

The Steps I Have Taken

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"We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak" (II Corinthians 4:13).

GREAT ADVENTURE OF FAITH

This is a brief and feeble attempt to journal my walk with the Lord. It is an effort to record some of the *steps that I have taken* over nearly forty years of spiritual development. It has indeed been a *great adventure of faith*.

The truths that we learn are designed to *change* our lives. As we study God's Word we should grow; and as we grow there comes a point in our lives where we are moved to make decisions. These times are crucial to our continued spiritual growth.

I have always lived a life of firm conviction, even as these convictions have changed over the years. I affirm the truths that I currently see; but they do not embody who I am. They are not my creed, but simply my present understanding. Just as in my past, further study will undoubtedly adjust and change these convictions, and thus transform my life – over and over again. This is the spiritual cycle of divine life.

Often our readers will ask about our testimony, about our background, how the Lord has brought us to the place where we are today. I am taking the opportunity to tell you of *the steps I have taken* on my journey with the Lord to where I am today.

EARLY YEARS

I was born in Hampton, VA¹ on January 20, 1959 to Clyde and Christine (Webb) Pilkington,² who knew God, and the Savior's work at Calvary. My parents faithfully and lovingly brought me up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. They loved each other greatly, and our home was a wonderful haven of that love that they shared. I am eternally thankful for having such an exceptional couple as my parents. Some of my earliest memories are

1. Dixie Hospital, Hampton, VA.

2. Both of my parents were born in Johnston County, NC.

around God's Word. I never remember a time when I did not know there was a God; a God Who loved me. I never remember a time that I did not know that the Lord Jesus Christ had died for my sins. My parents constantly lived in these truths. As a result, it was at an early age that I, too, by faith, found my resting place in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As I came into my pre-teen years a hunger for the life of God began in my heart. I had a great desire to study God's Word for myself; and as I studied, I found that I wanted to share with others the truths from the Bible that I was enjoying.

FULL-TIME CHRISTIAN SERVICE

At this early, formative stage of my life, my only understanding of the *ultimate* activity of God's life was "full-time Christian service." I began such a pursuit of "the *ministry*" as a very young teenager. It was my *goal*. As a result I preached my first "sermon" at the age of thirteen (I guess all those sermons that I had preached as a boy to my dog in the back yard under the weeping willow tree were my early preparations!). This first message was delivered at a multi-church youth rally held at my home church.³

Within two years I was developing and conducting weekly youth meetings at our church, as well as giving an occasional message for our Sunday morning "junior church." These occasions gave fuel to the burden and *goal* to give my life to "the service of the Lord."

I entered Christian high school in my sophomore year.⁴ That same year I began conducting weekly services at a nearby hospital for the chronically ill.⁵ I carried on this weekly ministry for six years. This was a very special time for me, as I learned to love the people to whom I ministered, and the various speaking opportunities would prove valuable, as they allowed me to learn to communicate what I learned with others.

In all of this, I was following a course of examples that had been set before me. I was doing what I knew and understood to be "the work of the Lord." All I had ever known about the things of God were directly and inseparably tied to "church." We were "every-time-the-doors-were-open" Christians. In many ways it was my life growing up. I desired to pursue the patterns of those whom I admired – my heroes both through personal acquaintance and through the many Christian biographies that I had read. I was on a firm course of "full-time Christian service" in the true traditional sense. This was my *goal* as it seemed proper and appropriate to my mind at that time, the ultimate love and service of God. I did this out of a sincere desire to honor my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Little did I realize all that I was getting myself into. Over the years, I would come to learn *too many things* for my *goal* of true "full-time Christian service" to ever become a fixed reality for me. My life would become *anything* but traditional. Maybe my life would be better described as *transitional*, for it would indeed turn out to be an ever-perpetual transition. As a result,

3. The P.B.Y.F. (Peninsula Baptist Youth Fellowship) gathering at Victory Baptist Church, Hampton, VA.

4. Central Baptist High School, Hampton, VA.

5. Patrick Henry Hospital, Newport News, VA.

conscience would continually cause me to forego avenues constantly available to me that were advantageous toward my original *goal*. I would incessantly close doors that would have led me to my *goal*.

BIBLE COLLEGE

After completing Christian high school I entered Bible College⁶ and became an assistant pastor of the Independent Baptist church in which I had been raised. Bible College was not at all what I had hoped it would be. It produced for me many difficult internal conflicts. Before long there was a deep turmoil in my heart that could not be satisfied. The conflict was between what I had learned in my own studies, and the direction in which the religious curriculum was leading. This was an extremely trying and difficult time for me. After completing only three semesters, I was so troubled that my conscience required me to discontinue my Bible College education in the fall of 1978.

Over the subsequent years, the question posed to traditional ministers, “Where did you graduate?” would be a hindrance to my original *goal*. After all, by religious standards I had “shot myself in the foot” by not obtaining a religious education degree. Reflecting back over the years, I can see that this was actually a great decision. I am thankful to God to have been spared any additional religious training.

I did, however, continue on in my full-time position of assistant pastor for another two years. I would eventually be licensed and then ordained as a Baptist preacher. I was being groomed to take over a well-established church ministry; but once again conflicts began to build in my conscience between things that I was personally learning from the Scriptures and what I was doing “for the Lord.”

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

As the decade of the eighties began, I found an ever increasing state of turmoil in my heart. My studies had left a host of unanswered questions: questions concerning the Bible; questions about the church; questions related to the will of God. The joyful labor of serving the Lord had become a burden of frustration. Neither I, nor *anyone* I knew, had answers to the inquiries of my heavily-burdened soul.

I was embarking on a journey that would gradually lead me *out* of my religious confusion and bondage; a journey into understanding the glorious liberty and freedom which I already, unknowingly, had in Jesus Christ! As with many others who have set out on such a similar search, it wasn't always an easy or simple course, but one that would result in eventual joy and blessing. Many along the way would not understand my decisions or direction. Often I did not really understand it myself. I only knew that I did not want to continue in the state in which I was struggling. There had to be answers to my heartfelt longings and questions.

6. Central Baptist College, Hampton, VA.

LEAVING DENOMINATIONALISM

The first significant step that I made was to leave the security of my professional church position. This was an extremely difficult decision, for this was the church of my childhood. I was once again “shooting myself in the foot.” This action in no way harmonized with my original *goal* of “full-time Christian service.” Added to this conflict was the fact that my wife’s father was the pastor, of whom I was the assistant. I was leaving the “family business” so to speak; but conscience would no longer allow me to support many doctrines and practices that violated what I believed the Bible taught at that time. Over the years I have reflected, with thanksgiving to God, for this decision that brought me *out* of the entrapment of “mainstream” religion. This was the fall of 1980.

I took a job as a security guard⁷ to support my new family.⁸ After all, like many ministers, I wasn’t qualified to do too many things.⁹ During this time I began to visit many different denominational churches to see if there was a place in my heart for one of them. I even read diligently through *The Handbook of Denominations* by Frank Mead to see if I could “find myself” there. This led me to expand my search, visiting churches even into a neighboring state. In short order, I was disillusioned with them all. Not only did they not have the answers for which my heart so desperately sought, they did not even *understand* the questions. I realized that conscience would not allow me to be a traditional “denominationalist.”

Deep within my heart I sought to escape sectarianism and division, but all I knew and understood was the traditional “church.” After all, it had been my life. Like many others, I had absolutely no concept of *any* spiritual life apart from the traditional concept of “church.” Out of sheer frustration I ultimately began to meet with a few other saints in our small apartment.¹⁰ I ended up doing the only thing I knew how to do; I established *my own* traditional “church” – “non-denominational” though it was. I honestly thought I might be used of the Lord to help fix some of the problems that I saw in Christendom, even though I knew at the time that I did not as of yet have the answers myself either.

7. It was with Old Dominion Security, working at the Newport News City Hall,

8. I was not only married, but now had my first child, Clyde III.

9. Since leaving my “job” as “assistant pastor” in 1980, I had been a “tentmaker” following the Pauline pattern. Even during the period that I actually “pastored” I was never salaried. It is by *choice* I was not a salaried “minister.” Paul did not make his living by the *gospel*. He made a living making tents. In so doing he left the Body of Christ a pattern that matched his teaching, “*And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you*” (1 Thessalonians 4:11). As believers even our livelihood is to be “*as unto the Lord*” (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-24; Titus 2:9-10). Our occupation is earthly, but our vocation is heavenly – a high calling of God (Ephesians 4:1). Many think that for someone to really serve the Lord they should be religiously “salaried.” Before men’s systems this is honorable and respectable; but not so with God (Luke 16:15). We are not to serve the Lord for salary; we are not to be “hired” or “hirelings;” we are to be ministers of the Lord out of our *own* livelihoods. As William Carey (1761-1834) said, “My business is preaching the gospel, and I cobble shoes to pay my expenses.” (See my article, *Paul the Tentmaker*” in *Bible Student’s Notebook #82*).

10. This was in an apartment that had been built on my parents’ house for my grandparents on Fox Hill Rd, Hampton, VA.

MY OWN CHURCH

The Old Fashioned Gospel Tabernacle was founded in Hampton, VA, in March of 1981, the name being patterned after C.H. Spurgeon's *Metropolitan Tabernacle*, with the "Old Fashioned" part reflecting my desire to return to some form of a biblical pattern of the church. Although I felt inadequate for the task of starting a "church," I was at a complete loss as to what else to do. My family needed to "go to church" somewhere. I knew of no other options before me. I was trusting God and His Word to lead me through this dark maze.

The next four years would at least grant me a measure of freedom from the system to grow and develop in some areas. We were not directly associated with any other "church" or religious organization; although we did have fellowships that offered both positive and negative influences on our thinking and approach.¹¹ During this time I developed a very strong dispensational position, what might be referred to as "Acts 2 Dispensationalism."¹² This did produce much insight and growth in my life; but I was still lacking something very important – something that would allow me to see plainly what God's purpose and will was for today. Even though I had left the denomination of my birth, I was not able to shake my denominational bondage and strong legalistic approach; it was internal. My militant, hard and legalistic confusion would foster a critical spirit in my church and those around me.

During this time we did what we believed good "churches" should do: we supported "missionaries," started a Bible correspondence school,¹³ a Christian school,¹⁴ Bible institute,¹⁵ a library,¹⁶ a periodical,¹⁷ and a radio ministry.¹⁸ We also had extensive rest home, street preaching, and door-to-door "ministries."

PAUL'S GOSPEL

The next major change in my life would come in the summer of 1985, as I was introduced to Paul's *distinct* message and ministry, as *the* apostle to the Gentiles. This actually came about as a result of one of our "ministries." I used our radio broadcast to share what insight I had at the time. It was not the traditional Christian broadcast for sure. One particular Saturday morning I was teaching on the "10 Virgins" from the book of Matthew. I was sharing how they did not represent the "church" of our age. I was using the passage to make the clear distinction between Israel and "the church." That Saturday morning a listener from the neighboring state of North Carolina thought I understood clearly Paul's distinct apostleship from the "Twelve Apostles" to Israel. Though I had become very dispensational, I had not come to the full

11. At that time we had contact with associates of Peter Ruckman (1921-), and other "King James Version Only" advocates.

12. A similar dispensational approach of C.I. Scofield (1843-1921), Clarence Larkin (1850-1924), and L.S. Chafer (1871-1952). This position believes that the church (ecclesia) of this dispensation began in Acts chapter two.

13. Open Bible School

14. Gospel Tabernacle Christian School

15. Believers' Bible Institute

16. The Lord's Library

17. *The Old Paths*

18. Bible Study Time

knowledge and appreciation of the truth of Paul's special ministry and message.

The next day that very listener¹⁹ from North Carolina drove up and visited our Sunday morning "services." He arrived early and we had the opportunity to fellowship for a while. Soon, we both realized that we were not always talking about the same things – especially when he spoke of the "one baptism" to the exclusion of "water baptism." After the "service" he went to his car and pulled out a couple of books from his trunk to leave with me.²⁰

I can remember how I felt as he left me with those books that Sunday afternoon. I felt sorry for him. He was such a nice guy; but I had heard of "hyper-dispensationalists"²¹ like him. (Oh, how we love to label people!) The fact is, I had been warned against such "dry-cleaners"²² as they had been called; how dangerous they could be – how they could destroy your "church."

My heart went out to him – such a dear brother who could be so close to truth, and yet be caught up in such sad error. His heart was very gracious and I looked forward to meeting with him again. I determined to read very carefully the two books that he had given me. I would find the error in them, and then we could get back together and I would share with him where he was wrong. The timing was perfect, as our Christian school was out for the summer and I had the time to devote to these books.

I read the books with a close "magnifying-glass" approach – looking up cautiously every Scripture reference, studying them carefully for myself. What I soon found out, though, was that these books actually spoke to me, that my heart was being enlightened. For the first time in many years someone knew many of the questions that I had been asking – and they were providing the answers as well.

Paul's *unique* message and ministry was a missing element in my understanding. As I embraced the "revelation of the mystery" (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 3:3) that was given to Paul, a floodlight of illumination was shed upon the pages of God's Word.

I dedicated the ensuing years to understanding the message and ministry of Jesus Christ through the revelation given to Paul. These were truly enlightening, enjoyable, and exciting times, eventually resulting in a change in our "church" constitution and name, becoming *Grace Bible Church*.²³ This process was not an easy one; but, once again conscience took

19. Vince Mercer from Elizabeth City, NC.

20. The two books were *Things that Differ* by C.R. Stam (1909-2003) and *Dispensational Relationships* by Charles F. Baker (1905-1994). Both of these books represent what is sometimes referred to as "Mid-Acts Dispensationalism." These books contain some wonderful truths by very able teachers.

21. Used as a reference to anyone more ("hyper") dispensational than you are. For example, to an "Acts 2 Dispensationalist," anyone beyond that ("Mid-Acts Dispensationalist" or "Acts 28 Dispensationalist") is "Hyper-Dispensationalist."

22. "Dry-cleaners" is sometimes used a reference to their "non-water baptism" position.

23. We named it *Grace Bible Church* following the pattern of many of the "churches" within the groups that were associated with the teachings of the two books given to me. The two books represented two basic divisions of the self-termed "Grace Movement." The two "fellowships" (sometimes a religious cliché for "factions") were the *Grace Gospel Fellowship* and the *Berean Bible Fellowship*, basically spearheaded by the two authors Charles F. Baker (1905-1994) and C.R. Stam (1909-2003) respectively (although around the time that I came into the picture there was another significant split developing with in the *Berean Bible Fellowship* that centered on another brother,

the truth and led the way. I was now as far away from my original *goal* and the traditional approach to successful “Christian ministry” as I had ever been. Looking back, this was indeed another important transition, taking place in March of 1986.

RE-EVALUATION

Throughout the entire decade of the 1980s there was a long, slow, detailed re-evaluation of many points of doctrine and practice. The believer’s identity in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the lack of biblical support for all rituals, ceremonies, ordinances and holy days in the current age of grace, being the major things that would demand my attention.

During the first half of the 1990s I began to question the legitimacy of the human organization of “church”²⁴ itself, including my own role as “pastor” in this man-made system. This again was not an easy process. Once again truth was taking the very life out of my original *goal*. As an initial response, in January of 1992, I led us to change the “church” constitution to reflect *eldership*. Following quickly on the heels of this action was a change to abandon the Sunday morning “service” completely and begin gatherings in homes, all of which was a very delicate transition.

All of the things that I learned along the way were tested, with a continual pressure from without and from within always present for me to return to the organized religious system that I had left. One great test that would weigh heavily upon my heart was an opportunity that, if taken, would drive me all the way back into the traditional “*pastoral*” role and reclaim my “job security” – within the framework of “full-time Christian service.” Occasion presented itself to quickly restore my original *goal* in good fashion. This was done through the pastoral vacancy at a flagship church of the “Grace Movement.”²⁵ Yet conscience would not allow the conduct of life to contradict understood truth.

In the midst of all of this, the conscience of truth continued its steady and diligent work in my heart. How could I pawn off *my own* human organization as God’s *church*? Much discussion and time was devoted to the topic of the *true* nature of the church. Eventually, in April of 1993, as a result of my deep-seated struggling, the name of our organization was changed – removing the word “church” altogether – to *Grace Edification Ministries (G.E.M.)*. This allowed for some temporary relief.

ON THE MOVE

In 1994 we sold our home on the Virginia coast and moved to Central Virginia.²⁶ This served a couple of purposes. It allowed me somewhat of a “sabbatical” from religious activity, and we began looking for property in which to build a Christian community. The vision of this community was the establishment of a retreat environment for the Body of Christ through

Richard Jordan and the *Grace School of the Bible*).

24. For a detailed study of this subject watch for my upcoming book: *The Outsiders: God’s Called-Out Ones (A Biblical Look at the Church – The Ecclesia of God)* Bible Student’s Press.

25. At the *Altoona Bible Church* (PA) where I had spoken about a dozen times.

26. We rented an old farmhouse on 200 acres in Elam, VA, near Farmville.

shared community life. Within a year, acreage²⁷ was collectively purchased by nine families. At the time, our land partnership seemed to me to be a viable alternative to traditional religious organizations.²⁸

We sold our traditional church building in June of 1995. It was *replaced* by a double-wide mobile home in Gladstone, VA, in January of 1996.²⁹ This double-wide was adjacent to our community property. During the two years after leaving Hampton, we had operated our 501(c)(3) organization in its *least* religious form in its fifteen-year existence. For me, personally, since I had first entered “*the ministry*” as an assistant pastor of a Baptist church nearly twenty years earlier, I was functioning as *far away* from my original goal as ever.

Even over these two years I had a continual conflict as to my role and function in relation to *religious structure*. I greatly struggled as to how to do the work of “*the ministry*” and how to continue to provide for my family. Do not be confused: I never struggled with my desire to live for and serve God and His people; I never struggled with the desire to study and share what I had learned from God’s Word. My life-long passion consistently has been to get at the truth and have it communicated to others – especially in the form of the written page. My difficulties came in *how* to do this, while providing for my family in the process. For years these two issues led me to look through the classifieds, to network marketing programs, and small business ventures. The lack of any marketable trade was a difficulty. In many ways I felt trapped in the long-reaching arm of the religious system, a system that had swallowed-up many a man. Among the greatest victims of this system are the ones attempting to serve God *through* it.

God has sent me encouragers all along my transitional journey. This period of my life was no exception. Throughout the years almost all of my encouragers have been in the form of literature; thus leading one of my mentors, years ago, to tell me that my problem was that I “read too much.” The fact is, many of my literary encouragers were actually dead to boot – “*being dead yet speaketh*” (Hebrews 11:4) – leading a brother to remark to me, “All your friends are dead!”

One contemporary author was, however, especially used of the Father to speak to me during some of the hardest transitions of this particular period:

“There is nothing less skilled on this planet than a preacher ... I admonish you ... lay down the professional ministry ... Go get a skill. Learn how to earn an honest living, and discover

27. A 135 acre track in Gladstone, VA.

28. *Land Investments for Edification* (L.I.F.E.) was established as a private partnership of families to purchase and hold a track of land collectively. Each family would be allotted a share portion of the property for the purpose of developing individual family home sites. Each partner family was to be responsible for the cost and upkeep of their own homes. The only thing held financially in common was the property and its common ground development and upkeep. The objective was to offer a retreat setting to the Body of Christ out of our mutual venture and lives together.

29. Even the sale of the property fostered a heart conflict, as there were some who desired to use some of the proceeds to compensate me for my years of “church ministry” without salary. This was something that conscience would not allow either. I just wanted ultimately to be free from the entanglement of religion!

the depths of Jesus Christ in the midst of the Body of Christ.”³⁰

During this entire struggle I could often hear in my heart the words of another dear brother:

We cannot stand against what we are a part of. And we must fly “one flag,” we cannot send mixed messages.³¹

Where was I to go from here? What was I to do? My own conscience was steadily moving me toward yet another transition.

INWARD STRUGGLES OF INSTITUTIONALISM

I had become so very tired of the sectarianism within the Body of Christ. I was so tired of having any part in this sectarianism (of “us” vs. “them”). I so longed *NOT* to be associated with the operation of *ANY* religious organization. I so longed to be a *FREE* member of Christ’s Body – and *NOT* a member of *ANYTHING* else!

One thing that increasingly lay heavy on my own heart was my understanding of what true *ministry* was. The religious system has so long mimicked Israel’s Old Testament program that *great* damage and disservice has been done to the Body of Christ. The “ministry” has been taken *away* from Christ’s Body and it has been *institutionalized*. I began to realize that God had not authorized our man-made institutions to *store* and *manage* His ministries and resources.

The religious system has even attempted to *institutionalize* God Himself! We can go to see God in His *institutionalized* condition on Sunday mornings and then the rest of the week is ours. (We treat Him like our society does our elderly relatives!) We give this “institution” some of our finances, and then the rest of the money is ours! How “convenient” religion is. How “satisfying” to the flesh; how “soothing” to the conscience – but it all made my heart ache, and my eyes fill with tears; and here I was, a part of it! Yet, for what reason? Was it for the benefit of being “non-profit,” and having an IRS recognized “charitable contribution”? Of being an official governmental 501(c)(3)? Or was it more basic than that? Was it simply because I was trapped?

“Help!!! Please!!! Somebody let me out!!!” This was my heart-felt cry.

HOW I GOT IN MY “FIX”

How had I gotten myself into such a “fix”? It was hard for me to say. Maybe it was because my *practice* contradicted all that I had learned and taught up to that point. Maybe it was just getting up in the morning and going to bed at night that has gotten me into this situation.

I can not tell you how often I thought of our organization. I woke up each morning, and went

30. Gene Edwards (1932-)

31. Oscar Woodall (1925-2004)

to bed each night with it on my mind. After all, others think of their “work place” often, don’t they? It was only natural, right?

Did some among us not believe that we were indeed a part of the organized religious system? All they needed to do was call up the I.R.S. and ask for information about #541548441. They would learn, regardless of what they might *think* or *feel*, that *Grace Edification Ministries* was in fact an I.R.S.-sanctioned 501(c)(3) religious institution. The facts were plain: We may have attempted to justify our “church” organization’s existence in some other way, or in some other terms, but we were playing the *role* of the religious system and *agreeing* with the government’s assessment – we were an *active part* of the very religious system *against* which we so often spoke. We were partners with them and the government.

Maybe a part of the problem with my conscience was that I could not see in practice that there was any difference between “our ministry” and that of the outstanding national leaders of the religious system, except that we played in *the little league*, and they in *the major league*. Although we may have attempted to view it differently, I am not sure that the world saw much difference. They viewed our “organization” as just *another* religious one trying to build their little “empire.” They viewed me as its “Reverend,” “Man of the Cloth,” “Pastor,” “Clergyman.” Now, I was sure that they would recognize that our organization was odd, and that I was surely an odd kind of a “Reverend;” but, they would still see us as basically the same. I knew that this was not the case in my *heart*, but our government and those around us did not know this! They were not looking at my heart, at what I “thought,” or at what I “felt” – they were looking at what I was *doing*. If you lead a “religious organization” you will always be the “Reverend,” even if only a small scale “Reverend.” Can or could this ever change? Was I to be forever stuck in “Reverendism” even though my entire life I had rejected that title?³² Would our society *ever* make the distinctions I had been hoping to make, distancing myself from the “system” while I still practiced, even if only in some small amateurish way, the “system”? Or were they really smarter than I?

“... *the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light*”
(Luke 16:8).

Or, maybe a part of the problem with my conscience also had to do with the future. Someone may ask, “Is it a *sin* to have an organization?” I think that the answer obviously would be, “No.” The Lord always allows us to use our creative genius to serve Him; but have we been using our creative genius, or are we still following the religious course of this world? Is there anything either creative or genius about following such a prepared course?

Man has taken the entire “*dispensation of grace*,” up until our day, to demonstrate clearly that all human religious institutions, no matter how humbly and focused they begin, end up in apostasy. What was it that made us feel that we could do better? Were we smarter? Were we more spiritual? What did we have that others had not?

There is something about the very nature of religious organizations that eventually takes the focus off of the original message, ministry and spirit of its purpose, and transfers all these to

32. See the article “*Reverend Ministers*” by C.H. Spurgeon in *Bible Student’s Notebook* #8.

the organization itself. They take on a life of their very own. *All* of them eventually do. Some of them do it more quickly than others. Some take a generation or two. Did we dare attempt success at a human concept that has *only* managed to demonstrate failure? Were we to create a future *monster* to deliver to our children and grandchildren? Was concern over preserving finances, or whatever may have been our goal, really worth the *risk*, even if it was *only* a small one? Should we leave our children with religious institutional politicking and power struggles, with misplaced direction and love, with endless business meetings, financial statements and squabbles, as the attention and focus is placed off of relationships and personal ministry and on the perpetuation and control of “the institution”? I began to think that I knew the answer. There was a part of me that did not want to think this way, that I should just leave everything alone; but, then, there was my conscience again.

THE LAST STRAW

The last straw for my conscience may have been triggered by the direction that other organizations had taken. The following is a quote from *The Berean Searchlight*, May, 1996 (and all emphasis is as it appeared in the publication):

Paul warns us about those who, whether wittingly or unwittingly, would spread unsound doctrine among us. We are living in a time when some of the brethren seem to deem it important to find something new. Of course, it is not our intent to discourage anyone in regard to exercising the “Berean spirit.” However, care should be taken not to undermine the *foundation* upon which our faith rests. We do well to remember that “The Doctrinal Statement” our forefathers forged for us, was a product of intense debate with the denominational leaders of their day. Each plank of the statement was carefully crafted as a *defense* and *confirmation* of the Fundamentals of the faith and Paul’s gospel. Therefore, let us not be too quick to challenge those things which are “tried and true.”

At this late hour, there are those who tell us that the “gifts” of *evangelist*, *pastors* and *teachers* or *pastor-teachers* are no longer in operation today. Some have even gone so far as to say that the enabling “gifts” have also passed. This flies in the face of our “Doctrinal Statement,” which has served us well for over fifty years ...”

After this came in the mail, I had sickening shivers as I read it. I think that may have finalized things in my own heart, but it’s hard to say. The conscience is an odd sort of thing. The conscience is an “alarm” of sorts that operates inside our heart and mind. It can operate properly, or it can be faulty. In other words, it can respond to truth or to error. Our obligation, as sincere believers, is to determine from Scripture which it is; but, the conscience is *never* to be *violated*. It is either honored or *corrected* by truth; but either way, conscience is to remain clear.

LEAVING MY OWN ORGANIZATIONS

Obviously my connection with *Grace Edification Ministries* ran very deep. It represented my personal passions and efforts. After all, it was the organization of my own making.

In 1997 I did one of the hardest things that I had done in my life – I resigned my position and association with the very ministry I had started. Our family then opened a new and used bookstore in the town of Amherst, VA. It was an attempt at doing something more honest, and at having a relationship with the community while working with my own hands.

These decisions of course shook the very foundation of my way of life; but conscience of truth dictated that I must at least begin the final stages of this very important transition. This was all very awkward, as awkward as any transition that I had ever made.

MY TRUE IDENTITY

Only a few years ago “my” *identity* was firmly established. I had lived in Hampton all my life. I was, all my adult life, a “minister.” I was always identified with some denominational “group” (Baptist, Grace, etc.).

This all had changed. My “profession” had been laid down (painfully). In addition – in the process of time – my study of the Scriptures had caused me to lose my *identity* as an “American,” a “Republican,” a “Libertarian” and maybe more importantly to me – as a “Southerner.” All of this is who I *had been* in Adam.

I no longer could even consider myself a “King James Bible Believer,” a “Dispensationalist,” a “Grace Believer,” a “conservative” or a “Fundamentalist.” Even though I still may have had convictions regarding some of these areas, these did not represent who I was. They were not my *identity!* Christ *alone* was my *identity!*

I was not in “the Grace Movement,” “Home School Movement,” “King James Movement,” “House Church Movement,” or any other “movement.” I sought to remain *only* a member of Christ’s Body – to be identified only there – and indeed, *what else* really was there?

I had reached a climax of sorts – at least up to this point of my life. My resignation from my own organization was painful for me as well as others. I was at a place in my life where I could easily have regretted many of my actions in the past; but God had taught me that this was the natural process of growth. I had walked only in the light that I had at any given time, being satisfied that I did what I did “*as unto the Lord.*” This did not stop me from taking the things that I was learning and re-evaluating my past: this is what we call “experience!” (Romans 5). I had much to go back and correct, as best I could.

BIBLE CONFERENCES

During the decade of the 1990s I had been active across the county, speaking at small weekend church conferences, as well as to larger, annual, weeklong conferences on college campuses and at conference centers.³³

As time went on I personally began having great difficulty with the “Bible conference” system.

33. I had spoken in VA, NC, TN, AL, ME, AZ, WI, OH, MI, DC, FL, NY, PA, IL, and CA.

It was my personal desire to stand outside the religious system. I wanted to live *outside the camp!* – not one foot in, and one foot out.

I began to realize that through my participation in “Bible Conferences” I was also leading many to the wrong conclusions about what I had been communicating. Little wonder that some of the saints thought that I was always talking about the “other guys” when I was in reality talking about “us”!

Don’t get me wrong: I greatly enjoyed seeing the saints and having fellowship with them. The issue was not personal. It was just the whole system itself. Ceasing my involvement was not an easy decision, and it is not made on a whim. In fact it was more than a half a dozen years in the making. I struggled with this – one conference at a time. The time had come for me to “come clean” in this area, so in 2000 I brought my conference speaking engagements to an end. I no longer could continue to be a part of sectarian party-preaching.

ALL THINGS “DUNG”

These years brought “grief” and tears; and yet, all very welcomed! The Lord was purging me for His own purpose. The Lord was working things *out* of me, and *me* out of things! It was the beginning of allowing God to drain the “professional ministry” fully from my life. Meanwhile, the Lord grew much dearer!

The passage that became so precious to my heart was:

“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for Whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Philippians 3:7-11).

Among other things, I counted my religious past a loss! I could not seem to imagine Paul somehow trying to salvage his own religious past. I could not conceive in my mind of him trying – through any method – to “cash in” on, and “preserve” the synagogue and somehow use it “for the Lord.” He went to the synagogues to rescue his brethren, according to the flesh, *out of that system.* The system itself – with all its many resources – he simply and plainly counted “dung” – i.e., waste, or manure.

What I began doing for the next half dozen years was to learn to follow Paul’s admonition:

“That ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing” (I Thessalonians 4:11-12).

MY WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

I best describe this period as my “wilderness experience” before the Lord. Moses was for forty years the “son of Pharaoh’s daughter.” For the next forty years he was on the backside of the desert. Then at the age of 80 he went on his divine mission to Egypt to leading the children of Israel on their forty-year journey. Three forty-year periods marked his life. It in was that middle forty-year period, while out in the wilderness, that Moses *unlearned* the first forty years of this world’s religious-political-educational-social course. This was crucial for God’s use of him in the last third of this life.

This period of my life was my own “wilderness.” God used the “stillness” of it as a place of “draining” from me many things that were obstacles of His work in my life. Not long after moving to Amherst County I knew that one day I would need to follow a totally different course of action, I just didn’t know at the time what form that course would take. My walk with the Lord and my study of His Word during this time would lead me upon a very different path than that which was expressed in the G.E.M. and L.I.F.E. models. What had seemed like such good ideas over these years had become a grief to my heart. Almost all those who had worked together with me in the past in establishing these organizations were in disagreement with the direction that I was heading. It was clearly confirmed to me they were in fact *religious* organizations that, whether they attempted to or not, usurped the true Body of Christ, along with the divine plan of the home and its headship. Maybe there was wisdom in the oft repeated statement of Richard Jordan: “In every organization are the seeds of its own destruction.”

By God’s grace I was now as far from my original ministry *goal* as at any point in my life. My Father had taken what was a genuine love for Him and His Word – but had been mis-directed into religious devotion and zeal – and over three decades transformed them into a *relationship with Him*. He had showed me what it meant to be a part of *His* ecclesia – to be a functioning part of His *called-out ones*; the freedom to be who and what God had made me “*in Christ*.”

TRUE LIBERTY AND FREEDOM

God developed in me a mindset to love His truth, and to walk boldly in the light that He currently has given me to see. He taught me to be free – to stand fast in my Father’s liberty and *not* to be brought into bondage – to anyone or anything.

“If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

He taught me that the fruit of spiritual life is liberty; that He wants me to be free to live, to serve, to love – and not give up my freeman status!

“Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (II Corinthians 3:17).

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1).

God taught me to be my own man before Him, to not allow *anyone* to change who He had made me – and is making me.

He taught me to do what I do before Him only, and as unto Him only, regardless of what *anyone* thinks; to do so whether or not *anyone* agrees with me or joins me. He taught me that faithfulness is more important than supposed “success,” as all real success will only be determined at the Judgment Seat of Christ. He taught me that the bottom line was being faithful to where I am in my journey with Him – even if it is just with my family!

He taught me to live fully and freely in the liberty that we have been given in Christ. He taught me not only to take this liberty myself, but to afford it to all those around me as well – allowing others to follow their own heart and studies as they believe that the Lord may be leading them.

THE SALVATION OF ALL

One of the greatest benefits of this period of time and freedom was the opportunity to give my attention to other Scripture subjects that had long been weighing on my mind – some for nearly twenty years. I will mention only one such doctrine at this time – *the salvation of all mankind*. Finally breaking all ties with organized religion freed my heart to really study, enjoy and embrace this wondrous truth. In the stillness of my own heart I was able to come to grips with what the blessed redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ was fully able to accomplish.

I came to believe that the Gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, was truly better “good news” than I could ever have imagined! It was far more glorious than organized religion would ever have had me believe!³⁴

MOVING NORTH

After much planning and searching, in 2004 we finally closed our bookstore and moved our household and business to western Central Pennsylvania. We did so without finding a buyer for our property share and home. We just simply walked away. It represented the end of an entire era of my life. It was a big move – much more than I had imagined it would even be. It ended up taking us months to move our household items and the books, and to get our business set up and operating once again. We had to move nearly 60,000 books 7 hours away by truck. We ended up moving a total of nine 26’ truck loads!

34. See my detailed study of this subject: *The Salvation of All: Creation’s Final Destination* (A Biblical Look at Universal Reconciliation) Bible Student’s Press.

Here in PA³⁵ we sell new³⁶ and used³⁷ books through the internet and mail order. It is a meager way for our family to make a living,³⁸ but not having the retail store has allowed me to spend more time focusing on the love and care of my family, making a living, and doing what God has given me to do – that which He has placed upon my heart. When it comes to reading, studying, writing and publishing, I have the “I-can’t-help-it” syndrome – it is just who I am, it is my passion, it is what I do, I can’t help it!

LOVE AND PATIENCE

I greatly appreciate the love, concern, thoughtfulness, and patience that have been afforded me by some members of Christ’s Body during my *LONG* transitions. Even though some have not understood the *steps that I have taken*, I do want each of you to know that I love you. I have not been mad, unhappy or disgruntled along the journey. I just had to be true to the Lord, and to myself – as the Lord has fashioned me – and to what I have come to see in the Scriptures.

FOR THOSE WHO CONCUR

I would like to add a brief word to those of you who may find yourselves in harmony with some of my journey. We must all remember that “*knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth*” (I Corinthians 8:1). Let us dare not use anything that we may learn, and hold dear, as a tool of division between us and other believers. May we always remember that contentious debate has its place – it belongs to the realm of the flesh – to our former identity in Adam (*c.f.* Romans 1:29; II Corinthians 12:20). We should never use any issue *against* fellow members of Christ’s Body. God the Father has received all in Christ (Romans 14:3). Can we truly do any less?

“Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ has also received us to the glory of God”
(Romans 15:7).

FOR THOSE WHO DON’T CONCUR

For those of you who have not yet caught a glimpse of the life and ministry of Christ in our lives – in its *SIMPLICITY* and *FREEDOM*, *completely* apart from the religious system – I want you to know that I love you regardless, even if you *never* agree with my personal conclusions and convictions. We are eternally brothers!

None of what I have shared is in any way intended to pass judgment on “*another man’s servant*” (Romans 14:4). Many dear and precious saints are effective and valuable servants

35. Our search has led us to a place that would accommodate our book business and family all under one roof. We acquired two homes joined together with additions, both originally built in 1895. The property formerly had been a *funeral home* and is located in the Borough of Paint, with a Windber address, situated in the Laurel Highlands, just outside of Johnstown – the famous “Flood City.” For the past four years we have brought life to a place that for many decades had been focused upon death. How fitting!

36. www.StudyShelf.com

37. www.LostEditions.com

38. In fact it is supplemented by other, smaller family business ventures.

for our Lord within the religious system. I do not value them any less for this. I do not intend to pass my judgment or condemnation upon them. I value their service for God, and I would not change their activities even if I could. I have enough to do managing the affairs of my own life. At the same time, I couldn't do things that they do. (As they can't do things that I am doing – our understandings are different and that's alright.)

These are just the *steps that I have personally taken* to this place in my life. They are not offered as a pattern for any other believer. By God's grace, this is not the end of my journey, but only its midstream reflection. Let every man follow the Lord out of the sincerity of his own heart, being fully persuaded in his own mind, as he enjoys the *great adventure of faith*.

These are the *steps that I have taken*.

“The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and He delighteth in his way” (Psalm 37:23).

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