

“Why I’m a Christian”

Acts 11.19-26

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Two weeks ago I promised that I would answer the question: “When someone asks you why you’re a Christian, what do you reply?” I had thought that the question was just a general one – someone asking for advice on what *they* should say when someone asks *them* why they’re a Christian – but the individual (Sheren!) clarified later that’s not what she meant. She really wanted me to answer the question: “Bill, what do *you* say when someone asks *you* why you’re a Christian?” Ah. I see!

I will give you a short answer to that question, and a longer explanation of what my answer *means*. But let’s start with the word “Christian.” Where did the word “Christian” come from? Jesus never used the word. He didn’t call his followers “Christians.” He called them “disciples” – which means “students” or “learners” or “pupils,” people who voluntarily place themselves under the instruction of a *teacher*. The early Christians continued to use the word “disciples,” and they initially referred to their growing movement as “the Way” (Acts 9.2; 18.25; 18.26; 19.9; 19.23; 24.14; 24.22), as in “the way, the truth, and the life.” It was *non-Christians* who used the word “Christian” first, to describe this strange group of people who followed *the Christ*. Luke says: “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’” (Acts 11.26) Notice that these early followers of Jesus were disciples *first* and Christians *second*. This is important. If you’re a Christian, that means that you are also a *disciple*. Being a Christian isn’t about going to church or assenting to a set of doctrines so much as it is about *following* and *trusting* and *obeying* a Master who *rescues* you and *heals* you from everything that’s *wrong* in your life.

Which leads me back to the question: “What do I say when somebody asks me why I’m a Christian?” My short answer is this: “I desperately *need* someone whom I can follow and trust and obey, and there’s *nobody better* to follow, trust, and obey than Jesus Christ; and I desperately *need* someone who can *rescue* me and *heal* me from everything that’s wrong in my life, and there’s *nobody* who rescues and heals better than Jesus Christ.” I need a Lord, and I need a Savior, and there’s no better Lord, no better Savior, than Jesus. *That’s* why I’m a Christian. Now, let me tell you what I *mean* by that.

I grew up in the church. The church we attended offered all sorts of programs for children and youth. That’s why my family and many other families were attracted to it. The music program was particularly strong, with three different choirs for children and youth, and a series of progressive handbell choirs starting in sixth grade, culminating in the Festival Ringers, a high school group of *extremely* high caliber. We went on two-week concert tours every summer, across the United States, into Canada, and across the ocean to the United Kingdom, where we rang at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh and on the front steps of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. We were *good*. We were *really*

good. Every time we were heading off on one of these concert tours, the Senior Pastor's parting words were: "Remember *who* you are, and *Whose* you are." Those were good words. The problem was: we didn't ever really *talk* about who we were, or *Whose* we were. Oh, there was a Sunday School program, all right. And many of us went through Confirmation. I knew a lot of the basic stories, but I don't recall learning much of anything about our identity in Christ, or about Christ's work of salvation, or about what it truly means to follow Jesus. We talked *around* that stuff more than we talked *about* it. A church can have strong programs that attract lots of people, and yet neglect essential aspects of the gospel.

Towards the end of my high school years the church went through a major crisis, centering around the new Senior Pastor. He wasn't a good fit for the congregation, and a number of ethical concerns were being raised. I was one of the people who was raising them. I was one of the most active youth; people knew me and trusted me; I was angry about some stuff that had happened, and I ended up saying some things publicly that kinda lit the house on fire. I hadn't been given a strong foundation in the gospel, but that does not excuse what I did or how I did it. The place erupted. Some of you know what that's like, when a church loses its center in Jesus Christ and dissolves into bitter infighting. Factions form; people leave; people stop giving; people lose hope. *I* lost hope. I headed off to college, angry and hurt and disillusioned, and I had no desire to find a church or join a Christian campus ministry.

That first year in college, I was a long way from home and I didn't know anybody. I was in a dorm and my room was literally *right next* to the main common room, where there were keg parties on a regular basis. I had avoided the whole party scene all the way through high school – my friends and I hung out on Friday nights and played games – but in college it seemed like *everybody* was drinking. I learned later that some students did other (more wholesome) things on Friday and Saturday nights, but all the people in my freshman center were doing the party thing, so I did too. I wonder how many of us were just trying to fit in. I learned later that my Lutheran roommate was trying to fit in just as much as I was. We were wearing masks, pretending to be people that we weren't. I didn't have enough self-confidence to say, "Let's do something else." The *last* thing I wanted was to feel like a misfit and risk being ostracized. I settled into the college party life and pretended I was enjoying myself. I made a lot of dumb decisions and I could have been arrested numerous times. One night about ten of us gathered in a room with an illegal substance that most of us had never tried before. The next day I had enough recollection of what transpired that night to resolve that I *never* wanted to do that to myself again.

Now I know there are young people listening to this. Friends, just don't even start down that road. Just *don't even start*. I'm not proud of that phase of my life. I have memories I wish I didn't have, and regrets I still carry with me. *You don't have to follow the crowd*. There's only one person worth following, and his name's Jesus, and he has *no desire* to see you waste precious years of your life doing stupid stuff that has no meaning. There are *lots* of other fun things to do, and *plenty* of people who desperately want someone to say, "Let's do something else tonight" and don't have the guts to say it themselves. *You* could be the person to say it. *You* could be the person with the guts.

When Easter Sunday rolled around, I debated: should I go to church? I hadn't been going all year. I concluded that the logical answer was *no*. If I'm not going any other time, why go on Easter Sunday? I had walked away from the faith; I had walked away from God, from Jesus, from the church; why fake it by showing up on Easter? I went to the library that Easter morning, and I wrote a twelve-page letter to my former youth pastor, telling him all the reasons why I was *done* with Christianity. Too

much hypocrisy; too much injustice; too many “wrongs” committed throughout history in the name of Jesus. I rejected *everything* that day. Everything I had been taught; everything I had once believed. I was *done* – and there was *nothing* my youth pastor could say that would change my mind. Some of you are currently working on marketing material for the church – and that’s great – but you need to know: *no church marketing whatsoever would have brought me back into a church at that point in my life.* I wasn’t *looking* for God, or Jesus, or a church; I was running *as far away as I possibly could.* I thought it was all *pointless.* From that day forward, I lived my life *as if there were no God.*

Thankfully, even if I had given up on Jesus, Jesus never gave up on me. He had to *rescue* me from the life I was living. One evening, feeling hurt and betrayed and with tears welling up in my eyes, I got up from the table where I was eating dinner with my so-called “friends,” left their company, and never returned. God placed some new friends in my life, people who *slowly, gently, one step at a time,* guided me back into a meaningful relationship with Jesus, with God, with the church. They were willing to meet me *where I was,* with all my arrogance and pride and loneliness and insecurity, and we engaged in many conversations about things that *really matter.* It took a *war* before I was willing to step foot into a church again – the first Gulf War – as I found myself wanting to go to a candlelight vigil to pray for peace. My new friends were encouraging me, “Come to church with us,” and finally I went – a little Baptist church across the street from campus, where we sat in the front pew, some of us taking notes. I enrolled in a historical overview of the Old Testament, and the Bible came *alive* for me. Moses *inspired* me. Amos and Micah *captured my heart.* Job left me *thunderstruck.* I changed majors from history to religious studies; I learned about Buddhism and Hinduism and Confucianism and Taoism and Shinto and I did my own not-for-credit independent study on Islam, and I read the entire Qu’ran, cover to cover (in English translation), and none of it grabbed my heart – except the Christian stuff. Daniel and Revelation – *really cool.* The letters of Paul – difficult and challenging, and there were parts I wanted to argue with, but there was also *really amazing stuff* that I’d never *heard* before. The history of the early church – *utterly fascinating.* Augustine’s *Confessions* and Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* – truly inspiring. My last five weeks of college, I was learning how to read Greek through an inductive study of the gospel of John. *Blew me away* – I didn’t want it to end. Meanwhile, God had nudged me to teach a Sunday School class, and lead a youth group, and even head off to seminary, though I was adamant: “I’ll do *anything* you want, God, *except* become a pastor!” Six years after I had utterly rejected Christianity, I stood up in front of a congregation and publicly recommitted my life to Jesus Christ. It took another seven years before I acquiesced to God’s will for my life, knelt on the steps of that church, and was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, to become that which I had told God I would never become. I had argued with God as hard as I possibly could, and God had won, and that was *good.*

Why am I a Christian? Because I desperately need someone whom I can *follow* and *trust* and *obey.* Following and trusting and obeying other people had gotten me *nowhere good.* And because I desperately need someone who can *rescue* me and *heal* me from everything that’s wrong in my life. I needed a lot of rescuing, and there are still plenty of times I screw up and need forgiveness, and the process of healing is ongoing. Not long ago I learned that Jesus can heal even your most painful memories in *amazing* ways. I truly *need* a Lord and I truly *need* a Savior ... and there’s *no one better than Jesus.* Believe me, I looked at the other options. There’s *no* one better. *That’s* why I’m a Christian.

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