



My Journey in Christian DISCIPLESHIP

by DANIEL TOMBERLIN

I WAS REARED in the Church of God Sunday School. My earliest memories are of the men and women who dedicated their lives to teach the gospel of Christ to children.

I have vivid memories of flannelgraphs, memory verses, and the gold stars on the attendance chart. There can be little doubt that Church of God Sunday School laid the foundation of my Christian faith. Sadly, after my parents divorced (when I was eleven), church became a less significant part of my life.

However, at the age of 15, I got saved during a Saturday night revival service. The following Sunday morning, I returned to Sunday school, church, and the Bible. When I got saved, I didn't own a Bible. But that Sunday after church, I began to read the only Bible in our home—the big coffee table Bible that rest-

ed in the middle of the room, but was never read. I began with Genesis. I read the Bible every day. Sometimes, it was tough and slow... Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and the Prophets were difficult for a teen reader. But I loved the Bible! By the first anniversary of my conversion I had read the complete Bible—twice. Early on, I discovered a text that has guided my life:

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success (Joshua 1:8 NASB).

This text encouraged me to do more than read the Bible; I had to learn how to meditate, to *think* about the Bible. So, I began to look for resources that could guide my study of the Bible. My pastor, Walter Langdon, directed me to the Church Training Course (CTC) books published by the Church of God Publishing House/Pathway Press. The CTC books covered biblical studies, theology, and church leadership. Completing the CTC courses and receiving the certificate was a significant milestone in my journey as a disciple. Also, I attended the Bible Institutes that were sponsored by the Church of God Department of Education. Each of these courses helped me to *think* about the Bible. Learning to *think* about the Bible *sanctified* my mind. Our statement of faith declares that we believe in “sanctification... through faith in the blood of Christ, *through the Word*, and by the Holy Ghost.” The Bible will form the heart and transform the mind (Romans 12:2; 2 Timothy 3:16-17), but the disciple must be diligent in reading, studying, and thinking about the Bible (2 Timothy 2:15).

After I graduated from high school I knew that God had called me into ministry and I pursued the opportunity to continue my study at East Coast Bible College in Charlotte, North Carolina. The professors and staff at ECBC loved the Bible and they taught me to express my devotion to the Scriptures through diligent study. My first professor, Dr. Ken Bell, challenged us on the first day of classes. He said, "Your studies here will be more than a glorified Sunday school class." He was right! Dr. George Voorhis introduced me to the study of theology and the history of the church. He challenged me to think critically about the Faith. My time at ECBC provided the foundation for my ministerial studies. I left ECBC prematurely, eager to begin pastoral work. But I continued my studies through the Lee University external studies program, graduating in 1994, sixteen years after I first started baccalaureate studies.

My journey as a disciple did not end with graduation from Lee University. I continued to study and read theology, church history, and the Bible. I read the books of Pentecostal scholars French Arrington, Hollis Gause, Steven Land, and Christopher Thomas. Many other scholars enriched my study through their books: Walter Brueggemann, N. T. Wright, George Ladd, F. F. Bruce, and many others. The point is that the disciple should never cease to diligently pursue the study of the Christian faith.

In 1999, I was invited to attend the Church of God Theological Seminary (now Pentecostal Theological Seminary). At the time, I was pastoring in Thomasville, Georgia, which was a seven-hour drive to Cleveland. For five years, I traveled to Cleveland with other colleagues from southern Georgia, taking courses in the seminary's Thursdays only program. At the

seminary, I found myself studying with some of the finest Pentecostal scholars in the world. There is a myth in many circles that formal theological studies tend to weaken one's faith in Christ. My experience was just the opposite. I found graduate studies to be challenging and enriching. I was graduated in 2004 with the Master of Divinity degree. But I had more than a degree. I had participated in a discipleship journey, a community of faith that continued to form my heart and sanctify my mind. My journey continues. Presently, due to the encouragement of many colleagues, I am enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Pentecostal Theological Seminary.

The life of the Christian disciple is the ongoing walk with Jesus and His disciples—study and life in the church. The Church of God offers many opportunities for discipleship. Nothing can take the place of local church discipleship programs such as Sunday school, children and youth ministries, and small-group adult discipleship. The role of denominational leadership is to provide resources, curriculum, and opportunities for learning. Discipleship requires mentors. Pastors, teachers, and leaders must be dedicated to *teaching* the Word of God and building relationships. There have been scores of church leaders who have contributed to my discipleship journey—Sunday school teachers and pastors in the local church, and professors and instructors in our educational institutions. I am grateful for their contribution to my journey of discipleship. ■

Daniel Tomberlin is pastor at the Vidalia, Ga. Church of God. He serves as coordinator of ministerial development programs in South Georgia. He is the author of Pentecostal Sacraments: Encountering God at the Altar.