

# ***Why I Left...***

## ***The Baptist Church***

*By Michael Jones*

There's a proverb that says, "a wise man learned from the mistakes of others; a fool learns only from his own." When asked to prepare a short treatise on my conversion, I jumped at the opportunity to do so. There was a time in my life when I was a lost person who thought he was a saved person, just like Cornelius (Acts 10) and the "many" of Matthew 7:21-23. Anything I can do to help other people who are either personally deceived, or are working with those who are, I will always do.

### **Reared a Good Calvinistic Baptist**

My immediate family didn't attend any church regularly until I was about 12 years old. We began attending church when an associate pastor of the local Baptist church moved a cross the Street from us and invited our family to join them at services. Perhaps realizing that it was not wise to neglect the spiritual development of their children, my parents agreed to go, and my active spiritual life began. Having not really been involved in church earlier in my life, I really knew almost nothing about the Bible. I developed a strong spiritual interest, and I was eager to learn all that I could.

In my late teen years, I began to play guitar professionally in a Christian rock band. Also, I took a job working at the local Christian bookstore. Part of my job requirement was that I'd be very well read on the inventory within our store. As a result, even at the young age of about 18 years old, I had read probably hundreds of books on theology, doctrine, and Protestant Church history. I probably understood Calvinistic theology and Premillennial eschatology as well (or better) as the Baptist Church staff I attended. My reading would have been essentially what those in mainline protestant denominations or evangelical churches embrace.

I distinctly remember the day that I told my family of my desire to go to seminary and become a Baptist pastor. They encouraged me in that, and said that people had prayed for generations that a preacher would arise out of the family. The Baptist Church of which I was a member also encouraged me, and I began to do a considerable amount of work within the congregation. Ultimately, I began doing preaching work at Baptist churches, presentations before youth groups, and worked as an assistant to the Sunday school director.

While I was working with the Baptist Church, I was also attending a Baptist University in preparation for my seminary studies at Dallas Theological Seminary (Ground Zero for the modern Premillennial eschatology movement). It was fairly normal for me to give "faith only" invitations, work at evangelistic rallies, deliver sermons and messages, and teach classes involving sometimes intricate areas of Calvinistic theology and eschatology.

To be completely honest, most people attending Baptist churches don't really know their theology. Baptist theology is deeply rooted in Calvinism, yet most Baptists would deny they are Calvinistic. The entire basis of "once saved, always saved" is that you cannot be lost, because you did nothing of your own accord to be saved in the first place! I was a little unique in that my reading schedule at the bookstore had resulted in me not only knowing what I believed, but also having a thorough understanding of exactly why I believed it. Further, I was extremely zealous and evangelistic in teaching the "truth" of Calvinism, and all that it contained: original sin, the impossibility of apostasy, unconditional predestination, etc.

(Although churches with Calvinistic theology are perceived as teaching "faith only" salvation, in truth they teach "nothing only" salvation. A genuine Calvinist would tell you that you have done absolutely nothing for your salvation—you were unconditionally selected before time began by God. A common Calvinistic line is "you did not choose God; God chose you." Because this essentially makes all evangelistic activities pointless, this element of Calvinism is generally forgotten.)

### **My Beliefs Radically Changed.**

I met a young lady who was attending the church of Christ in the neighboring town. We started dating, and I agreed to visit her church on Wednesday evening. When I got there, I was astonished to find that I disagreed with almost the entirety of their doctrine and theology. This was clearly not the "faith only salvation," "once saved always saved," unconditional Calvinistic theology that I embraced so dearly. In fact, I had determined that my new goal was to convert the entire congregation to the "truths" of Calvinism, and committed to attending their midweek Bible study every week until I had succeeded.

Because I was now attending their Bible study, the church there began a new Bible study on denominational error. As our study went along, we evaluated characteristic error taught within various denominational churches. Much of the error we were studying were things that I held very dearly as true.

Perhaps the very first element in my theology to fall was the idea that denominations were acceptable. Within most denominational churches, it is often accepted as a good trait that there are so many different churches to choose from. That way, people can always find a church that they agree with. Of course, the problem with this is it sets man as the ultimate arbiter of truth, rather than the scriptures. God's expectation of us is that we conform ourselves to the truth of the word of God, not that we just move around until we can find people who agree to ignore the same portions of scripture (see Rom 3:4).

Much to my surprise, I found myself completely unprepared to deal with the rather pointed questions I was being asked about my beliefs. What about men with long hair who claim to be godly? (see 1 Cor 11:14). This was problematic for me because I was a long-haired hippie type playing in a Christian rock band. When asked about the frequency of which we observed the Lord's Supper at the Baptist Church, I could only reply that we did so quarterly, four times a year, for no other reason than "that's just the way we do it" (see Acts 20:7). When asked why I didn't teach baptism was essential to salvation, I would rely on passages such as John 3:16, while admittedly ignoring passages such as Mark 16:16 and Acts 2:38.

I did not understand the principle of the homogeneity of scripture (John 10:3 5; Acts 15:15), and was genuinely surprised to learn that I had significant holes in my Bible knowledge.

I had preached, taught, and performed concerts in and around Baptist churches for years. I was attending a Baptist University. I had at this time read extensively on doctrine and theology. I had been formally educated in Biblical languages. But one thing I had not done was actually read the Bible much. Amazingly enough, I had logged thousands of hours in studying about the Bible, but comparatively little time actually in the Bible itself. I began to see where my studies had almost systematically avoided large segments of scripture. You can imagine my shock when someone read me James 2:24. I think I probably responded somewhat like Martin Luther, and thought to myself, "that just doesn't belong in the Bible." I was amazed that I had never seen that before.

I remember sitting in a Baptist worship service when the senior pastor's wife went to the pulpit and proclaimed, "Many people are proud to be Christians. But I want you to know, that I'm proud to be a Baptist." I remember exactly where I was sitting. I will never forget it. Never. I was absolutely devastated. I remember thinking to myself, "This is so wrong! We have a woman preaching about how proud she is that we have divided up the body of Christ. I just can't do this anymore." I determined right then that I would not be a Baptist pastor. Instead, I changed my plan to pastoring a nondenominational evangelical church. I was making progress, but I still wasn't there yet.

My plan to "convert" the local church of Christ was not going as I had intended. Instead, I found major tenets of my theology being shot down one right after another. Clearly man had a free will, as God had given men many occasions to make a choice. It was also evident that the Bible taught about a faith that did not save. Even with my Baptist Church invitations, I appealed to Romans 10:10 which teaches the necessity of confession. For years I had managed to miss that faith plus confession did not equal faith only. Our salvation was not unconditional, but was very conditional upon an obedient faith.

And then I had the night at the church of Christ that I will never forget.

I was sitting on the back row, when someone in passing read 1 John 3:15: "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." This was the straw that broke the camel's back! I remember feeling somewhat shell-shocked at that passage. I had to have been visibly stunned. I turned to the person next to me and said, "Do you realize that this passage says if you are a murderer, you don't have eternal life?" She said, "Of course, everybody knows that." I replied, "You're wrong —everybody doesn't know that."

Within Calvinistic theology, once a person has eternal life, it can never be forfeited. I had already determined that man had a free will. Therefore, I knew it was within the realm of possibility for a Christian to choose to commit murder. And if that Christian could choose to commit murder, 1 John 3:15 said he would not have eternal life. "Once saved, always saved" was now gone. I had pretty much come to the conclusion that 80% or more of what I believed was not true.

I spoke with a preacher at the church of Christ, and told him my concerns. He pointed out that I took passages out of context in order to support a position I had already decided upon. To avoid this problem, I read through the entire Bible in essentially one sitting over the course of three or four days. Thereafter, I went back to the Baptist Church and told them I was leaving. My final stop that day was for scriptural baptism (Titus 3:5; Col 2:12). I am now privileged to preach "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

Again, I would be happy to help anyone to overcome the same issues that I had in my life. Please let me know if I can help.