

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Why I am a Christian

Reading *Why I Am a Catholic*, by Garry Wills (Houghton Mifflin, 2002), his account of how he arrived at his present views about his church and his relationship to it, has made me think about why I'm a member of the United Methodist Church. In next month's *Connections* I'll write about that.



Thinking about why I'm a United Methodist led me to think also about why I'm a Christian—how I became one and why I'm still one. The Christmas season, when we're surrounded by reminders of the birth of Jesus, may be an especially good time for all of us who are Christians to think about why we're Christians, so I'm passing on some of my thoughts about it here. If you're a Christian, I



hope what I'm saying here will help you take a fresh look at some of your own reasons for following the Christ who shows us God's love and justice. That's harder than merely loving the sweet baby Jesus of the Christmas story, I find.

A Christian because "everyone" was

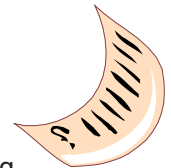
My main reason for becoming a Christian was being born into a churchgoing Christian family. When I was growing up, not only my parents and grandparents but also nearly everyone else I knew were Christians. Being anything else never occurred to me. Having a choice never occurred to me.

I don't believe being born in the midst of Christians rather than Buddhists or Hindus was a special favor God chose to give me, letting me be born into the



What makes someone a Christian?

I recently heard a member of the Hopi tribe give a talk that was essentially a spiritual autobiography. During it, he gave his hearers a list of the main aims of the Hopi religion, almost all of which I felt most Christians would also accept as valid goals to aim for. To my surprise, however, he said at the end of his talk, "I am not Hopi. I am just trying to become Hopi."



A Christian, or just trying to become one?



I wondered if that would also apply to being a Christian. If being a Christian requires doing all that Jesus modeled and taught, then none of us are Christian. At best, we're just trying to become Christian.

Some Christians say that the test of whether someone is a Christian and thus is saved from going to hell is whether he or she has made a personal statement of belief in Jesus Christ and has invited Jesus into his or her life. Others say accepting a particular group of beliefs about Jesus—especially his virgin birth, physical resurrection, and substitutionary atonement—is essential. I find it hard to believe, however, that making a particular statement or accepting a particular group of interpretations about Jesus is a requirement for being a Christian.

Others say what counts is being "born again" — having a powerful one-time experience of God's presence. To me, however, seeing continual evidence of God's presence and call, and continuing to grow and mature in faith, seems much more important than having had a compelling experience in the past.



Are words or actions the test?

I'm inclined to think that what makes someone Christian is trying to follow Jesus because Jesus shows what God is like. In my view, the question of whether we're Christian or not is answered more convincingly by actions than by words or by a so-called conversion experience. What do you think determines whether a person is or isn't a Christian?

one religion whose beliefs are right instead of some other religion whose beliefs are wrong. If I'd been born in a different country or a different kind of family, I'd most likely have become a member of whatever religion was practiced there, instead of a Christian, and I believe that would have been equally okay with God.



Two main requirements

Until mid-life I assumed that being a Christian was rather easy. It seemed virtually automatic because, as far as I could tell, it simply required following the conventional pattern that was followed by most people I knew. I saw the requirements for being a Christian as mainly these two.

◆ Being active in a church.

This meant being baptized, being a church member, attending Sunday School and “church” (worship) every Sunday unless I was sick or out of town, doing all the expected church jobs and taking my turn at holding the offices in whatever church groups I was in, and paying my share of church expenses. It also included vaguely believing what I was aware



that the Bible said and whatever else the church's official beliefs seemed to include. When I “joined the church,” however, and for many years after that, I wasn't even aware of some of the doctrines that all church members are assumed to have accepted.

◆ Being sweet and nice.

This included having good manners and being polite, kind, honest, neat and clean, well educated, never angry, and diligent, dutiful, and industrious rather than lazy. Being nice essentially meant following all the rules and customs that the people around me considered important. It also vaguely included being a good citizen and a patriot, supporting whatever my country did.



“You'll see when you get older”

Once in a while as I was growing up I questioned or mildly objected to some part of this pattern, when

some part of it didn't fully make sense to me or seem really necessary. On the rare occasions when I did that, however, my mother always replied, “Well, when you get older you will see why this is the right way.” Because she was my mother I assumed she was right about that, as about everything else, so I pushed my questions and doubts to the back of my mind and kept quiet about them from then on.



A surprising change

Mid-life changed that pattern. When my mother was eighty and I was fifty, I finally realized that her advice about waiting until I got older was never going to work. I wasn't ever going to be as old as she was. It's hard for me to believe that catching onto that took me so long, but it did.

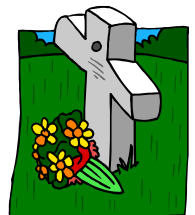
By mid-life, my doubts and questions would no longer stay in the back of my mind. They were rising up and demanding attention. I started reevaluating many of my ways of thinking, including my religious beliefs and what I observed about the church.



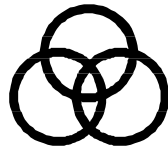
In the years since then, I've acknowledged the questions, doubts, and nonconforming thoughts as they arose. I've kept reading and thinking about the subjects those questions related to. That has made me take a harder look at what I believe being a Christian really requires, and also at my own church and others. It has kept me speaking up about those subjects, too.

Still a Christian but no longer passive

As a result, I'm still a Christian but no longer just an automatic, passive one. I'm still a Christian but not because I think Christianity is the only route to God. I'm quite sure it's not. I'm still a Christian but not because I think that unless I've passed the test for being a real Christian (whatever that test may be) I will go to hell when I die. I feel sure that plenty of people from all religions and from none will end up in heaven, which I don't believe is a place in the sky. And I believe that being a Christian has more to do with what we do while we're alive than with what happens when we die.



God by any name is God



In addition, I don't believe that Christianity and other religions worship different Gods. When Christians claim, as I've heard many do, that Muslims or members of some other religion worship a different God from ours, that makes no sense to me. If, as we claim, there is only one God, how can anyone be worshipping another one? Other religions may attribute some different characteristics to God from those that Christians attribute to God, making us believe that those religions are mistaken about what God is like, but if there's only one God there's no other God for anyone to worship.



Because Christianity is the religion I happened to be born into and have spent so many years in, its ways of portraying God and worshipping God are the ways in which I can best conceive of God and worship God. However, I don't believe those are the only valid ways. I don't believe that we Christians know all there is to know about God, that we have the only legitimate ways of worshipping God, or that our words are the only legitimate words for God. If what we claim about God is true, then God is infinitely more than we can ever fully know or describe. In addition, God undoubtedly communicates with all people, using whatever languages and methods will reach them.

I'm still a Christian not only because its ways of seeing God have become my ways, but also because I believe that the love and

... What does [God] require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
—Micah 6:8

justice taught and modeled by Jesus are ways in which God wants all people to treat each other. I don't believe, however, that Christianity is the only religion that advocates Christ-like love and justice, even though Jesus may be the prime example of that kind of love and justice.

Being Christian means more than being a churchgoer



I no longer see participation in an institutional church as the main requirement for being a Christian. I don't see it, either, as something that automatically makes someone a Christian. Although I believe only God can say who is really following Jesus Christ and who isn't, I suspect that some people in the church aren't and some people who aren't in the church are.

Unfortunately it's fairly easy to spend a lifetime participating actively in a church without ever revising or even very thoroughly examining one's understanding of God. It's easy to be in the church for years without ever coming to notice the injustices that exist not only in the world but also in the church itself, and to begin actively working to promote justice. As churchgoers we can get by with giving lip-service to Christian principles that we aren't willing to act on.



Faithful Christians aren't always sweet

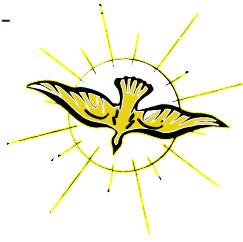
Along with no longer seeing mere church participation as equivalent with being a Christian, I no longer see being sweet and nice and following social rules and customs as what being a Christian requires. In fact, I believe that practicing the kind of love and justice Jesus taught and modeled sometimes requires breaking widely accepted social rules and customs.

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers voluntarily make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

In church we often sing sentimentally about the “sweet, sweet Spirit,” and the “sweet expressions on each face” that the Holy Spirit causes, but the Holy Spirit’s action is often far from sweet. It can be fierce, demanding, critical, challenging, and even terrifying.



What has led you to your beliefs?

If you’re a Christian, what led you to become one? What’s your reason for remaining one? If you’re a churchgoer, what keeps you going? What led you to

become a member of the denomination you’re in? What leads you to stay in it? What do you see as its most important features?

What do you think determines whether someone is or isn’t a Christian? Is it mainly what the person says or fails to say about what he or she believes? Or do the person’s actions and their results—their “fruits”—matter more? Or is something else what matters? Good questions to ask at Christmas.



Barbara

Why I am a Christian

December 2003

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven ... ”
—Matthew 7:21

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
—John 13:34-35



“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”
—Mark 3:35

[Jesus] asked [his disciples] “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They answered, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.”
—Luke 9:18-20

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. ... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ... Thus you will know them by their fruits.”

—Matthew 7:16