

## *Author's Personal Statement About Lead-Ups to This Study*

### *Salvation and My Own Progressive Divisiveness*

After two years of simultaneous atheism and parental compulsion to attend non-hardline<sup>1n</sup> Church of Christ congregations, I was elsewhere taught about salvation by faith<sup>2n</sup> and making it real by doing good things for the Lord. This was in a "fundamental" Baptist church building privately on Thursday morning, June 17, 1993 at 16 years old. Immediately, I began showing changes that regeneration as Christians causes in "a new creature" (ASV) – 2 Corinthians 5:17. Titus 2:14b says Jesus Christ died "that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good works" (ASV).

Unfortunately, this congregation withheld baptism from me. The main reason was their error that baptism is not in any way tied to salvation. They viewed baptism highly, so they wanted to wait and see if I showed a changed life, lest they "baptize" a non-Christian. While I showed clear signs of being a new Christian, I awaited when they would allow me to do the 'biggie' that Scripture commands of new Christians: baptism. On November 14, 1993 I was baptized to obey Scripture. It did not affect how zealous I was to please the Lord because I already had been since June 17, 1993, but I felt like I had done all the things new Christians are to do.

From June 1993 to spring 1999, I earnestly engaged in study of and about Scripture. I studied privately, in congregation settings, and in informal Bible study groups. I studied reference works about the Bible, and saw to use Bible translations in foreign languages I can read. I also spent two weeks on the mission field in Bogotá, Colombia,

advised as unsafe by the U.S. government, and then in the heavily Spiritist Amazon region of Brazil.

Ever since I accepted the Gospel, I could not understand why there was so much resistance among churches in various denominations to cooperate in service to the Lord. Unfortunately, I was taught the unbiblical notion that one should only go to church with whom s/he thought had pristine understanding from the Bible about strictly-academic religious tenets and church worship procedures. I suspected something not right on this, but the 'service to the Lord' I enjoyed most was harsh refutations over these. I felt discomfort about 1 Timothy 6:3-4, but did not yet change. I restricted regular attendance to churches in the 'right' denominations while being open to visits outside of those, oblivious to how oppositional this was to my belief in cooperation.

One reason I left the Baptist church I got saved at was what was agreed on by that "fundamental" Baptist congregation and my pre-conversion two Churches of Christ: 'go with the Bible only, give no authority to the opinions of any person, study it for yourself,<sup>3n</sup> and try to replicate the New Testament church using Scripture as sole authority.' At the Baptist church, "Individual Soul Liberty" from Romans 14 was emphasized. In this, the Christian is free to make responsible decisions accountable to God in areas where Scripture is not explicit. In fall 1998, the preacher began teaching a list of things that Scripture was silent about but which could not possibly be not sin.

<sup>3</sup> Without acknowledging it, both types often add '...but be sure you arrive at our party line.' Those leaders insist on freedom to interpret Scripture for themselves, but do not grant it fully to others, contrary to Luke 6:31.

<sup>1</sup> This refers to CONDUCT, not belief.

<sup>2</sup> Baptism was so emphasized by the prior congregations that I missed this.

He also became increasingly influenced by the fact that Baptist churches are a continuation of the Anabaptists whose origins predated the 1500's Protestant Reformation. He began to believe that Baptist churches are themselves New Testament churches. "Baptist tradition" began to appear increasingly in his sermons for the 'New Testament church' understanding of passages. Between advocating "Individual Sole Liberty" while preaching and teaching

against it in effect, and the increasing encroachment of "Baptist tradition" on how Scripture was preached, another building was becoming more appealing. The Baptist preacher later returned to preaching only from Scripture.

In fall 1998<sup>1n</sup> I was about to become a victim of my own hierarching of 'best' and 'worst' church affiliations based upon denominational distinctives.

<sup>1</sup>Also, in 1997-8 I learned firsthand that Bible skeptics could be good Christians.

### Enlightening Experience

A hard-line<sup>1n</sup> "Church of Christ" building spoke best of biblical authority — I will explain the quotation marks later. Also, the group of people who met in it, at first look, did not alter the Bible conversion experience. For the first time, I was shown passages which linked baptism to salvation. They presented them in a way to teach that salvation was by completed baptism. These were apparent contradictions with Ephesians 2:8-10, where nothing we do after "faith" causes our salvation "not of works" (KJV). This was deeply troubling to me; if God's Word was self-contradictory on how to be saved, how could we be sure there would even be salvation? I began my own extensive study to try to harmonize the passages on salvation by faith with passages linking baptism to salvation. With the help of foreign language translations with finer verb tenses and nuances than English has available, I learned that there is no contradiction. The Baptist church I got saved at saw the same in Scripture about confession that I now also saw in Scripture about baptism. I learned that salvation is indeed by faith itself, but that baptism is a required follow-up of any faith as Scripture means "faith" — while salvation is by such faith before baptism, obedience to the command to get baptized is not optional in regards to salvation.

Between November 1998 and August 1999, this was where I usually went during church time. I did visit an Assembly of God with a friend and a few other churches, but usually I went to the hard-line "Church of Christ" building. I did not expect the gap between belief about the Bible claimed in words versus how they followed its basic principles. They spoke mean-spirited tirades against "the denominations" that often involved statements that were not true,<sup>2n</sup> nor did it seem to matter. I saw a near-celebratory attitude that "the denominations" faced a 'bad eternity,' and meetings often involved much self-congratulation about their own 'correctness.' I saw tracts from other hard-line "Church of Christ" buildings that involved slanderous lies, and despite naïve efforts to point out some of the most glaring inaccuracies,<sup>3n</sup> the tracts were kept.

<sup>2</sup>Example: that 'denominational' people "believe whatever they want." Usually hard-liners before outsiders say about 'denominational people' things like 'not bad people, just sincerely in error.' Among themselves, they commonly say that 'denominational' people are willing sinners, which reviles character.

<sup>3</sup>Example: Grover Stevens wrote in a pamphlet "Why I Left the Baptist Church" the following:

"a denominational preacher will preach for an hour and 'wind up' by saying that it doesn't matter whether you believe what he has been preaching or not."

Of course, many of us have seen a "denominational preacher" plea to a congregation to make good decisions for the Lord, so we know better.

<sup>1</sup> "Hard-line" means they view nearly ANY non-violent means -- right or wrong -- of promoting their group interests as okay. They do not acknowledge this.

Auxiliary Material: Personal Statement

I saw religiously-motivated malicious acts done unabashedly that would be disapproved of in secular society whether done for religion or not.<sup>1n</sup> The final straw was a tangent in a sermon: the tangent taught that grudges were okay as long as they were acted on only in certain ways.<sup>2n</sup> The leaders spoke against churches having ice cream socials because they are "not authorized" – but grudges could be okay. Hebrews 6:1 says "Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death and of faith toward God" (NKJV|NASB|ICB|NASB). I finally

<sup>1</sup> One account is as follows. I was asked to "study" with the preacher at his home. I repeatedly declined, but he nagged me until I consented. I went over some material he gave me, and saw quickly that the questions were of the type 'Do you agree with us on this, or can it be claimed that you reject Scripture?' Very naively, I showed up anyway, alone with him at his home.

When I showed the preacher how various translations in Portuguese of his favorite passages did not support the tracts, he accused of not believing I have to obey the Bible, and asked why I even came since I felt I knew the Scriptures. He disregarded that he nagged me into this "study."

He also said I do not belong at "a place that teaches the truth," but "need to go some place where they read Portuguese or whatever." This would suggest that native Portuguese-readers would not "teach the truth." We were alone; it is doubtful he would have done this with others present – especially anyone outside his group.

Foolishly, I stayed with this group because I liked what they said about Scripture. It would take more months to see that this was only words.

<sup>2</sup> This happened when an 'identifier' who adopted all party lines started trouble in regular life with a regular attender who had not adopted all party lines. The regular attender felt obligated to try to reconcile, and shared passages against grudges including Romans 12:18, but the identifier refused to accept what those passages meant. The tangent described was in the very next 'sermon.'

accepted the truth of what I had long seen: despite lip-service toward Scripture, these people did not get the basics of it, nor did they really care about those basics, so they were not qualified to teach anyone anything about Scripture. I had been a fool; it had been WELL PAST time to leave.

They did alter the conversion experience: for baptism to be held valid, it had to be 'with intention for remission of sins.' In Scripture, one must only believe that Jesus Christ is Lord in the biblical sense. Esteemed group members lived 'Where Scripture is silent, we forbid'; while obsessing over and being nasty about what is not written, they commonly disregarded the basics of what is written. There are Christians among religious groups that meet in hard-line "Church of Christ" buildings, but from later and more widespread observation and exposure, I realized later that hard-line "Churches of Christ" are not church congregations. Why:

- how little they care about being truthful in religious polemics and other group interests
- how they treat those they judge to be 'decided non-Christians,' are indifferent about or enjoy inflicting such treatment, and encourage others in such treatment

do not match the faith Christ described at Matthew 7:20 "by their fruits ye shall know them" (ASV). Christians are not "going to church" when meeting with them; Matthew 18:20 "two or three are gathered in my name" (ESV) does not apply because those groups do not meet for what Jesus' Name<sup>3n</sup> is about, and Christians' walks could get tainted or damaged by them. Because of this group and like groups whose most active and esteemed persons commonly show less Christian virtue, are less honest, less kind, and more nasty because they meet at their building than they would be if they had no religion at all, I saw how VITAL it is to get the basics as Christians before we fixate on congregational distinctives.

<sup>3</sup> In ancient times, "name" summed up the whole person,\* and was not merely physical identification.

\*in Barker, NASB Study Bible, page 1519.

*Down to the Basics*

In fall 1998, as my Baptist congregation's leadership temporarily drifted off sole authority of Scripture, things began to go seriously wrong in my life outside of religion — or so it looked at the time. These events were not minor: they involved a hope for my life shattered, an important life plan seriously complicated and delayed, unexpected belligerence by a then long-time and cherished friend which 'coincidentally' would have been of great benefit to that person,<sup>1n</sup> and humiliations from these situations and others. My 1999 college graduation was not a joyous occasion. After I departed the hard-line "Church of Christ" building, things continued to decline. After I left the hard-line "Church of Christ" building, I drifted churches visiting short-term. Things got better, then worse. I spent time at a

<sup>1</sup> It may have been a coincidence, but odd bad events followed for me, and s/he got something related that s/he wanted.

*Rebuilt as a Non-Divisive Christian*

When that situation for me reached its low point in January 2001, I had met some Christian friends. To see them, I joined them at a college ministry hosted at their university but shared by my new college. It got me back wanting to do more for the Lord. I also served in a Catholic school for six weeks. By spring 2002 I wanted regular church attendance; in fall 2002 I began attending the Assembly of God I visited in spring 1999. Assemblies of God are Pentecostal, and while I agreed little with Pentecostal distinctives, I was drawn to their enthusiasm in celebrating the Lord and serving accordingly, plus I was needed for one of their ministries.

At this Assembly of God, I was asked to be in a drama ministry, which I did not really want at first but which they needed me in. That drama ministry sometimes involved help from a nearby non-denominational church, including its preacher. This Assembly of God also invited preachers from other denominations to preach, and held a joint service with an Apostolic Pentecostal

Methodist church with a friend, then time at the Baptist church I got saved at, but eventually quit attending any at all. These 'catastrophes' cooled my desire to serve the Lord, in part because I believed He did not love me. I confess I should have trusted the Lord better in these situations.

During time of poor trust in the Lord and coolness on service to Him, my service was basic obedience in regular life and good deeds. I did not squabble any longer about what should happen when churches were assembled; I had my opinions from Scripture, but I did not care enough anymore to argue for them. I was only interested in the basics: obeying in regular life. Being down to "the minimum" was a very important experience for me because from it I relearned what is most important in the Christian's life. Now it was time to start growing a different direction.

congregation to celebrate a mutually helpful property transaction. I also helped a friend in a youth ministry at a Methodist church. My time in the Assemblies of God also taught me that Christian worship and service can be fun without being irreverent.

From late summer 2003 to spring 2004, I could usually attend services at my home congregation only on Sunday mornings, and had to be hours away during the rest of the week. In visiting Pentecostal churches elsewhere during the week, as well as observing events in my own congregation, I began to get a sinking realization that Pentecostalism often involved an unhealthy interest in 'good show.' While most certainly NOT universal to Pentecostalism as a whole, this widespread desire for extravagance often wastes finances and needlessly complicates people's tasks in ministry. I was never inconvenienced personally, but after I had witnessed enough excesses, I grew tired of it, and came to want a home congregation where things were simpler.

I found a good non-hardline Church of Christ congregation in July 2004. In spring 1999 I had lost my desire to discuss Scripture's teachings, but during their Bible study times this changed. Unlike 1999 and before, I was now most interested in Scripture's teachings about regular life and service away from assembly.\* In September 2004, I began to regularly work with children in school settings. Since spring 1995, I had avoided being around children whenever

\* "Churches of Christ" and Churches of Christ

This is distinct from the United Church of Christ. Many classify buildings named "Church of Christ" into over 20 categories, but as far as what is important, I believe there are only two types:

- 1) hard-line/radical, and
- 2) non-hardline/non-radical.

Theological liberalism is rejected in both kinds, but the former often slanders the latter as "liberal."

Hard-line "Churches of Christ" typically focus on what Scripture says about assembled worship and distinctly religious beliefs taught at assembly. Compared to most Christians, they have very little regard for Scripture's teachings about life away from assembled worship. Unlike Christians, most of their leaders and influencers disregard these teachings when this may advance group interests. Hard-liners deny doing this, but just as theological liberals disregard parts of Scripture, they do too. The 'hard line' is that their party lines and propagators should be advanced even by means that clearly violate Scripture's teachings on conduct.

Non-hardline Churches of Christ have similar distinctive beliefs held just as strongly. However, they know that Scripture's teaching on conduct in and out of church assembly is always binding and can never be disregarded. Hard-liners commonly disdain non-hardline congregations; non-hardliners often perceive a kinship due to common name and similarity of group distinctives. This causes non-hardliners' influencers to often be tainted by hard-liner ways. In reality, non-hardliners have far more in common with Christians in other denominations than with hard-liners, but do not always notice. This is prevented by focus on group tenets instead of on Scripture's priorities for our lives. Great benefit would result if more of the non-radicals would realize their real kinships.

It is pointless to try to replicate "the church of the New Testament" if the person does not follow the Christ of the New Testament. "Church of Christ" radicals do not follow Jesus Christ; Church of Christ Christians and other Christians do.

possible. Therefore, starting September 2004, when working with them and learning to understand them and enjoy them and adore them, I learned very much. One such lesson is in *Part 7/Conclusion 3*.

I am an educator with experience in being employed by multiple educational institutions simultaneously,<sup>1n</sup> and in such a situation, one simply adjusts to the policies of where s/he is located at the time; church congregations can often be handled similarly. In spring 2005 I asked to serve a role at Vacation Bible School at a prominent Baptist congregation near the school I worked; I wanted to be a Christian influence on the children of that school. Unexpectedly, I was asked to be ex-third grade teacher at this VBS, and this was the age group I had worked most with the prior year. Anytime and anywhere I teach, I subject what I say and/or how I say it to congregation leadership, keeping to Hebrews 13:17. A teacher does not always have to relay all s/he believes; Proverbs 18:2 says "The fool" desires "only to air his thoughts" (JPS 1985), and all-knowing Jesus did not say everything He could have. Sometimes merely relaying without commentary that the particular congregation teaches/does such-and-such is most appropriate. During that week, the joy of teaching children about following the Lord amidst their enjoyment addicted me.

This Baptist congregation's Vacation Bible School curriculum was very basic in July 2005: we studied how salvation by faith in what Jesus Christ did operates, and we also studied obedience to that faith, for which the issued curriculum used baptism. During that week, a child asked about what congregations do regarding baptism. The class had children from multiple denominations. I recalled my own childhood and responded as

<sup>1</sup> One scenario of several: a college and one or more elementary schools.

so: 'Some churches...; other churches...' because to me when I was a child and to most children, churches are churches, which all tell us to do the same good things in our regular lives -- and I was entirely unwilling to dis-educate them otherwise. This would only have confused them and caused unneeded distraction. Children need to learn the basics of how to serve and obey the Lord to grow up into Christians, and we should let nothing distract this objective.

*Service before controversy.*

—Gist of 1 Timothy 6:3-4 + Titus 3:8-9.

We adult Christians should let nothing distract or impede our overall service

*Between Then and This Study.*

The 'catastrophes' that I thought were 'catastrophes' in 1998-2000 were hard circumstances -- not catastrophes. First, the plan that was complicated and delayed by events of 1998-9 was improved when I got a job doing what I wanted to do and had already done -- but in a better venue; the job offer came in a surprise phone call during Vacation Bible School 2005.

Even better news followed. A few weeks after accepting the Gospel in summer 1993, symptoms of a rare and serious illness began to appear in my body; it is not communicable, but is considered terminal. What it was is not for public knowledge. It worsened until Vacation Bible School 2005 and a few weeks after, when I had bouts of intense joy that were physically tiring. Due to those weeks, I personally suspect that Christians will need the new bodies of 1 Corinthians 15:42-54 in part to be able to bear the joys of Heaven. Proverbs 17:22a says "A cheerful heart is a good medicine" (ASV). During those several weeks, the illness began to clear up. In January 2006 the specialist who treated it for years said it is gone. There is no wholly medical explanation for this.

Without most of those 'catastrophes,' I would not have taught VBS, a likely influence on the illness's disappearance -- orchestrated by the God we Christians serve, matching Romans 8:28a "And we know that in everything God works for the good of those who love him" (ASV|ICB).

Since conversion, I have been a Christian only. I have sought to avoid any 'blinding' allegiant loyalty to

to the Lord either. When appropriate, it is good to discuss differences and positively contribute edifying relevant information in matters of disagreement. I most certainly do not agree with or approve of all that happens in the meetings of our various 'fellowships' and denominations and genuinely/entirely unaffiliated congregations. Some of these things do not match my preferences, and some of these things I strongly disapprove of. Nonetheless, careful study of Scripture shows that Christians are called away from indulging in factional 'party spirit' against each other in the Lord's service, and our 'yes, but' rationalizations do not change this.

any group, or any group-motivated 'on principle' hostility to another. Wherever I have 'gone to church,' my sole highest loyalty has been to Jesus Christ Himself and His service. For me, to be 'Christian only' does NOT mean 'only Christians' nor 'more Christian.'

My Church of Christ and 'fundamental' Baptist background, plus mathematics coursework in college, taught me to seek and examine underlying assumptions. These influence how we approach Scripture. Also, as I studied Scripture and learned more, I saw ever the more ways to reasonably misunderstand it. It became clearer that we should be charitable about Bible inferences.

In the past few years, it has been exciting for me to encounter more and more Christians who wish to serve Christ mainly by their own lives rather than by congregation. I have encountered them all over the Christian 'churchscape.' Since I started this study, I have encountered others who have independently arrived at similar views to ones in this study. To more and more of us, serving Christ means to serve Him by our own lives and deeds, rather than by mainly an allegiance to 'fellowship'/'brotherhood'/denomination or congregation party lines. These Christians desire to serve the Lord so much that disagreement is not enough to undermine seeking the best for Christ. It is great to see more and more of God's people seek to join and involve as many of God's people as possible in seeking the best for the Lord. More and more Christians are realizing that the Lord's work must be held foremost. It is my hope that the tradition of the carnal divisive agreement-fixated Christian is fading away.

*This Study and the Present*

After months of aspiring this study, I finally began in July 2006 and finished a first draft two months later. This study has affected my doings. One effect: I try more to visit Christian groups with worship styles I disagree with during uncommon service times. Another effect: sermons preached at a non-hardline Church of Christ about Christian unity, as well as my experiences, my own observations of Scripture and of the church, plus this study led me to a Disciples of Christ congregation for church home.

I pondered that decision for eight months. I knew they did prompt baptism of converts, yet opposed the carnal sin of factiousness, but a reputation of devaluing Scripture concerned me. Still, over time, I felt guilty about having groups that encouraged or pressed factiousness for my church home. In March 2007 I realized that congregations' opposition to sin should come first. I also saw that what people think about Jesus Christ, not about Scripture, must come first. It turned out that biblical conservatives have a big presence in the Disciples of Christ – and they with the rest of the denomination avoid how so many biblical conservatives engage in:

- ◆ indulgence in carnal factious urges of the flesh with their own acts of dividing in violation of Galatians 5:19-21 and Romans 16:17;
- ◆ overvalue of denomination or 'fellowship' or 'brotherhood' distinctives which are
  1. disagreed-on by honest, well-studied, Scripture-focused Christians,
  2. therefore reasonably open to question from Scripture,
  3. therefore not unambiguous from Scripture,
  4. and furthermore, also irrelevant to good deeds and godly lifestyle,<sup>1n</sup>in violation of 1 Timothy 6:3-4 + Titus 3:8-9;
- ◆ and/or knowing truths of biblical unity but being unwilling to act meaningfully on them, in violation of James 4:17

with resultant detriment to service for Christ.

<sup>1</sup> When I was an atheist, I knew from perusals of Christ's teachings that His teaching focused on doing what is good. Years later, it is a marvel to me that so many of His followers and similar non-followers have gotten caught up focusing on other things that He did not even touch on. I should have known better when I got caught up in it too.

The Lord Jesus repeatedly called us to focus on Him foremost. One of His last earthly sayings was when one disciple became unduly attentive about another; Jesus said to him "what is that| to you? You follow Me" (ASV|NBV) at John 21:22b.

Continuing this, at times it bothers me greatly to know that to many Christians, our Savior Jesus Christ is not foremost; to them, being disagreed-with and/or others' unshared devotion to their cherished group tenets makes the fact that we are all Christ's servants effectively unimportant. Many of these Christians would rather shun, protest, or even outright oppose disagreed-with fellow-servants of Christ than serve the Lord alongside them. To Christians who love the Lord, this should be seen as a grievous wrong.

We can be sure that the Lord views this grievous wrong with utter disfavor. There is a deep and immense need of repentance in the church on this matter.

Jesus Christ said "Blessed are the peacemakers" (ASV) at Matthew 5:9. We all need to heed this in His church.

Since March 2007, my church home has been in the Disciples of Christ. In preparation for relocation after marriage, my beloved and I were blessed to find and attach to an old-style Christian Church within the Disciples of Christ in 2009. Since March 2007, I have also served in ministries within other denominations, including Baptists and Methodists. I also frequent the evening ministrations of a different non-hardline Church of Christ congregation. In July 2004-September 2006, my church home was among the non-hardline Churches of Christ. During that time, with nothing other than approval expressed, I served the Lord across denomination lines, and was richly blessed. I urge others to do the same, always keeping in mind what being a Christian means, plus the Hebrews 10:24-5 purpose for Christians even meeting as church congregations, and rightly prioritizing accordingly. -- Darron L. Steele

1 Thessalonians 5:16 "Rejoice-*always*" (ARA/ARC/AEC/NRA)  
= "*You-must-rejoice-you always*" ■