**Pilgrimage of a Stranger**

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By Eddie K. Garrett, II

Many Christian brethren have asked me to write on my personal pilgrimage and conversion experience to the truth in Christ. I suppose that most, if not all, find it difficult to write on oneself, and I am no different, being of that same mind. However, I will attempt to do so in hope that some- one, somewhere, might be encouraged and uplifted by it. Also to give them the assurance that there are others out there who are lost, as I was, who need to hear God’s honest truth, that have been misled by the universality of false-teachers and their condemnable doctrines. The *only*way to combat these is for those of us who are in Christ and that have obeyed the truth of the gospel to teach, preach, proclaim, and declare it to everyone, everywhere, in every opportunity and situation we may find ourselves in our everyday lives. Just as Satan has flooded the arena of our surroundings with his influence, so we must do the same as our Lord Jesus has thus commanded. As it is true that we do not have to be as great in number as those that are influenced by him and his cunning craftiness, nevertheless the lost still need to hear the truth of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16; Heb. 4:12). For without that power and those that proclaim it, I would not be at this time, as a child of God, writing this to you. “How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things” (Rom. 10:15).

My friends, I was an ordained Baptist preacher of the sect known as Primitive Baptists. My father and brother were also Baptist preachers. About nine years ago I decided to “follow the Lord” and start going to church. Not knowing anything about the Bible I did what most end up doing and that is following a relative or friend to the church of their choice. In my case it was following my dad and the sect he was with. Being naive as others and not knowing any better, many are influenced by these friends and relatives that we judge to have been religious for some time and certainly must know more than us. We allow our- selves to slowly be indoctrinated into church methodology and theology. All religions want to make converts to their own group and I was as a little child with grown-ups offering me candy, so to speak. All of us want to feel as though we’re wanted and liked, and that there is a special place for us in a church. I was certainly no different. My father and his Primitive Baptist friends took me under their wings and immediately started to “teach” me the Bible. They taught me how to interpret it, what passages mean, and warned me about not associating with those of other religious sects. Little did I know that this was a part of the “grooming” process of a new convert. From the start I was taught what is commonly referred to as the “TULIP” doc- trines, or as they like to refer to them as the “doctrines of grace” with the certain “proof texts” that supposedly sup- ported these teachings. That man is “Totally Depraved” from Adam; that God has “Unconditionally Elected” certain particular individuals before the foundation of the world; That Jesus *only*died for those certain ones (Limited Atonement): that God “Irresistibly Calls” those individuals (regenerated or born again); and that once we’re saved we can never be lost (Preservation of the Saints). This is what I heard week after week in our pulpits. Every- one seemed to agree and I would occasionally hear an “Amen” out of the congregation to give support to what was being taught. So I did not question this because surely these “men of God” knew far more than me. Eventually, I was licensed to preach and finally ordained to the full work of the ministry. Looking back now, I see me in those days being a pal-parrot. In other words, I was doing and saying as I saw them do and say.

As the years went by as I was reading and studying more of God’s Word, some things that I had been taught I started to question. When I would pose my thoughts on certain things from the Bible to some preachers, to my surprise, they got very upset and slowly were distancing themselves from me. As long as I was pal-parroting what they taught me and not questioning anything I was doing fine, but when I did do so troubles and problems came my way, of which I could not understand. Some would get very angry at me and dis-fellowship me all together. My preaching appointments started to dwindle. Others were being called to “Pastor” churches instead of me. It seemed all because I was diligently studying the Sacred Scripture. The more I would ask questions, the more trouble I received. This drove me to investigate thoroughly what I had been taught. I had been taught, so much against “Arminianism” and wanted to see why so many of the people I was with hated them so much. I thought to myself that I wanted to know both ends of the theological spectrum. I wanted to give their “sys- tem” a chance as I had done with “Calvinism.” I reckoned that by knowing both realms of these opposite teachings that I would find out the *real*truth.

I decided the best way to know “Arminianism” was to be taught directly from them. So I enrolled into a program in a Seminary of that persuasion. I rigorously studied my heart out course by course. I took 16 courses in the one Masters program. Then I enrolled into their Doctorate program in Theology. One of my courses in this program was in “Hermeneutics” (the science of Bible interpretation). I was intrigued with what I had learned in that particular course. Just by chance, I had to do a thesis at the end of this program of which it was appointed that I do it in Hermeneutics. The research that I had done was extensive and thorough. I had to read and study this subject inside and out. I read many books of scholars on this subject. The reason why I mention this is because this was a major turning point in my sojourn to the truth. I realized that “Calvinism” approached the Bible using an “Allegorical Method” of interpretation. That is, “beyond the literal, obvious, and apparent meaning of a pas- sage lies the real hidden secret meaning.” I knew right off the bat that this was wrong. I realized that the way I was taught to interpret the Word of God was not the proper way of doing so. Then I started to re-interpret what I had read in God’s Word. I wanted to challenge every doctrine that I was taught by taking the literal, plain and obvious and apparent meaning of what I would now read.

Yet, before I get too ahead of myself, I want to mention something that is of great significance to my conversion. A few years ago I was the Moderator for my father in a public debate with a church of Christ preacher named Patrick Donahue. The proposition was “For whom did Christ die?” I remember that day well. Although, I was of my father’s persuasion, that debate (looking back now) had a profound effect on me. I remember during the debate while Mr. Donahue was dissecting, piece by piece, point by point, what I was taught to believe as the truth, there was a particular point in that debate that I saw some truth of what he was declaring from God’s Word. That debate *never*left my mind over the months to come. The seed of the truth of the gospel was planted in my heart that very day.

During my theological education I was challenging every point of the “TULIP” doctrines of which I was taught. The first major point that I challenged was “Limited Atonement.” Why I started here I think was because of what was planted in me from the Donahue/Garrett de- bate on this subject. After much careful study, I saw the truth that Christ died for “all men” not just a few. Once I saw that truth I went to “Unconditional Election” and so challenged that point of Calvinistic doctrine. It was not long after I saw the real truth on election or salvation, that it was in fact conditional on our obedience in believ- ing, repenting, and confessing. Of course the Calvinistic doctrine of “irresistible grace” fell down all by itself af- ter that. All I had left was “total depravity” and the “perseverance of the saints.” But, these did not fall so easily. I struggled with these for some time. Yet, I kept challenging these points with God’s Word. I would stay up to sometimes 3- 4 o’clock in the morning studying and researching the Scripture. Once saved, always saved eventually fell by the wayside. When I saw that a person could fall out of grace then that convicted my soul a great deal. A struggle began in me to venture whether or not I was truly saved or not. Many prayers were prayed during this time in my studies. The hardest point to challenge was “total depravity.” I was taught it since my youth. During this time I had been watching some debate tapes of my dad with fellows like John Welch, Tommy Thrasher, and Patrick Donahue that my dad had given me. At times, these discussions got pretty heated and very forceful in argument. Yet, I learned and enjoyed much from them.

One day, out of the blue, I wanted to talk to Patrick Donahue. So I called my dad and asked him for Patrick’s phone number. Dad says, “What in the world do you want his phone number for?” I told him I just wanted to talk with him. So, he gave me his number and I called him. He was very nice and cordial and sent me some literature and debate tapes on total depravity. My wanting to talk to Patrick, as I look back was because of that seed that had been planted in me during that debate with my father a couple three years prior. Eventually I saw that total depravity was not the truth of Scripture. I then left my father and the Primitive Baptists and went and joined the Southern Baptists. This was because I still wanted to “worship” and go to church and there were many Southern Baptists in my area. It was a place for me and my family to go while I got my “theology” straightened out. During this time Patrick kept in contact with me and tried (not force- fully) to help in any way that he could. We would correspond every day on the Internet by way of E-Mail communication. Patrick showed great concern about my soul in a loving manner. He asked me to investigate the doctrine of water baptism. I laughed and said I would. But, deep down in- side I “knew” that water baptism had absolutely nothing to do in the salvation of people’s soul. This I was certainly sure. I had done a lot of changing, but, this I knew with certainty. He would post arguments (debating on Internet) to me on baptism passages and I would respond in the nor- mal usual Baptist way. Yet, every argument I had was being thrown down in defeat. This angered me tremendously and I did not like it at all. Yet, I was determined to prove him wrong nonetheless. Little did I know that when two men debate every point and Scripture that sooner or later the truth will pop right out of the discussion. And it certainly did with Pat and our discussion. I was befuddled! I did not communicate with him for a while, while I was pondering this with much conviction.

After seeing the truth on baptism in the Scripture I still did not want to accept it. Yet, the nights were unsleepable for me. I could not just sweep this under the rug to lie dormant. I was searching and looking for ways to get out of baptism being a necessity for salvation. I went to my Baptist and Protestant scholars commentaries hoping they would explain it away or give me something to grab hold of to not accept it. Yet, when these scholars went to Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, 1 Peter 3:21 and other passages they were so very weak and afforded me no relief. I thought, well, I’ll just get some scholarly Christian History books and prove the early church Fathers did not believe in baptismal regeneration. To my surprise, I found out, on the contrary, that the early church believed in it so much that major heresies crept in after the first few centuries. That Irenaeus, who was taught by Polycarp, who had been taught by John the Apostle, taught the necessity of baptism. That Tertullian, an early church historian said the early church believed strongly in the necessity of baptism. That they felt so strongly in it that many people refused to be baptized until near their death. So strongly that they started baptizing infants. This was only because of the new heresy of total depravity that had slowly crept in among somein the early assemblies. Once I had seen this in the pre- Nicene Fathers, I was shocked.

I went back into my Bible to investigate more on baptism. Then when I finally saw that it was the truth of God, I came to the hardest place I had ever been in my quest of truth. What must I do? Do I go and “join” the “Campbellites” whom I have been taught to laugh at and hate with a passion? I thought, well I’ll just stay where I am in the Southern Baptists and just not say anything about baptism. Sure I could believe it is true, yet, keep it to my- self. Oh! my friends, this mind set did not last too long. My convictions were too strong to pull such a stunt. My love of God’s Word and my affection for the Baptists were now at odds with each other. Days went by (sleepless) as I pondered what must I do. I started to read once again the book of Acts to find this answer. I found that I was not alone in wanting this question answered. The Jews asked Peter the question in Acts 2. The apostle Paul asked Jesus the same thing. The Philippian jailer asked the same question, etc. The answer was always believe and be baptized and thou shalt be saved. The exact words of Jesus in Mark

16:16. So I called my friend Patrick Donahue and he gave me two phone numbers of preacher brethren here in my area. I called both and we’d meet once a week and talk the Scripture. One of these men was Bobby K. Thompson of the Manatee County Church of Christ. Bobby is up in his seventies and his biblical answers soothed my weary soul. One day I asked him to take me to “his” church to view his library. He had given me a couple of books to read, but the most important thing he said to me was when we were walking out to leave, he put his arm around my neck, hugged me and said, “Eddie, you need to be in Christ, you must accept the truth of Jesus, obey the gospel and be baptized leaving your old world behind.” These few little words convicted my heart for days. Him putting his arm around me meant so much because he saw the agony I was in and the dilemma I had found myself.

One thing that intrigued me of these “church of Christ” people is that all of them encouraged me to read and study my Bible. To stay away from reading so many other books of others and just stay with God’s Word.

I talked frequently with my wife on these doctrinal is- sues and we would study together. My conviction was getting too strong to wait any longer. I had to obey the gospel as the Lord Jesus commanded. I called Bobby Thompson and told him to get the baptistry ready for Sun- day. Those few days till then seemed as though a year. Satan was working overtime it seemed. But, I kept myself into the Scripture, the safest haven for me. My wife was stunned and shocked. “Was he going to leave all his years in the Baptist church and all his educational credentials and titles behind?” she thought. Yet, I indeed did and was baptized upon my confession in Christ Jesus on that Sunday morning.

The next day, after my baptism into Christ, I was called by a Southern Baptist church to be their “Pastor.” This is what I had worked so hard for years. I turned them down because of my true conversion to Christ. Satan was working overtime with me because on that Wednesday I received another call to “Pastor” full-time another Baptist Church in my area. My wife said to me (reminds me of Job’s wife), “Eddie this is what you’ve been working for so long and now it comes and you refuse it.” But, my mind was set in the defense of the truth. I was not going to be tempted away from my Lord Jesus. I walked away from all my friends, preachers, and laymen. By doing all this, I think this gave reason for my wife to investigate what I had found.

Walking into the church of Christ building seemed strange or different than what I’d been accustomed to, the people were different as well than what I was used to, but I knew I had followed my Lord’s commands. My wife and I kept studying together every day and to my wonderful surprise, she came forward a month later in the service to obey the gospel. I was so happy and rejoicing. Bobby came up to me and asked if I wanted to baptize her and thus my joy was fulfilled. I baptized my wife, Priscilla, on that very day.

We have been serving our Lord ever since and feel so blessed by our Lord. Ephesians 1:3 has certainly lived up to all the truth it declares. All spiritual blessings are in- deed *in Christ*. I was experiencing them like I had never experienced them before. We are so happy and filled with joy over what our Lord Jesus has done for us.

Brethren, beloved in the Lord, there were many things that contributed to my conversion in Christ, but it all started with viewing and attending debates. If it wasn’t for the sternness of the gospel preachers in their conviction in pro- claiming the truth in boldness of which I had never experienced before, my wife and I may not be where we are today. Do debates do any good? This very soul and his wife would no doubt be lost, bound for the fiery pits of Heck in torment, if not for those I experienced. Oh! blessed are the feet of those that preach the gospel of Christ.

What we need is not a backing off of doing them, but to return to publicly proclaim with a vigor that has never since been seen since the first century Christians. Let all who have the truth challenge every sectarian preacher and theologian to discuss these matters. Let us raise the proclamation flag of God’s truth and not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation.

The first century Christians turned this world upside down and thousands were converted to Christ. What has changed now? Is it possible that we are too sophisticated now to openly declare the truth of Christ? Let all who know the truth search, as Paul, Barnabas, Silas, etc. for avenues of discussion. Let’s let our light so shine that all others can see the truth in Christ. This is a warfare with Satan and the powers of darkness that is sending poor souls to Heck, let us not give up on these precious souls that need to be saved. Let us try much harder to proclaim it and not hide our talent under the ground.