

# Wittenberg Trail

## Not By My Own Strength or Reason

by Jim Pierce

How does one go from being a Pentecostal to being a conservative Baptist to an atheist only later to become a Lutheran? The question is more than a little bizarre, and the answer to it is filled with twists and turns and gets somewhat tangled in places. Nevertheless, the following is a short, true story of how God works through His Word to bring life to a particular dead man: me.

If you have ever watched Jimmy Swaggart or Pat Robertson preaching on one of the several Christian broadcasting stations, then you have seen a Pentecostal preacher in action. Pentecostals believe that a water Baptism is not enough to make one a full-blown Christian. According to the Pentecostal, you must also be baptized with the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues. Some Pentecostals dogmatically assert that unless you have spoken in tongues, then you aren't a Christian. I was one of those Pentecostals for much of my childhood and young adult life.

At a young age, I started preaching and eventually became a licensed minister in the United Pentecostal Church, which is a denomination that rejects the teaching of the Holy Trinity. I was a youth pastor at a local congregation and was soon to be promoted to assistant pastor. It was at that point I thought I should increase my understanding of the Bible, so I took a course in biblical Greek offered at a Reformed congregation. The class worked together to translate the first chapter of John, which is some of the easiest Greek to learn. John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John later tells us in the same chapter that the Word was "made flesh" and is the

Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the whole world. Right there in the opening chapter of John, the teaching of the preexistence of God the Son is unmistakably clear. I had completely misunderstood the Scriptures. Shortly after this, I had to resign my position as youth pastor and departed the United Pentecostal Church. A couple of friends of mine, who worked me through the teaching of the Holy Trinity, pointed me to a neighborhood Baptist congregation where I was re-baptized and publicly confessed my faith in the one true God.

I hadn't been a Baptist all that long when my story spread out into the local evangelical community. Soon I was asked to preach, teach and to give presentations about the United Pentecostals. It was at one of these speaking events that I was invited to give an apologetics presentation to a small group of Lutherans. I knew little about Lutheranism, and what I did know of it made me wonder if Lutherans weren't part of a cult, since they taught infant Baptism and baptismal regeneration, among many other teachings I thought unscriptural at the time. However, my curiosity got the best of me, and I accepted the invitation.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that I was to speak in a home and that after the presentation we would have dinner. Our hostess was a very kind woman whose husband was a Lutheran pastor. We weren't too far into our meal when the pastor's wife, whose name is Greta, queried me concerning my faith, and soon we were talking about what she termed "justification through faith alone in Christ." In short order, I was told I couldn't have possibly made a decision for Christ while dead in sins, words I automatically resisted. Of course I made a decision for Christ! I had publicly confessed Him after much soul searching and investigation into the truth of His Word. I looked at the evidence, weighed it, and the verdict came back in Christ's favor. That I decided Jesus was my Savior made perfect sense to me; my will was free to choose Jesus. How else could I have come to God except through my own free will?

My Lutheran interlocutor would have none of it. She walked me through the Scriptures and showed me how I had been dead in sin and how faith was given to me as a free gift through the hearing of God's Word. According to her, I couldn't have made a decision for Jesus; Christ had to give me faith that I might receive the truth of the Gospel. For the very first time in my life, I was confronted with the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ, but at that time I didn't understand it as such.

My desire to know the truth above all things drove me not only to study theology but also into the study of philosophy. I loved philosophical studies and, in particular, discussing issues regarding how we come to have knowledge and why human language works the way that it does. I was in college at this time, and it was in my junior year that I took a course about the Enlightenment philosophers. I fell head over heels in love with the philosophy of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Now, this isn't the article to discuss Hume's views in any depth, but suffice it to say that he was quite inclined to doubt the truthfulness of any talk about God or the supernatural. Hume's ideas can be summed up into the motto of "Seeing is believing!" Hume was most certainly a skeptic, and I quickly became enchanted by skepticism.

One day, Greta called me on the phone and asked if I could come over for dinner to talk with a new friend of hers who had been a Pentecostal but rejected Christianity to become an agnostic. I talked with Greta's new friend for many hours, and it was during one of our long discussions that we talked about atheism. This man wasn't sure that he could remain an agnostic. He presented several arguments that seemed to logically disprove the existence of God. I wasn't able to interact successfully with the arguments presented, since they also appealed to me. Indeed, they sounded much like something Hume would have presented, and he was my favorite philosopher at that time! My faith was shaken. What if I was wrong about Christianity as I had been wrong about Pentecostalism?

After having my faith challenged to its core, I started digging into my studies much deeper. My entire focus turned to ideas concerning the nature of being and how it is we come to have knowledge. I wanted to know the truth about God. Was He real? My resolve was to find the truth at any cost, even if that meant God didn't exist. Indeed, human reason became the object of my faith. As I worked my way through the many philosophical issues I thought critical, I had forsaken Jesus. He became an intellectual exercise found in a pile of apologetic books collecting dust in my library. In fact, I started questioning the truth of the Scriptures, listening to the great lie of the devil, "Did God really say?"

Predictably, my faith died, and I became an atheist. I spent 18 years in atheism. During that time, I went from being a militant, evangelical atheist who wanted every Christian de-converted and set "free" from his or her delusional faith to being a "spiritual atheist," grasping at any belief that could silence the nagging of the Law of God, which told me I was in trouble with the Being whose existence I denied. For 18 years, God's Law tormented me day and night. I hated God!

Eventually I collapsed under the weight of my sins; the Law of God had done its work. Remembering the Gospel Greta had shared with me, I cried out to God, repenting of my unbelief and knowing my sins were forgiven me for the sake of Christ.

At this point, I was well aware that I needed solid teaching. I needed a church that taught salvation was by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus. For that reason, I couldn't return to the denominations I had been part of, but I didn't know where to go other than to find the one person I had lost contact with over the years who could help me: Greta.

Finding her phone number, I called Greta and told her the wonderful news and asked if she could help me find a church. Eagerly she sent me to a friend of

hers, and I eventually found myself in an LCMS congregation that was close by house: Messiah Lutheran in Seattle. I promptly called the pastor there, the Rev. Ernie Lassman, and he extended to me and my family a warm invitation to the Divine Service.

I was excited to attend Sunday service for the first time in 18 years, but at the same time, I was nervous. What was to happen to me? Would church members seek me out and try to convert me? Would they lay hands on me and start praying over me? Was I to be the object of the preacher's altar call? I arrived early to the church and quietly slipped into a pew, but not unnoticed. A man wearing a clerical collar and vestments approached me. Oh, dear, had I mistakenly walked into the wrong church? Maybe this was a Roman Catholic Church. Well, it was too late now to leave without embarrassment, but to my relief it turned out to be Pastor Lassman. After a warm greeting, he invited me to chat with him after the service.

As the pastor went into the sacristy, the organ began warming up and the pews started to fill with people. I heard glorious singing of hymns and the chanting of Psalms. It was if I had come to the intersection of heaven and earth. I fumbled, bumbled and stumbled through the liturgy, but as the congregation joyfully sang hymns, confessed their sins and received absolution, I was comforted by the words I was hearing. It was during the pastor's sermon, though, that I knew I hadn't gone to the wrong church, for I heard the Gospel of Jesus as it was told to me by Greta. After that Divine Service, I started attending the adult catechism class, and months later, I had my first Holy Communion, receiving the true body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Now I would be remiss not to mention something about my family. What happened with them? Well, at first they didn't know what to make of my conversion, and none of them were immediately receptive to the idea of following

me to church. For several months, I prayed, agonized and invited my family to join me. My son was the first to attend church with me, and he was eventually baptized. Shortly after my son began attending services with me, my wife began to come along, and hearing solid Law and Gospel preaching, she received through faith the forgiveness of her sins. My daughter was the last “hold out,” so to speak. She had been an avowed atheist, which broke my heart, since I had taught her to be such. However, God had something else in mind for her, and she, too, was eventually baptized, catechized and received her first Communion kneeling with me at the altar. Thanks be to God!

How does one go from Pentecostalism to atheism and finally to Lutheran Christianity? The answer is really simple. One only needs to be a sinner who destroys his faith through hatred for God. However, what I could not do by my own strength or reason was find God. Our God is faithful, and while I had turned against Him, He came and found me and, taking pity on me, He gave me faith to receive the forgiveness of sins on account of what His Son, Jesus Christ, has done for me.



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