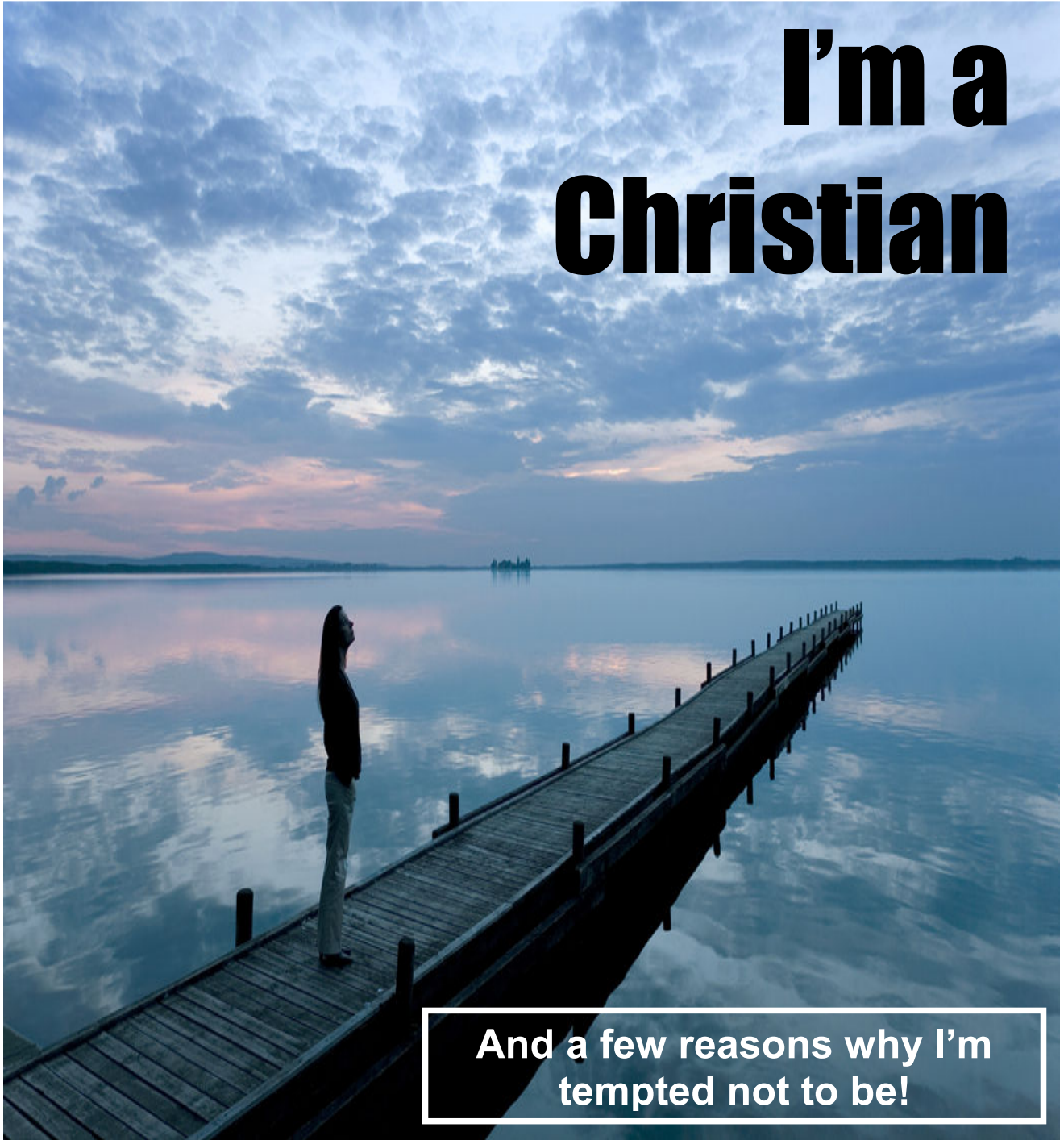


Why I'm a Christian



And a few reasons why I'm
tempted not to be!

Why I'm a Christian

By way of confession, let me begin by saying why I am sometimes tempted not to be a Christian.

1. The awful witness of so many, many Christians.

My heart sinks into despair and my face blushes as I read the pages of history, especially when reading about the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. I want to immediately distance myself from these disturbing and dark chapters of the church's history and claim: "These dudes were not Christians!" But that's too easy when I realise that lurking in my heart is the same self-seeking, misguided craziness that drove the Crusaders and Spanish conquistadors to misrepresent Christ so blatantly. If I learn from their mistakes perhaps I can avoid their madness.

My heart cringes with embarrassment and I struggle to keep my anger in check when I turn on so much of Christian television to see a money-making circus that often preys on the gullible and desperate. Again I want to shout "Foul Play!" – actually that's the sanitised version – and write them all off as charlatans. But that's too easy when I have to admit that I am also so prone to hypocrisy and insincerity. If I learn from their mistakes I can avoid their stupidity.

My heart breaks that so much is done in the Name of Christ that does not reflect the heart of God. Jesus came to bring such a liberating, inclusive message of hope...but too often those who follow Him model a suffocating, exclusive message of despair. He was interested in improving our world; too many of those who claim His name are only interested in self-advancement.

But I choose to be a Christian despite the bad job done by so many who claim to represent Christ. Just because 90% of the world's water supply is not healthy to drink, I am not going to boycott water. That would be silly...and I would be dead in four days. Just because people tell the truth badly, doesn't mean there is no truth.

Just because there are few bad plumbers in the world who over quote and under deliver doesn't mean I allow my sewage to continue to splash out onto the streets of my neighbourhood when the drain becomes blocked. My drainage system is under control because I have found a plumber whose quote was right and whose service was outstanding.

Likewise, I am alive because there is fresh water in this world... And I am a Christian because there is truth in this world despite the lies and half-truths that run rampant. And I have been fortunate to know many, many true followers of Christ who through their own struggles and challenges have helped me see the truth more clearly. And for this reason, I make it my goal to attempt to represent Christ well. [If you think I'm failing in any way, please tell me. I know I could do better].

2. Life is incredibly difficult and being a Christian doesn't make it easier.

There is an easier way to live. Doing what you want when you want as much as you want is the easiest way to live. It is also the loneliest way to live. It is also the shallowest way to live. There is no nobility living that way. There is no courage living that way. There is no meaning living that way. Living that way will not improve our world and will not raise children who will improve theirs.

It is easy to follow my selfish whims, easy to satisfy my greedy appetites, easy to go with the flow of my dark thoughts and easy to go with the tide of popular opinion...but choosing the path of least resistance leads to sure emptiness and acute unhappiness. Sadly the things we seek freedom in end up enslaving us. An extreme example tells the tale. The drug addict becomes enslaved to a habit that initially promised freedom. The same is true of sex, materialism, success, etc. etc. Selfishness is the root of all unhappiness. Pleasure-seeking is the door to all bondage.

True nobility means choosing a way of life above easy. Courage means doing what's right...doing what's true. A sense of meaning and purpose stems not from choosing the easy way to live but from blazing a trail despite the opposition.

I choose to be a Christian despite how tough life can be. I am a follower of Christ because He makes sense. Even though being a Christian does not remove my problems; it does give me the courage to face my problems and the power to overcome them. I am a follower of Christ because even though He doesn't smooth out all the lumps and bumps in life's path, He enables me to be more focused on helping others than in living in the prison of self-absorption. A life all about me is a very small life to live.

Following Jesus does not guarantee you the American Dream and untold wealth. Following Jesus, and applying His wisdom to our lives, does enable us to live from a place of inner peace and freedom to enjoy life and the adventure we are given in Christ. And this quality of life is not dependent on how fat our bank account is.

Please don't get me wrong. God uses many of His followers to influence the business world and other spheres of society with their gifts and skills. And He entrusts many of His followers to administrate large sums of money. But they do not live dependent on money nor is it the source of their worth. They deliberately live free from making their fortune their god by proactively helping the less fortunate and administrating their finances to further Jesus' cause through the vehicle of the church.

Thus I do not base my faith on the performance of other Christians or on how I think God is entitled to help me get what I want. If I did my faith would be quickly shipwrecked on the rocks of disappointment and misplaced expectations. But there are at least three reasons why I am a Christian. Are you ready for some blatant honesty?

I am a Christian because...

...the beauty on this planet speaks of a Creator.

From the telescopic awesomeness of the cosmos to the microscopic genius of the atom, creation testifies of a Creator's design. This article is not intended to be a scientific document so I won't bore you. But numerous notable astronomers and scientists have been gob-smacked by the clear evidence of design in the universe.

But we don't need telescopes and microscopes to come to these conclusions.

We look at a sunset and our minds are filled with the beauty and glory of the moment.

We look into the face of our children and our hearts are moved with the innocence and gift of life.

In these moments we know life is more than skin and bones...there is something beyond mere existence...something Divine.

We know God is not in the tree or in the rainbow – and that He is not the tree or we're really in trouble – but their beauty reveals His distinct finger-print in our world. We know we are not God – mankind's tendency to abuse and exploit testifies to that in shameful ways – but our potential for such incredible goodness and love reveals His touch in our soul.

One early follower of Christ said: "God has revealed His existence through His creation. When we see the earth and the sky and all He has made, we can see aspects of His Personality*". He then went on to explain that God did this for one reason: so that we would yearn to meet the Creator of all this beauty. To only admire the beauty of the creation and reject the invitation to meet in person the Creator never made sense to me. I accepted the invitation and can now testify that the beauty of creation is but a hint to the awesomeness of the One who created it.

*Paraphrase of Romans 1:19, 20

I am a Christian because...

...the chaos in our world confirms that mankind has fallen.

When you consider the potential of human beings...the incredible ability to do good...the capacity to be noble and heroic...to be kind and caring...only the Bible's account of the fall of man explains why human beings consistently use this capacity to do wrong...to be selfish...to hoard...to abuse...and to exploit.

Even science confirms our fall. On the first day a child is born into this world, he is actively trying to manipulate the adults in his world. While this is an act of survival rather than wicked intention, every parent knows we need to teach our children to "do good". We don't need to teach our children to be selfish...they manage just fine without our help.

The chaos we see in our world confirms the Biblical story but also points to a Divine hope. I no longer despair at the corruption I see in our world today. I no longer become depressed when I read of the wickedness in our world. I understand that it is the inevitable result and consequence of man's fall from glory. But in it I see hope. I can choose to bring order and hope into my world...to strike a match in the darkness...and it is the inspirational life and teachings of Jesus that moves me to try.

In most moments of human greatness...true greatness that brought freedom to the oppressed and dignity to the downtrodden...one will find the inspiration of Jesus. One example is Mahatma Gandhi. Although he struggled with the prejudiced, institutional church of his day, he attributed his life's work in liberating his people from colonial oppression to the life and teachings of Jesus. From people like Mother Theresa to the countless thousands of unknown Christ-followers; those who add to the world are those who acknowledge their fallen tendency to take from it and choose, with Christ's help, to swim upstream.

Again an early follower of Christ said: "We all misuse our God-given capacity for good to accomplish our own selfish ends. To use this potential for good is only possible through the transformed life that Jesus Christ makes available"*. Although I continue to fight my tendency to use my God-given potential for self-gain, I now enjoy the power that Christ gives me to be free from chronic introspection as I do my part to upgrade our world.

*Paraphrases of Romans 3:23; 6:23.

I am a Christian because...

...I have to admit that I cannot help myself.

It does not take a rocket scientist to look at the chaos in our world today and say, "The world needs Divine help". But it does take courage and humility to look into your own heart and say, "I need God".

If I am honest with myself...and this is not easy for me to do...then I have to admit that I have tried just about everything to fill the hole in my own soul...and found it only increased my darkness. As I have pursued true happiness and tried to find meaning in this life I have had a few moments of fun...a moment here or there where I thought I had found something. But it never lasted long...it actually served only to tease me...to dangle that illusive carrot, making more acute my hopelessness.

As much as I hate to admit it, I...need help. I cannot help myself. Of course, I can use my talents and abilities to achieve something. I can go back to study and get another degree. I can try to pick up my sports career and win a few trophies. I can start a few businesses and with enough graft and sweat make some money. I can use my current friendships and when I've squeezed everything I can get from them, I could reinvent myself and seek a new, fresh circle of friends that I can use. There is a lot I can do. But I have to admit that there is nothing I can do to fill the hole in my heart. I cannot scratch the itch deep in my own soul. Like you, I have tried...everything. In fact, much of our lives consist of an internal driving force to do just this.

As one ancient prophet explained: "All of our good intentions and sincere efforts simply cannot change the way we are"*.

To find relief starts with me admitting, "I need help". Then this acknowledgement must evolve into the realisation that "I need help **from above**". No relationship, possession or accomplishment can help me. "I really do need help from above". Again, this is not a confession of the weak; this is the acknowledgement of the courageous and the smart. Nothing is sadder than an alcoholic who refuses to acknowledge his problem when his addiction has driven his loved ones to hate him. And I realised that nothing could be more foolish than if I failed to admit my need for Divine help when the ache within my heart screamed so loud.

*Paraphrase of Isaiah 64:6.

There we have it. Three reasons why I am a Christian:

Because the beauty on this planet speaks of a Creator.

Because the chaos in our world confirms that mankind has fallen.

Because I have to admit that I cannot help myself.

So what do we do now? Having come to the conclusion above, how did I respond?

Well it began with answering one rather simple question, actually two simple questions:

How did I become the way I am, in the words of the Bible, a sinner...one who consistently misuses God's potential for good for selfish gain?

Was it because I disobeyed my parents? Or spoke badly to my brother? Or was it when I entertained dark thoughts about another? Or perhaps when I cheated on an exam or harboured hatred against others? Or maybe when I drank too much or exercised too little? When exactly did I cross the line into the dark side? Ready for the answer?

I became a sinner when I was born. I was born into a fallen race. And then I confirmed my allegiance to fallen humanity by proving just how fallen I was too. When given the opportunity to use my God-given potential for good I chose to use it to advance my cause, to build my dreams and to fulfil my wants. I would not have classified myself as an evil person. Hey, I did a little good. And I certainly was not Hitler. But I had to admit that I was more Hitler-like than God-like when provoked or rejected. I was born a sinner.

Now to the question that changed my life.

How do I shed my tendency to sin...how do I receive this help from above I realise I need? What do I have to do? Pray a special prayer? Do some charitable deeds? Give some money? Read the Bible? The answer is no, no, no and no! Ready for the answer that may change your life in the way it changed mine?

I was born a sinner and only a ***new birth*** could change me. I needed to start again...different somehow. I needed to be born again.

And in fact, this is exactly the metaphor Jesus used when He was once asked how we could be free from our fallen nature. He said: **“Unless you are born again you cannot find help from above”***. Of course, He was not literally referring to being born again; He was speaking figuratively. Just for the record: you do not have to now wear the “Born Again” label, put a fish sticker on your car, become conceited over night and say “Hallelujah” every thirty seconds. Gee, these awful clichés could not be further from what Jesus intended. If they make you a little sick then join the club!

*Paraphrase of John 3:3.

Jesus used this “born again” metaphor to explain just how radical this internal revolution of our heart was to be. On the one hand, following Jesus is not just about making a few tweaks and adjustments to our old life. If we acknowledge we need help from above, then we must silence our tendency to want to decide what help we need and how it should be done for us. We must, to use Jesus’ analogy, be born again. I had to recognize my need for help and for the guidance He gives to take the baby-steps into a way of living new to me. We must humble ourselves to receive the help God gives on His terms not ours.

On the other hand, following Jesus is not just about adding Christianity to our already congested life. Let’s be honest, if you live in the twenty-first century, your plate is too full already. Your to-do list is too long; your schedule too busy. We must, to use Jesus’ analogy, be born again. I needed to redefine life in its entirety. I needed to go back to the beginning and to rethink what I do and why I do it. Jesus is not an attachment to our schedule, He now defines our schedule. If we acknowledge that we need help from above, then we must allow Him to lead and guide us...not in a few things...but in everything.

And because my God-given capacity for good has been unlocked from the prison of the old, self-absorbed life, I find it tremendously helpful to pray, to serve, to give and to study the Bible. I don’t do these things to break the shackles of the old life. Already free, I do them to explain and enhance how I can best maximize the new life I now have in Christ.

As stated, being born again is a metaphor expressing the necessary overhaul of our soul required. If it sounds painful; it is, in the sense that it will cost us our pride, our selfishness, our independence. But we all know that anything of true value has its price. And the cost must be compared to the worth of the object purchased and the consequence of failing to make the purchase. I for one can testify that it was a pleasure to lose my selfish pride and arrogant independence to gain a personal relationship with God and through this, experience the victory, peace, freedom and joy of a transformed life.

On hindsight, it really was a small price to pay.

I gave up the rights to my little, puny life...

...and received the privilege of relationship with God Himself...invited to join Him in a grand adventure.

I am not the same.

For the record:

Where did the term “Christian” come from?

The word “Christian” was actually coined in around AD 40 in Antioch, a thriving city in the Roman Province of Asia Minor. It was first used as a derogatory term by non-Christians to ridicule those who followed the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. During the growing persecution of the early church by the oppressive Roman Empire, non-Christians looked to distance themselves from followers of Christ and came up with this term (Greek: *christianos*), meaning “like Christ” or “Christ-follower”. However, those who followed Jesus embraced the term as a badge of honour and filled it with every true and heroic virtue that characterized Christ Himself. For example, one Roman Emperor, in exasperation, testified: “These Christians don’t just look after their own poor; they look after our poor as well!”

Today the word “Christian” tends to describe someone who claims association with the doctrinal statements of the Christian faith. This cheapens the word and makes Christianity an intellectual philosophy that gives rise to unnecessary argument and debate. The word should be associated with a person’s reverence for God and grateful response to His love which becomes evident in his or her compassion for all people and selfless service in the world.

As one man proclaimed: “It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting; it is that true Christianity has seldom been tried at all”.

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