

HOW I FOUND TRUE CHRISTIANITY

The Testimony of Steve Ritchie



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Written in the year 2000

I was born and raised here on Long Island and attended a large Denominational Church. This was the only representation I had of God and I did not like what I had experienced and observed. The people would attend church services on Sundays but their lives were not much different from the rest of society. The Minister did not preach strongly against sin, nor was there any kind of genuine manifestation of the presence of God.

I can remember as a young boy asking my mother many questions about God and the church we were attending. Even as a child I somehow knew that if there was a real God of these professing Christians, surely God would show up in some kind of supernatural way. The people were not being changed by the church they were attending. The lives of the people were hypocritical and devoid of any real power from God.

When I reached my teens I totally turned away from any faith in God. I reasoned, since God was not real in the people of this dull and boring church that God also must not be real. I rejected all faith in a God and decided to become an atheist. However, I did not like the idea that man originated from monkeys. This did not make much sense to me but I was open to the possibility that all life originated from some other source in the universe. I believed that life must have been brought here from some sort of extraterrestrial beings. I later realized that this theory again did not solve the problem. Life was either created by a Master Designer, or it spontaneously evolved elsewhere in the Universe without any programming or planning. The latter always seemed to me to be a complete impossibility, due to the scientific fact that all living creatures are incredibly complex from the cellular level right down to the DNA.

Programs on television such as "In Search Of" fascinated me. It was watching television that influenced me to totally disbelieve in God. The nominal Christians in the church I had attended as a child and teenager could not answer my many questions about science, the dinosaurs, etc. Since believing in God and the Bible seemed to be inconsistent with the facts of known science, I was forced to conclude that the Bible must be in error - and that there was really no God after all. Later I met Christians that were able to explain to me that there was much scientific evidence to support a personal belief in the God of the Bible and that the Biblical account makes scientific sense. I have since read dozens of books written by Scientists who support the Creation account in the Biblical book of Genesis. And I have found that the scientific evidence supporting the theory that God created the heavens and the earth outweighed any supposed evidence supporting the theory that life and all material things somehow came into existence on their own.

When I was a teenager in High School I would think a lot about what would happen to me when I died. Just the thought of dying and being placed six feet under made me very depressed. I used to dream about living forever by drinking from some sort of fountain of youth. I could not seem to handle the permanency of death. I could not handle the thought of dying and that was the utter end of my existence. The thought of it scared me and made me very depressed.

In my teens I aggressively worked out with weights for hours and loved to do about a thousand pushups and sit ups almost every day. I grew very strong and physically large by the age of fourteen. My muscular build enabled me to buy beer without being questioned for identification. I quickly developed an aggressive reputation when a friend of mine convinced me to try out for the football team. I knew nothing about football but I figured that I would give it a try. When they tried me at nose guard (a position that I continued to play throughout High School) I did very well because of my aggressive nature. I can remember making dozens of tackles in my first scrimmage against another team. My coach ranted and raved about my strength and aggression on the football field. It was quite humorous that I could play so well when I did not even know hardly anything about the sport. I knew enough to plow into the center as hard as I could and then look for the person carrying the football and tackle him as hard as possible. Yet when we played our first game, I had to tell my coach that I did not even know when to be on the field and when to be off and that I did not even know anything about the sport, as I did not watch it on television.

Although I became very good at football I soon realized that I was not big enough to make it professionally. I was only six feet tall and about two hundred and ten pounds. After graduation from High School I again sank into a deep depression. I had dreamed about being a professional football player but I did not have the genetics to play professionally. I loved the sport so much that I could not imagine going on living without playing it.

Since I was very aggressive in contact sports, I figured that I would fulfill my void by trying boxing. I had been suspended from High School for fighting because I refused to take any kind of abuse from the alleged tough kids who loved to bully people around. I went to Hunting Station almost every night of the week after I graduated from High School to learn how to box and hopefully one day go professional. Although I was very aggressive at this sport, it took me a while to spar effectively against semi-pro fighters because my wildness and angry temper caused me to leave my self open to getting punched very hard. This was a humbling experience for me because I never thought that someone could make me see stars. I remember being hit as I was leaning forward to throw a punch and I almost fell to the ground. I learned very quickly what not to do because I did not like getting hit hard by heavy weights with powerful punches.

I use to spar with an undefeated heavy weight on a regular basis. He was very good but I instantly earned his respect because I also could hit very hard. I instantly fell in love with this sport because I have to admit that I loved the thrill of the competition and the feeling that I got when guys were afraid of me (I was not a born again Christian at that time). When guys would get hurt they would try to cover their body and face so I would get mad at them for their cowardness and unleash a barrage of punches on their arms and some body shots until they fell to the ground.

I quickly gained the reputation for hitting guys real hard and for regularly breaking the chains on the heavy bags at the gym but I stopped boxing when I joined the Marines in September 1981 and God later took the desire to box out of my heart after receiving true Bible salvation. After receiving the true new birth experience God showed me that I was not able to keep a Christian spirit while boxing because I would always get very mad whenever someone was trying to hit me. However, I refused to obey God and tried out for the Marine Corps Boxing Team even though I felt God telling me not too. Therefore God allowed me to get chastened and I ended up with a broken jaw and my teeth were wired shut for a few months. At that time I was a very proud and foolish young man who needed God's hand of correction to make me humble.

I was only seventeen when I went to Paris Island. I had worked out so hard while training for football and then boxing that I was 215 pounds of solid muscle at only seventeen years of age. I use to laugh at guys while they were crying in pain at Paris Island while our Platoon was doing pushups. I was a very proud and foolish young man with very radical political views. I dreamed of becoming a great leader who would one day conquer the world. War always fascinated me. I read many books about war and great leaders who conquered much of the world. I even idolized evil leaders who were very tyrannical. I loved to watch movies with combat scenes because I had always glorified war. To me, working out was a preparation for real combat. I use to work out for hours while training for football and then boxing. Yet no matter how hard I tried, I could never find true fulfillment in sports, or in becoming a Marine.

I quickly became tired of getting drunk at bars. I would stagger back to the barracks feeling totally empty inside. No matter what I tried, I instinctively knew that there was something that I was desperately missing in life. At first I thought that it was a nice woman that I needed but I quickly realized that what I really needed was a genuine purpose in life that was much deeper than the superficiality of the things that I was pursuing. I needed a purpose in life that would really make life truly worth living for.

I can vividly remember going out with a group of Marine friends to visit every bar on court street in Jacksonville North Carolina. Our goal was to get so rowdy that we would get thrown out of every bar on court street. I quickly disdained this kind of life and the friends that I was hanging around with. There was something about the filthiness of sin that inwardly disgusted me. I might have been tough and aggressive on the outside but somewhere on the inside of me I knew that there was a good heart that was longing to be set free to do good. This was when I had one of my first encounters with a Spirit Filled Christian who was preaching on court street and handing out tracts. Since I was searching for a reason and purpose in life I reached out and grabbed a tract from the young preacher. I inwardly respected his boldness to stand up for his God (I always respected courage whenever I saw it) and I could feel something very special and powerful emanating from this man (I later knew that this was the power of the Holy Spirit). My friends disdained me for receiving the tract but I insisted that I would read it later.

I must have read this tract about twenty or thirty times. I soon began collecting tracts from everywhere I went. One time I almost called up a Christian Ministry after hearing a television evangelist from Rock Church in Virginia. Yet I never ended up making the call. My real reason for not calling was that I was not sure to believe in God or not. However, God solved this problem by causing me to be in the same barracks with a Baptist believer right next to my bunk. I remember staying up late at night asking this Baptist fellow many questions about God and

Bible. I asked him about the dinosaurs, about the UFO phenomenon, and why he trusted the Bible as the Word of God. I even tested this fellow with some very difficult questions. I even tried to mock God as "barbaric" for requiring worshipers to offer up animal sacrifices. Inwardly I knew that I was testing this Baptist fellow to see what he was made of. I have to admit that I was very impressed by his answers and by the many religious books that he allowed me to borrow. I was greatly influenced to believe in the existence of God by the writings of Josh McDowell. When I finally came to the conclusion that there was a strong possibility that God really did exist, I had to make a decision if I would fully serve Him or not. One day I asked this Baptist fellow, "what must I do to be saved?" He led me in a prayer in which I repeated certain words. I admitted that I was a sinner and that I needed God's forgiveness. Yet when I was through with repeating certain words, this fellow congratulated me and told me that I was now saved. I asked him if I now had received the Holy Spirit. He assured me that I did. At that point I was greatly discouraged because I had thought that since God is suppose to be powerful then receiving salvation should have been more powerful and wonderful than this shallow experience. Yet I decided to start attending the Baptist Church that this fellow attended even though I was seriously thinking about quitting because I still felt so empty.

I remember going to this Baptist Church quite regularly but I still was not satisfied deep down inside. I again instinctively knew that there must be more to Christianity than this unfulfilling feeling that continued to plague me deep down inside. I began crying out to God. **One night I remember reaching out one of my hands to the sky while on my bed saying, "God, if you are up there and you are real then please show me the truth. I want to know the truth." I had tears streaming down my face while I prayed as earnestly and as sincerely as I could.** It was about two weeks after I prayed this way that I came back to the barracks and met a peculiar fellow that was very bold and courageous about his faith. He told me that he used his rank as a corporal to go through the entire barracks until he found a room that God had directed him to live in. At this time I was housed in three man rooms. Out of the hundreds of rooms for this corporal to choose from, he just happened to select mine.

The first scripture that he turned to was Acts chapter two. He explained that I needed to receive the same experience of the Holy Ghost that the early Christians had received on the Day of Pentecost and that I needed to be baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of my sins. When I had questioned my Baptist Minister about getting baptized, he told me that it was important that I get baptized but that it was not necessary for me to get baptized right away. This answer did not quite settle with me but I figured that the Minister knew what he was talking about. Later I found out that this minister was completely wrong. All new converts of the first century Christian Church were immediately baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ on the same day of their conversions.

NOTE HOW SOON THE EARLY CHURCH BAPTIZED NEW CONVERTS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Acts 2:41 "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls."

Acts 8:12 "But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."

Acts 8:36 "And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what does hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If you believe with all your heart, you may. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him."

Acts 10:47 "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." (NIV)

Acts 16:14,15 "And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshiped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household. . ."

Acts 16:30-33 ". . . Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, and your house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway."

Acts 18:8 ". . . and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized."

Mark 16:16 "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believes not shall be damned."

Acts 19:1-5 ". . . and finding certain disciples, he said unto them, have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed? And they said unto him, we have not so much as heart whether there be any Holy Spirit. And he said unto

them, unto what then were you baptized? And they said unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John truly baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Acts 22:16 "And now why do you tarry? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord."

Romans 6:3,4 "Don't you know, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

When I visited the United Pentecostal Church in Jacksonville, North Carolina I quickly became offended at how demonstrative these people were in worshipping God. Most everyone lifted up their hands while praying, they clapped their hands very loudly while singing, and they danced and shouted with loud voices. I heard many praying in strange languages. While I was sitting on a pew I thought to myself, "this could not be right." While I was thinking about walking out of the church building I heard a voice speaking to me so strongly that I answered it. The voice clearly said, "You asked me for the truth, did you not?" These words came to me so clearly that I answered back and said to the Lord, "Yes, I did ask for the truth." So I decided to stay.

It was not long until I went up to the front and received the gift of the Holy Ghost just as the Bible said. When I received the gift of the Holy Ghost I spoke in tongues as the Spirit of God gave me the utterance, just like the early believers did in the New Testament book of Acts. I became so saturated by God's Spirit that I could hardly believe that God could be so real. I felt a warm tingling sensation permeate throughout my entire head and body. I could literally feel the presence of God from within and from without. I have now felt the presence of God with me every single day of my life now for over eighteen years. It is a wonderful feeling. Jesus promised that every person who would believe upon him as the scriptures have said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water. Water is spoken of throughout scripture as being symbolic of the Spirit of God. Therefore all who truly believe upon Jesus Christ as the scriptures have said shall receive a vast current of the Spirit of God that shall flow out of them as abundant as rivers of water.

When I received the Biblical Experience of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit I could truly state that I had received this wonderful promise. (Read Acts 2:1-4/Acts 8/Acts10/Acts 19) Yet as a Baptist and as a Protestant believer I could not honestly say that I could discern having the presence of the Spirit of God at all in my life. When I was baptized in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ I felt a wonderful cleansing. I knew both by the scriptures and by personal experience that I had found the way of truth that was originally preached by the first century apostles of Christ. Just as in the book of Acts Church, every where the way of truth was spoken against (See Acts 28:22). So it is today. Every where the Apostolic Faith Message is preached, it is persecuted as a way of error even though it is scripturally correct. Yet God's Word is still true today and His truth never changes to suit the personal whims of men. May God reveal His truth to many more millions of people before the end of this age come to a close.