

From the Church to the Cross

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I was raised in a Christian home, as were my mother and father before me. We attended church faithfully each week. I grew up singing all of the children's songs, as well as the hymns. I learned all the great Bible stories, and I knew all about Jesus: about His birth at Christmas and His resurrection at Easter. I knew about the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer. But somehow, in spite of all of that, I found myself drifting away as I grew older, and I eventually separated myself completely. It was only after spending years away from my Christian home, away from any Church influence, that I finally came to understand the truth. This is the story of the detour I took, and how I finally found my way back onto the road.

I was born in 1955 and spent the first nine years of my life in Terre Haute, Indiana where we attended the church where my mother had grown up. It was an independent, non-denominational church – though I'm not sure that term had actually been invented yet – loosely associated with Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and essentially Baptist in doctrine. I have a very vague memory from this period of having raised my hand or stood up or something during a time of prayer in the main worship service. That would seem to mean that I was responding to an invitation to accept salvation, but I have no further recollection of it, nor does my mother remember it at all. It could be that I just needed to go to the bathroom.

Dad worked for the federal prison system, so that meant transferring around the country every few years. Just before I turned nine, he got transferred to a small town in Minnesota. The sign said Sandstone, population 1500. The local joke was that that included the inmates at the penitentiary. Actually, I'm not sure whether the joke was all that local, or really more federal. While there we joined the Evangelical Free Church. That's a denomination founded long ago by immigrants of Scandinavian descent. I'm not certain why we went there, although I imagine that if there were any other choices they must all have been Lutheran. (No, I'm not Lutheran-bashing, it's just a fact of life in Minnesota – ask Garrison Keillor.) At some time during the next four years I attended confirmation classes with a few other boys in the pastor's office. Now from the standpoint of sound theology, one would think that confirmation classes would be for those who had indicated a desire for salvation and needed to be confirmed in the correct knowledge and understanding of their decision. However, I think in this case it was a

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class offered to all twelve year olds, and if they reached the end of the class knowing the right answers to the questions, then saved they were. If that's so then it's a sorry commentary on the church and a terrible stumbling block to those who trust in it. However, in making such a judgment, I have to admit that, again, my memory is very vague and I must give the church the benefit of the doubt.

We moved to Marion, IL when I was thirteen. Shortly after we arrived, a preacher came to visit and invited us to his church, which happened to be more or less across the street. We attended there the next Sunday. I'm pretty sure that my visual impressions are grossly inaccurate, but my image of the preacher is quite stereotypical. I see him in a light blue suit and white shoes, stalking back and forth across the dais, waiving his open Bible in the air. And I hear him: he's loud. When he offers an invitation people listen. I listened. I went forward and told him I wanted to accept Christ as my Savior. When the service was over Mom and Dad came up and hugged me. Dad told me, Son, you're a man now. Then we left for home. (Come to think of it, that was the first of three different occasions on which he told me that. What does that mean? No wonder I've been so confused all my life!)

We never went back to that church. Mom and Dad didn't like it. They were never specific about why, but given the description above it seems understandable. We eventually found another Baptist church across town more suitable to my parents. There I went – or was taken – to the pastor as a new convert. I was baptized some weeks later. We attended there for the next two years, but we were becoming inconsistent. My only other memory of that church is being with some of the kids from the Sunday school class. I don't have a specific reason for it, but I seem to recall the group being mostly social in nature. But maybe that was just me. What is important is that I have no memory of any spiritual teaching that would have helped me understand the decision I had made – or thought I had made.

By the time we moved to Atlanta in 1970, Mom and Dad were out of the church habit. A preacher – brother Jim – visited us and said they had a bus ministry and would pick the kids up every Sunday morning. So my sisters and I attended there fairly regularly, at least for a while. It was a Baptist church; a young one that was meeting in a school building, somewhere south of us, off of Old National I think. I have very few memories about that church as well, so I assume that I must have slacked off and dropped out after a while. Certainly by the time we moved to Virginia in the summer of 1972 I was attending only rarely, if ever.

I was only in Virginia for a couple of months in '72 and then again for a few weeks in the summer of '73. In between those times Mom and I returned to Atlanta for my senior year of high school. We never went to church that year, and I don't believe my father and sisters ever did either.

Whenever I talk about moving back to Atlanta I generally just give the short version: that it was for the purpose of my finishing school with my friends at NCHS. The truth however is a bit more complicated. In fact, my parents' decision was less about my whining and complaining than about a trial separation for them. Of course, I was too self-absorbed at the time to notice that anything was wrong. (Isn't a teenager a wonder to behold?)

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My folks had struggled increasingly for several years, but the escalation had been gradual, so we kids just kept adapting to it. However, not too long before we left Atlanta there was a major argument. Mom and Dad were in the basement screaming at each other. The rest of us were upstairs. The fight went on long enough and reached such a pitch that the girls were scared out of their wits. I was scared too, and angry. I was on the verge of going downstairs to intervene, but I hadn't worked up the courage yet. The girls were anxious for me to do something, though, so I started down. I had some mannish-boy idea of defending Mom and beating Dad up. Fortunately I wasn't stupid enough – or I was too petrified – to actually try it. I just stood on the stairs where I could see them and yelled at him. I don't know what I said, but the fact that I was there was enough to defuse the situation. I had no idea of it at the time, but I now realize that I may have given Dad a frightening flashback to a time when he stopped his own father – an abusive alcoholic – from beating his mother yet again. That is something I only learned about a short time ago.

So Mom and I returned to Atlanta in the fall of '72. Thankfully, the trial separation helped them to sort things out, and they've maintained a happy and comfortable marriage ever since. And I had the benefit of being able to squander my final year of secondary education with my old friends.

Immediately after graduation Mom and I returned to Virginia, but just a few weeks later Dad got transferred again to Tacoma, Washington, where we lived on the housing reservation of the McNeil Island federal penitentiary for two years. There was a church on the island and Mom says that she and Dad attended there some. They also tried a church on the mainland to which some island friends went. I remember visiting there with them once, but that was probably the only time I went to church between 1972 and 1982.

I spent my first year of college at Tacoma Community College where, while registering for classes I found myself being drafted onto the Forensics team. (Being but a young skull full of mush, when they said sign here, I signed.) We traveled around to other schools meeting in competition with teams from around the Pacific Northwest. I competed in the Persuasive, Expository and Extemporaneous categories, although, truth be told, all my speeches tended to be primarily extemporaneous! There were several other categories, including Poetic Reading and Debate, in which I never competed.

The coach of the team seemed to be a little confused as to his position in life and on campus. He couldn't seem to make up his mind if he was an instructor or a student. The team was a highly social organization surrounding him. He occasionally hosted parties for the team at his apartment. That was where I was first introduced to marijuana. It was only a casual acquaintance though. I wasn't interested in partaking and so I routinely passed the joint on whenever it was passed to me. The coach was supportive of me in this, making sure that no one was allowed to pressure me into smoking. I passed through an entire year of this experience without ever sampling, or even feeling particularly tempted. Recently I learned that the coach had other, even more shocking, extracurricular activities going on which eventually occasioned his rather hasty departure from both school and state.

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The following summer, however, I suddenly decided I was ready to try the stuff. So I finally started smoking pot with the high school kids on the island. (Yes, on federal property, with the under-aged children of federal employees, sneaking around our parents and numerous other members of the United States Department of Justice at every turn!) That started me on a path that for the next five years led me through experiments with hashish, opium, acid – supposedly, but that's another story – and cocaine. Also included were plenty of heavy drinking and other activities too unsavory to mention, though certainly typical for a foolish young man.

After two years on the island my folks moved to North Carolina, while I found an apartment on the mainland so I could stay, ostensibly to work my way through another year of school. That year of school never got finished, and working was barely paying my expenses, so a year later, in 1976, I decided to give it up and move back home to get another start. I lived with Mom and Dad for a while and then rented a trailer in the country with a friend from work.

My friend got me started playing the guitar, which was a blessing. But he also got me started using cocaine. His brother's girlfriend knew a guy from whom we could get it in quantities of a quarter-ounce for \$500. We decided we could sell enough dime bags at \$15 dollars each to finance our own usage of about a quarter of it. We proved to be pretty poor salesmen though – which we really could have figured out just from a quick check of our record of selling TVs at J. C. Penney – so we wound up consuming nearly all of it ourselves. Not being quitters, however, we decided to try it again. This time, though, my friend decided that snorting wasn't good enough, and that injecting would be much more satisfactory.

I watched him do this on two different occasions. I had seen it done in movies and now I was an eyewitness. Starting in the kitchen, he would measure out a small amount of coke, chop it finely with a razor blade, scoop it up on the flat of the blade and deposit it into a teaspoon. Into this he would inject a small amount of water that he had pulled into an insulin syringe and then hold the bowl of the spoon over a candle's flame for a few seconds until the liquid just began to bubble. The solution ready, he would drop in a small tuft from a cotton ball to serve as a filter. Then he would take the emptied syringe, press the tip of the needle down into the cotton until it was submerged at the lowest point of the spoon, and pull back on the plunger until the solution had all been drawn in. Finally he would point the needle upward, tapping the side of the syringe to float any air bubbles to the top, and then push the plunger slightly to expel them, a tiny squirt of liquid signaling completion.

Once everything was ready he would retire to his chair in the living room. He would take a moment to get himself comfortable, with his paraphernalia close at hand. He would roll up a sleeve and tie a rubber band just above his bicep to restrict the circulation, just like a nurse preparing to draw blood at a medical lab. Tapping at the inside of his elbow, he would wait for a good vein to appear. Once he had found it he would carefully insert the needle and then – holding the syringe between his thumb and middle fingers – gently push the plunger to the bottom with the tip of his index finger. As the solution entered and spread throughout his system, he would visibly relax, laying his head back on the chair, a quiet sigh escaping his lips and a stupefied smile of pleasure crawling across his face.

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He encouraged me to try it, but I declined. The whole thing had made me extremely nervous. In fact, knowing that he had previously been addicted to heroin and had done prison time for it, it completely freaked me out. I was never very comfortable sharing the trailer with him after that, and when the living arrangements began to change in other, even stranger ways, I finally packed up and moved back home again.

Not long after that I got involved in the Amway business.

(O k, just com e back w hen you're done laughing...)

Well, I never really did anything w ith the business. It w as w ay too m uch, not m e. Y ou had to talk to people – strangers even! But I stayed active because I had made a lot of very good friends. These people were very different from those I had been hanging about with for the last several years. They were clean, sober and happy. I always had a great tim e w ith them , even though the w ildest thing w e ever did w as to sit at Sam bo's drinking coffee until two or three in the morning – frequently.

One thing Amway distributors do a great deal of is going to meetings. In particular there were major conventions about every three months. These were typically held in large coliseums with thousands of distributors traveling from all over the country. They would begin on Friday night and run through Sunday afternoon. The Sunday morning session was of particular interest. It was strongly promoted throughout the weekend, but attendance was strictly optional. It was billed as a non-denominational worship service.

This service was conducted not by a preacher or by a special speaker of any kind, but by the leader of the organization. (Not of Amway, but of the group of distributors attending the particular convention.) The first of these worship services that I attended was in Greensboro, and I went because everyone else was going and because I thought it would feel good. I couldn't have been m ore w rong.

In spite of the venue, the message was as plain, clear and complete a presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that I have ever heard. And it ended with an invitation to accept the free gift of Christ's salvation. And these guys presented an invitation to com pete w ith any tent-revival evangelist anywhere. They were talking to rooms of a few thousand listeners, and at the first opportunity, many people stood in acceptance. But the invitation w ould go on. And on, and on. A fter several m inutes the speaker w ould still be saying, I know there's som eone else. I'm sure there's one m ore.

I was extremely uncomfortable from the very start. I felt an almost uncontrollable need to stand. But I couldn't do it. M y life w as no good. I couldn't be a Christian. I couldn't live that w ay. Besides, I'd already gotten rid of all of the junk I could. I couldn't do any m ore. And on top of that, I'd already done this, and look where it had gotten me: now here. I had an endless string of excuses roiling around in m y head, but I couldn't escape the compulsion I was feeling. Finally, the speaker decided the last person had stood, and he changed the invitation to one for rededicating one's life to the Lord. W hat a relief! That was something I could accept. Especially since everyone else in the room was standing up. So I told myself I was rededicating myself to God and joined them.

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It worked. I felt relieved. And I continued to feel better about myself and my life for the next few months. I even tried to change some of the things I hadn't managed to change already.

Then the next convention rolled around and with it the next worship service. This time I knew what was coming and the compulsion began to set in well before we got to the invitation. By the time the invitation started I was already sweating bullets. The response was the same as before, hundreds standing within the first minute or two. My compulsion intensified and I knew that everything I had done in my life so far was worthless; that I was still as rotten at the core as ever; that nothing I could do would ever change that. But I didn't know how I could accept Jesus Christ if I couldn't give Him a pure life in return. I looked around at the people who were standing. Couples. Couples everywhere. Well, sure, I said to myself, it's easy for *them* to be Christians. They're married!

Suddenly I knew three things. First, my life was full of sin. Not just a sin here and a sin there, but full of sin. Sin was a part of me. Second, changing that fact – getting the sin out of my life – was completely beyond my ability. Even if I changed the things that I knew were problems, sin would still be an inescapable part of me. And third, Jesus sacrificed himself for me in spite of that fact. No... Not in spite of it, but because of it!

I made my decision, and I stood to make it public.

The relief was palpable and immediate. I still had the same concerns about how to live my life. I knew that obedience was still required of me. But I also knew – I *knew*, I did not understand – that in forgiving all my past and present sins, He was forgiving my future sins as well. He was forgiving not just my catalog of sins, but the sinfulness in me from which it sprang.

Of all the time I spent in church before this my memories are very few and very vague. Of what I learned in those years – about God, about the Bible, about salvation – my memories are virtually non-existent. I can recall the odd Sunday school discussion of a classic Bible story like Daniel in the Lion's Den or Samson and Delilah. And I remember singing some of the old children's songs: This Little Light of Mine, The B-I-B-L-E, Jesus Loves the Little Children. But of theology, even of the simplest presentation of the Gospel, I recollect nothing that made it personal – nothing but dry facts. In some cases this may be a commentary on the churches we attended, but in every case it is a reflection on me. I was either too young to comprehend, or to disinterested – I should say self-interested – to devote my attention to the subject at hand. Of course, since my wife was saved at age 7 and my daughter at age three, that first excuse doesn't seem to hold much water.

I did of course know the basic facts. Jesus was born to Mary, who was a virgin, and to Joseph. He turned water into wine and healed people – mostly lepers. He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He was betrayed by Judas and taken before Pilate, who washed his hands. He was hung on a cross until He died on Good Friday and then He rose on Easter Sunday. And He died for my sins. I knew all of that. I'd heard the stories. I'd even seen the movies: The Robe, Barabbas, Ben-Hur. If you had asked me I could have told you all about it. But I didn't *understand* it. It didn't mean anything to *me*.

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Perhaps that was because I didn't understand sin. I had been taught a great deal about the savior but not much about sin. And without understanding sin, I couldn't understand myself. For the most part, as boys go, I was a fairly good one. Once when my mother was visiting from out of town, she met some very close friends of mine. One friend sat Mom down, pulled up a chair in front of her, looked her straight in the eye and said, "Ok now, tell me about all the trouble Steve got into as a boy." Mom thought for a moment. She wrinkled her brow, looking puzzled. After a moment she said, "Well, I can't think of anything, actually." And she was serious! Good old Mom. Of course, I was never really *that* good and after a couple of minutes things started to come back to her. Like the time I got caught playing with matches under the back end of the car. (The end with the gas tank!) So, while I was not an abnormal child, it is true that I didn't spend much of my time getting into trouble, even as a teenager. I saved most of that for later years, and it may be that I just needed to more fully experience the natural workings of my true self before I could grasp my own need for a savior.

In any case, by the time I accepted Christ, I was an expert on sin. Moreover, I was ready to listen, to read and to learn. I began going to the church where several of my Amway friends went. They said the pastor wouldn't, sugar coat it, - would, step on your toes. (Toe-stepping is very popular among Amway distributors.) So I attended this independent, fundamentalist Baptist church regularly, continuing even after most of my Amway friends had gotten bored and left. I came to understand the Gospel much better, gaining a hold on my own utter depravity and God's infinite love and mercy. I also came to realize that my previous baptism had really only been a quick swim, since my faith was not genuine or informed. I had not really understood baptism as a picture of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. So I identified myself with Him by being baptized as a believer at this church. It eventually became evident, through a rather ugly split, that the church was actually quite immature in its spiritual life. But as a new Christian, it supplied me with an environment in which I could grow for a couple of years. And after the split, the remnant that was left reconstituted the church and it took a new and better path under a wiser and more mature pastor.

As I came to understand more fully what Christ had done for me, who I was, who He is, what sin is and what repentance means, I found myself questioning whether I really had accepted Him. There were a few times when I decided to invite Him in again, just to be sure. But as I've thought about it over the years I have come to grips with the fact that, while my understanding was tenuous at best, the three things I knew on that day, December 7, 1981, were the critical facts required for salvation. Nothing but death can come from me and life can come only from Him. It is His gift: freely bestowed, impossible to earn.

Of course, as Paul explains in the seventh chapter of Romans, our struggle with sin does not *end* with our salvation; rather it *begins*. Before we accept Christ, sin is our natural state, the expected product of our lives. It is who we are. But once we have been crucified with Christ, that sinful nature is no longer our identity. I have been crucified with Christ. I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. (Galatians 2:19) Our new identity is Christ in us, working out His righteousness through us. And yet, we are still confined in the same bodies alongside the same old sin nature. And so we struggle: the new creature wishing to do good, the old flesh carrying out evil. As Jesus told His

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disciples when they fell asleep on their watch, Though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak. (Matthew 26:41) Or as Paul says of himself, When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. (Romans 7:19)

So too, my own struggles had just begun. I won't go into detail about particular areas in which I have struggled, though thankfully, I can say that drugs and alcohol have never again enticed me. There are other temptations though that have plagued me since childhood and continue to this day. My difficulties have been in those areas, as well as others, and seven and a half more years of singleness did nothing to alleviate those stresses. I did relatively well for a while, but the longer I remained single, the more difficult it became, until I reached a level of hopelessness where my struggles were hardly enthusiastic and my defeats quicker and more predictable. I finally became convinced that that would be my permanent state and succumbed to my waning interest in the fight. Before long I was attending church only rarely.

After a few months though, I seemed to pull myself together. (I still lacked the understanding to recognize who was really doing the pulling.) I went to church that Sunday for the first time in many weeks. In the evening service, I was standing in the back row, singing from the hymnal, when the woman who was to become my wife – and who lived, the last I had heard, several hundred miles away – walked past me smiling and touching my hand in greeting. She had moved to my town two weeks previously to take a job three miles from my house! We wed a year and a half later.

That ended my struggle with singleness but not with sin. Once one set of temptations was removed others were revealed – different but just as troublesome. And then, in a few more years, children began to come and with them, even more struggles. For all the difficulties I remember, I still sometimes think I was better at being a single man than I am at being a father.

But the most significant battle I have had has been a long period of deep spiritual dryness. This began with a little bit of marital strife that should have been utterly insignificant. But it wounded my pride, which was evidently the greatest part of me, so it festered and caused a good deal of friction for some time. Eventually, things were ok again as far as our marriage, but I had withdrawn from God and from everything spiritual. I continued to attend church, but in body only.

My recovery from this episode has been very long and slow and only began after we moved and began attending a new church. In our previous church I had built walls around myself to keep people from getting close to me. I wouldn't even sing the hymns. As time went by I became so accustomed to those walls that I didn't know how to function without them. Now, with a different set of people around me, I finally began to relax and let down my guard – just a little. I began to sing again, though not very loudly at first. Little by little I became a bit more open. When we finally attended a Sunday school class for the first time, I found myself making friends again. I still had a long way to go, but I was definitely getting better. However, it has only been in the past year, that I have begun to feel like God is truly a part of my life again. He has finally opened my eyes and allowed me to see clear signs of the work that He is doing with me and around me – something I haven't really experienced for quite a few years. And more

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importantly, He has allowed me to see – and accept – opportunities to participate in His work in ways that I have never been able to before.

Of course, as I reach the end of this particular battle I know that another is waiting. In fact, others are already at hand, being lost daily as my attention is diverted elsewhere. It is a well-disguised blessing that the closer we grow in our relationship with the Lord, the more we comprehend the vastness of the gulf that separates us. Hence Paul, as his life and ministry progressed, moved from declaring himself the least of the twelve Apostles at the beginning (I Corinthians 15:9), to lower than the lowliest saint in the middle (Ephesians 3:8), and ultimately to the chief of sinners near the end (Timothy 1:15). So I can only agree with him that, It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. (Romans 7:21)

Thankfully God does not allow Paul to leave us with such a bleak outlook, but goes on to give us hope. But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them are not Christians at all.) (Romans 8:9) And further: For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we will share his treasures– for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too. (Romans 8:16-17)

I've spent plenty of time going to church in my life and I've known Jesus as long as I've known myself. But going to church never got me anywhere but into a building, and knowing Jesus meant nothing until Jesus knew me. As James asks, Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror! (James 2:19) I can say, for example, that I know Phil Keaggy, my favorite guitarist. I know about his life, his family, his talent. I own all of his thirty-some-odd recordings, his videotapes, his songbooks. I've seen him in concert and met him backstage. I've corresponded with him via the Internet, and even received a personal reply – not unheard of, but uncommon. But ask Phil Keaggy about me and the response will be, Steve who? So in all the years I spent seeing the road signs – hearing the sermons, the Sunday school lessons, the songs – I filled my head with knowledge and then turned off the road anyway – with an empty heart.

Only the Holy Spirit seeking me, calling me, speaking directly to my heart brought me back from my self-imposed detour. He showed me that I am inescapably, eternally sinful (Romans 3:23); that relying on my own goodness to get me into heaven is futile (Matthew 5:48); but that He provided another payment for my sins, in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:8); that this salvation from myself was His gift to me (Romans 6:23); and that the only thing for me to do was to truthfully acknowledge Jesus as my Lord and honestly believe in His resurrection (Romans 10:9-10). He opened my heart to all of these things, which I had been carrying in my head for so many years.

What is He showing you? Is Jesus in your heart or is He only in your head?