe.

I still don't understand why God was so gracious as to choose to save me and then to enlighten me as to the true nature of the Gospel. I wasn't the smartest, the most dedicated or the most upright person in my old church, nor was I submissive enough to obey God with my whole heart in leaving. Despite my mixed loyalties, God has brought me to a place of greater service than I could have imagined in a church teaches the truth and challenges me to grow. He has placed me among people who love me. God is indeed worthy to be trusted and to be praised. His ways are above my ways.