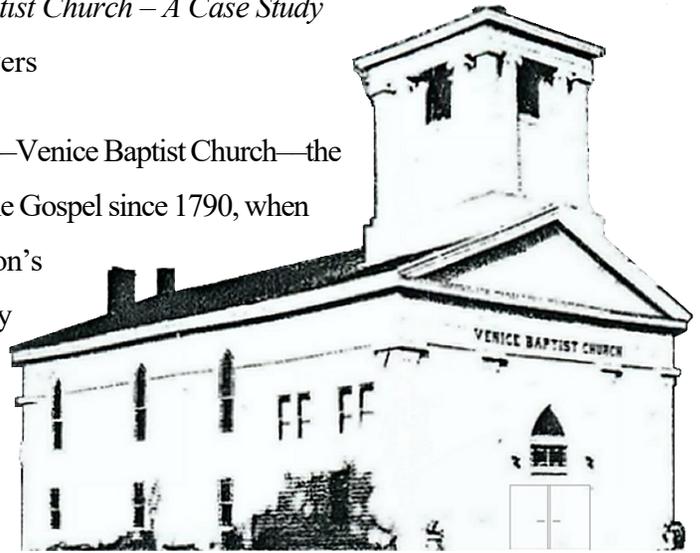


My Personal Encounter with The Dark Side of Calvinism:

The Sad Demise of Venice Baptist Church – A Case Study

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In focus is a little Baptist church in Upstate New York—Venice Baptist Church—the first incorporated church in Cayuga County and a beacon for the Gospel since 1790, when it was established and incorporated, during George Washington’s presidency. Numerous lives had been changed there. Many pastors, missionaries, and various Christian workers had been called to serve Christ from there or supported by that small but faithful congregation—diminutive in size compared to today’s mega-church standards.



One young Pastor that served there was Mike Burns. I first met Mike the week before I received Christ, introduced by a close friend and hobbyist motorcycle mechanic, Gordy Holley, whom Mike was visiting. Introduction over, I went back out and sat on the lawn with the other riders I had come with; whereupon, Mike came out and sat down beside me. Cigarette hanging from my lips, I purposefully turned the air blue with foul language, just to let Mike know he was out of his league. Miraculously, I accepted Christ and became a new Christian later that same week, due in part to the prayers, testimony, and friendship of this dear family, the Holleys, third generation members of Venice Baptist.

The next time I saw Mike I had become a new creation in Christ. Later, someone invited me to attend a potluck fellowship dinner at the church. Meal over, I went upstairs to the sanctuary to pray, sitting quietly by myself in the front pew. The sanctuary was dark except for ambient light coming through the windows from the dinner activities in the basement below. Pastor Mike, having seen me leave the potluck, came up and sat beside me. I had just come to faith that week due to a crisis in my life. My long-time wonderful girlfriend had broken off our relationship. Saddened and beside myself, I turned to God for answers. While seeking God, the convicting power of His Holy Spirit revealed to me my lost, hell-bound spiritual condition. Terrified, I repented and cried out for mercy. God heard my plea and graciously saved me.

Venice Baptist became my home church. The first sermon I heard there was a rousing evangelistic message on *The Great White Throne Judgment*, delivered by one of Mike’s visiting missionary friends. I recall being at perfect peace because I was already saved and secure in Christ by then—never doubting my salvation as some do. Pastor Mike and I got along famously, being similar in age. However, he and his young wife and family later moved on for personal reasons of which I wasn’t aware. Our new pastor was Pastor Albert and Mrs. Marita Garcia. They were very gracious people with many years of loving dedication in the Lord’s service. Pastor Garcia conducted our wedding there in conjunction with Cheryl’s dad, Pastor Bill Earle on August 26,

1969. We entered ministerial training with New Tribes Mission one week after our honeymoon. The Garcias later retired to their Kissimmee Florida home.

Our training complete and my ordination granted, Cheryl and I raised funding from like-minded churches and individuals. We went forth from Venice Baptist with their blessings in 1973 as missionaries to Thailand. Before leaving, a new pastor was selected to replace retiring Pastor Garcia, a Mr. Manley Johnson, whom I'll call MJ. He seemed very likable and outgoing; amening and smiling in agreement at about everything said (masking his true intentions). His wife was friendly but more reserved. Cheryl and I left for the mission field shortly afterward, confident that calling MJ was a good decision, which later proved very wrong. (I hold naïve pulpit committees at fault for things like this happening.) After back in Thailand for a while, the church's Deacon Board chairman wrote me saying Pastor MJ had changed, and that they tried to dismiss him but he refused to leave, having gained a foothold and a following by that time. The deacon, who left the church soon afterward, also related how MJ had announced to the congregation one Sunday that there had been enough talk about God's love and that they needed to talk more of God's wrath. The chairman also iterated how MJ had gone around scratching out the word *love* from their Sunday School materials, further upsetting what remained of the waning church membership.

One couple who disagreed—third generation church members from youth and my close friends—wouldn't leave so MJ forced them out as *persona non grata*. The more I learned of MJ's doings, the more I developed a strong dislike for the man because of his deceitfulness and bullying manner. He had set about to highjack the church and convert it into a *Sovereign Grace* outpost, no matter who he hurt—a doctrine I believe he had adopted during Bible school. He felt he hadn't preached the true Gospel before embracing its doctrines. A forceful speaker, newly saved Christians who didn't know any better accepted MJ's teachings. The Holley family (who had prayed so long for my salvation) embraced these doctrines wholeheartedly. Once sweet spirited and gracious, they became terse and argumentative, interjecting their newfound beliefs at every opportunity.

When missionary families returned home on furlough, MJ would interview each privately, telling them the church could no longer continue their support since they were not teaching the true Gospel—of which it was MJ who wasn't teaching the true Gospel. MJ's wife was against this whole thing, as was her pastor father. Yet she submitted unhappily under MJ, assuming her role as wife to keep their marriage stable. Later, while on furlough, Cheryl and I visited retired Pastor and Mrs. Garcia in Florida. Concerned, I told them what MJ was doing. Pastor Garcia smiled and calmly explained: "*The whosoever will are the vessels of God's mercy while the whosoever won't are the vessels of His wrath.*" Amen!

Missionaries returning home warned me about MJ's demeanor and his announcing that their support was dropped for "doctrinal reasons." While on the field, MJ sent me materials about his beliefs—a clue as to how I needed to prepare. When we came home, I stopped by the church, not sure what to expect. I was greeted with an outwardly friendly yet somewhat pretentious smile. We carried on a light conversation as MJ turned over monetary gifts that had come in towards our ministry, then helped me *Roneo* off a newsletter.

I inquired of MJ where he stood on various doctrinal issues like: *Total Inability*; *Unconditional Election or Call*; *Limited Atonement*; *Irresistible Grace*; and *Perseverance of the Saints*—as well as the *Security of the Believer*. Asking hypothetically if he yielded in weakness with his secretary would he still be *elect*. “No,” he responded, saying it would prove he was not one of the *elect*, since he hadn’t *persevered*. This left him totally unsure of his final destiny if he didn’t *persevere*, which is decidedly a works-oriented view of salvation. Biblically-based salvation is a gift, given freely by God to whosoever will, upon exhibiting repentance (a change of mindset) and faith (Acts 20:21). Meaning, embracing Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, by Grace alone, through Faith alone, by which one is then kept forever by the power of God, not by personal persevering (cf. Ephesians 1:13–14 and 1 Peter 1:5).

Shawn Lazar—Director of Publications of *Grace in Focus* magazine and author of *Why Biblical Election Is to Service and Not to Eternal life*—stated “There isn’t a single verse in the Bible that says God elects individuals for eternal life or eternal death.” Also, according to J.B. Hixson—pastor and author of numerous theological journal articles—wrote in his work *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, how the Scriptures state emphatically in over a dozen passages that “whosoever will” may be saved is an undeniable fact. Yet those who hold to a Reformed view claim that faith is works, which it is *not*, since Ephesians 2:8–9 separates the two—*Faith* being needed to appropriate salvation, while depending on *Works* nullifies salvation.

MJ also questioned the time of my salvation because I shared that I had ceased to walk with the Lord for three years (counting the cost) before finally yielding to God’s ministerial call on my life. I then brought up 1 John 2:2: that Christ’s atoning death for our sins also encompassed the sins of whole world. Whereupon he attempted to explain that Christ’s atoning act was limited to the “*whole world of the elect*,” which he inserted into the plain textual meaning. Meaning, *not* offered to *all* humanity, but just the so-called *elect*, in direct contradiction to Isaiah 53:6 and 1 Tim 4:10.

Approaching noontime, I said I had to leave for a mission conference at a church in town (Second Baptist in Auburn, NY, to where I transferred our membership). He then said we needed to get together sometime to talk further. Purposely glancing at my watch, I stating that I had a couple minutes. MJ responded saying we needed more time. Aware of what was coming, I had prepared for the encounter. I informed him that what I needed to say wouldn’t take very long. Turning the tables, I declared bluntly to his face that he was teaching erroneous doctrine and that I hereby formally disfellowshipped myself from him and from the church, and would not accept any further financial support. Taken aback, MJ blurted out that “*I (Ron) wasn’t preaching the Gospel.*” This response revealed his true heart.

I replied: “*What is the Gospel, Manley? It means ‘Good News’ and you don’t have any Good News; because, if you don’t have Good News for all, then you don’t have Good News at all—not even for yourself according to what you’ve said this morning. So, don’t try to tell me I’m not preaching the Gospel, because it’s You, Sir, that’s not preaching the Gospel.*” His face flushed and I assume his ears were smarting—no apologies offered for my boldness, which I feel he had coming. I had just upstaged him in his plans to drop the news on me that our home church’s support was being discontinued for “doctrinal reasons.” I thanked him for the support we had received from the church and his help that morning. I then bade him and his wife good

bye and left for the mission conference. I learned later he was maligning me to others, which I really didn't care, since it was his wounded pride talking.

Although it pained me to do so, I also disfellowshipped myself from the Holley family with whom I was once close and who had played an important role in my receiving Christ. I had seen God in their lives, and later learned that they had faithfully prayed for my salvation. They also continually invited me to come to church with them (Venice Baptist), to which I always declined. I went to a Christmas program once, but it made little impression since it was not unlike the liberal Presbyterian church in which I grew up in. One thing I faulted them for was that they never witnessed to me verbally. I was watching their lives and desired whatever it was that they had: God! I suppose they weren't confident they'd do it right. (*How much finesse does it take to yell out to someone asleep in a burning building, to wake up and escape to safety?*) I'm sure I would've received Christ much sooner had they witnessed to me verbally, based on the testimony of their lives—a very powerful draw on me for Christ.

Mr. Manly Johnson is still there at what was once Venice Baptist Church, meeting with a scattering of people in a small Quonset hut, having razed the old historic landmark—illegally, I'm quite sure, given his attitude. Venice Baptist Church was a landmark that should rightly be in the National Register of Historic Places. He now refers to himself as Reformed Baptist. Yet some perceive him as having deep-seated narcissistic issues, to which I would concur – seeing the destructive swath he leaves in his wake; issues deeper than merely doctrinal.

I rebuked him that day in 1978 because he wrongfully taught and spread questionable doctrine; dropped needy missionaries' support—blaming them for not teaching his pet views; razed an historic old church building (built and incorporated circa. 1790) ... a landmark that rightfully belonged in the National Registry; influenced new or weak untaught Christians to accept his questionable doctrines, forced church members that didn't agree to leave; harmed family and marriage relationships (even his own)—discouraging and saddening my friend's Christian wife, who's salvation became questionable in her husband's eyes as not being “in-the-fold of the *elect*.” In short, MJ, in his misdirected zeal, did something that God deeply hates; he caused splits and divisions among the brethren, as well as knowingly spread a questionable (false) doctrine (cf. Proverbs 6:16-19; Malachi 2:16—2 Peter 1-2).

Mrs. Ethel Holley (and the whole Holley family), whom I sincerely loved in the Lord, finally saw through MJ's self-aggrandizing authority. She wrote me while we were back on the field that she had some fences to mend, starting with an apology to me. It seems that MJ told Ethel—her husband having recently passed—that she should turn the picturesque homestead farm property (house, buildings, and acreage) over to him, for whatever reason. When she refused to acquiesce, he disfellowshipped her for rebellion and insubordination, which finally woke her up from the trance she'd been in. We enjoyed fellowship again after that (but not like

before). I could tell that the Sovereign Grace doctrine had made a negative impact on her understanding. I've also noticed that many who might appear to be strong believers on the surface aren't truly grounded in the Word. Instead, they're sheeple, followers of tradition or cultural Christianity, thus easily led astray.

Gordy is still caught up in the doctrine to this day (which saddens me for his sake), and tries to interject it whenever and with whomever he can, but not with me anymore because he knows the firm response he'll get. Sadly, Gordy no longer exhibits any happiness or joy, nor the fruit of the Spirit in his life—that which drew me in the first place as something I wanted and needed but wasn't sure what it was the Holley family had. God!

My friend Gordy, once deeply in love with his dear Christian wife Eva (a strong believer), began to distance himself from her as I recall—openly doubting her being one of the *elect*, simply because she didn't buy into the doctrine. Eva came to Cheryl and me sobbing during that time, both disheartened and disgusted over the whole scenario that had disrupted their marriage and put them at odds. Eva later contracted an incurable condition and went to be with her Lord and Savior soon afterward.

Gordon Holley Sr., like his daughter-in-law, did not embrace his wife's and son's newly acquired *enlightenment*. To them, this meant his salvation and *election* (like Eva's) was also suspect. One thing I've noticed about those with this mindset—if someone embraces the doctrine of Calvinism it's a sure sign that person is one of the so-called *elect*, and if not, they're likely not *elect*, which makes no sense. Jesus told us that we shall know false prophets by their fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). Also, as the Apostle Peter warned:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. ⁽²⁾ Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; ⁽³⁾ and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep (2 Peter 2:1–3).

In like manner, we can discern from whence Calvinism's teachings are derived by getting a glimpse of the divisive and destructive fruit its doctrines caused in Venice Baptist church—evidenced in the lives of my friends, the Holley family, and others. This consequence was brought about by an interloper who came in unawares—like a wolf in sheep's clothing—bringing a false gospel with him. In doing so, he instigated the demise of a lovely body of believers, a longtime shining light for truth that God had both greatly blessed and used. Scripture clearly warns that God hates false teachers and those that cause discord and division; so, go figure (cf. Proverbs 6:16-19; Romans 16:17; 1 Timothy 4:1; Jude 1:18-19).