

My Story...

One of the things I struggle with is how to share my faith in Christ with people I care for without coming off as a fanatic, or making people feel uncomfortable. However, if I don't share, I'm not telling about the one thing in life which, if true, matters more than all else, knowing God. So, as friend to friend, I'd like to explain why I am a Christian. I know I run the risk of offending, or being misunderstood, although I hope not. If you feel offended, or have questions, please feel free to call or email me.

Being both a photographer and a hospice chaplain (working with the terminally ill), I view the world differently than most. I see both beauty and heartache. I also see how important genuine faith is in facing death. My heart grieves for those who come to the end of life unprepared, with no forethought of where they will spend eternity.

With this in mind, I invite you to consider the claims of Jesus Christ afresh. Please do not judge him by the religion some people have made through the use or misuse of his name. Christianity stands or falls on the person of Jesus alone.

In high school I quit church. I wrote most Christians off as either nerds, eccentrics, or hypocrites. One summer out bailing hay, a preacher's kid asked what I was doing Saturday night. I said, "Nothing." He then invited me to a Christian youth rally. I thought, "Oh shoot!"—The last thing I wanted to do was go with him, but I didn't have an excuse not to go, so I went. It was there, for the first time in my life, I met some Christians who totally blew my stereotype of Christians. They didn't dress or act weird, and they had something I didn't have: inner peace. So, I kept going back.—Later that summer, I prayed and invited Christ into my life. To my amazement, it worked. God's peace flooded through me. Old feelings of guilt were gone, and I had an inner sense of God's presence. In the days that followed, the Bible seemed to come alive. It finally made sense. I also began to see God answer prayer.

Once, on a gravel road near the farm where I worked, I was driving a pickup load of wheat up a hill approaching a blind intersection. Rather than slow down and lose my momentum, I did a foolish thing. I thought the odds of my being hit were nil, so I floorboarded the accelerator. It was as though God [or an angel] reached in and turned off the ignition. I had never had the pickup stall on me before. As it did, a huge truck loaded with wheat zipped in front of me going about 50 miles an hour. Had my engine not died, I would have been splattered all over the road.

About a mile down the road, on the same trip, my heart still pounding, I was coming up over the crest of a hill when a voice, not my own, said, "Pull over." It startled me, but it was unmistakable, "Pull over!" As I pulled to the far right, a car

from the other direction came blasting over the top of the hill in the middle of the road. Had I not pulled over I am convinced I would have been hit. Twice, within minutes, God had spared my life.

When I went to college I found myself wondering whether Christianity could hold its own intellectually. With real fear, I must confess, I began to ask the hardest questions of my life, "Is it possible that I have been deceived? Could all my Christian experiences be explained psychologically?"

Some think of Christianity as escapism or as pie in the sky. The real issue, of course, is whether it is true. Is there really pie in the sky? To say, "There is a tunnel under this prison" may be an escapist idea, but it may also be true. So how can one know whether God exists and if Christianity is true?—Let me share my conclusions after much reading and questioning.

First, concerning the existence of God, I once asked a recovering alcoholic if he went to A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous]. He said, "No, I don't believe all that God stuff." His wife, who was sitting beside him, said, "You should believe in God!" He responded, "I don't believe there is a God." At that point I couldn't resist, so I said, "I think there is an easy way to prove to you there is a God." I said, "See that picture?" [He looked at a painting on the wall.] "Would you believe me if I said there was an explosion at a paint factory, and it blew paint everywhere, and just by chance made that painting?" He said, "No." I asked, "Why not?" He said, "It couldn't happen." I responded, "So, whenever you see design, there is usually a designer, or when you see art, there is usually an artist, right?" He said, "Yeah." Then I asked, "When you look at Cindy Crawford, the supermodel, or an Arabian stallion, a rose, a kitten, a butterfly, or a New England Fall, do they look like something the universe puked out by accident, or do you see design?" He paused and said, "Design." I said, "Then there must be a Designer, and that is God." He said, "####, you got me!"

Concerning this God, there are a lot of religions and people saying what God is or is not like, and whether or not he even exists. The only One who can say for sure whether God exists, and what God is like, is God. As simple as this is, it is an important point to grasp. Only God can give the final word on himself.

Suppose one day a man [Jesus] walked this earth claiming to be God, saying that he was "THE way...THE truth...THE life" [John 14:6-10, emphasis mine]. This is something that could be tested empirically, historically. Any man saying he was God would be one of three things: psychotic (delusions of grandeur), a liar (con artist), or God.

Yet, this is precisely what the Bible teaches about Jesus; that he is God-become-man. Virtually every major name used to describe God in the Old Testament is used of Jesus in the New Testament: "God" [John 1:1,14]; "Yahweh" [John 8:58; cf. Exodus 3:14]; "Lord" [Acts 10:36]; "Creator" [Hebrews

1:1,2; Colossians 1:16-18]; "Savior" [Titus 2:13]; "King of kings" [Revelation 19:16]; "Alpha and the Omega" [Revelation 22:12-16]; "Holy One" [Acts 3:14,15]; "Forgiver Of Sins" [Mark 2:1-12]; "Lord of the Sabbath" [John 5:18]; etc. To say that Jesus was just a good teacher, assuming he claimed to be God, would be out of the question. He would either be much more than a "good teacher" [i.e., God], or much less [i.e., a liar or a lunatic].

C.S. Lewis wrote, "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." [Mere Christianity, MacMillan Pub., N.Y.]

If Jesus was/is God then he can state the truth about God [himself], and the only way to have a right relationship with God. Like it or not, if he was/is God then he could make such statements. That is why Christianity is such an exclusive religion, and why Christians seem so narrowminded. We believe Jesus spoke as God, and must be obeyed as God.

Let me summarize some of the major evidences that Jesus was telling the truth. You be the judge.

1. The first is Jesus' character. No single human being who has ever lived from the beginning of time has so powerfully affected life upon this earth as Jesus of Nazareth. His teachings are profound. [If you have never read the New Testament, a good place to begin would be with the Gospels of John or Luke.] It is hard to read the account of Jesus' life and teachings and maintain that He was either a liar or a lunatic.

2. The second is the historical evidence for his rising from the dead. If anyone could disprove the resurrection, they could disprove Christianity. However, to do so, they would have to explain what happened to his mutilated body, how the tomb, which was guarded by Roman soldiers, got empty, why over 500 people claimed to have seen him physically alive, and several other equally difficult questions.

3. The third major piece of evidence is the documented accounts of Jesus' miracles from both Christian and non-Christian sources. If Jesus is God-the-Creator, then for him to heal someone, or calm a stormy sea, would be no big deal, but only a minor repeat of what he did when he created the universe.

4. Fourth, is the trustworthiness of the eyewitnesses. If you can't trust them, you might as well throw out the first three pieces of evidence. According to tradition, of the original twelve disciples, not counting Judas, all of the disciples were killed for their faith in the resurrected Christ, except John, who

was thrown into boiling oil but lived.—Would you knowingly die for a lie? (Neither would they!) Further, they passed on to the world its highest moral and ethical teachings. It doesn't make sense that these teachings would have been founded upon deception.

Plus, in the gospel accounts, the disciples don't cast themselves in a favorable light, as one would expect if they were making up the story. They record their own bickerings, Peter's denial, their cowardice, etc. Yet, these Jews, who only believe in one God, the one religion in all the world least likely to entertain such beliefs about God becoming man, spoke of the glory and sinlessness of Jesus, called him "Lord" and "God" [e.g., John 20:28], and "worshipped" him [Matthew 28:9,17].

5. Fifth, is the reliability of the Bible as a historical document. There are over 24,600 partial or complete manuscripts of the New Testament in either Greek or Latin. The second best documented manuscript of antiquity is *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer. It has around 600 manuscripts. Even if all of the New Testament manuscripts were destroyed, we could still reconstruct all of the New Testament, with the exception of about eleven verses, from the writings of the early church fathers before the year 325 A.D. Even non-Christian historians have to admit that by all scientific, archaeological, and historical standards applied to any ancient manuscript, the New Testament we have is over 99.9 percent reliable.

6. Sixth, is the testimony of believers. There are many people of every age, nationality, social class, or century, like myself, who say they have experienced the living Christ. The accounts of restored lives, answers to prayer, healed bodies, and other evidences are hard, if not impossible, to explain unless Christ is alive.

7. The last major piece of evidence is prophecy. There were many prophecies in the Bible which foretold Messiah's [Christ's] first coming, including where he was to be born [Micah 5:2], that he would die having his hands and feet pierced [Psalm 22:16; cf., Isaiah 53; Zechariah 12:10], and even the exact week and year Messiah [Christ] would die. [Daniel 9:25,26—To understand these prophecies, or any of my other previous points, I recommend Josh McDowell's book, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, Vol. 1.]

How could the Bible predict such astounding things hundreds of years in advance unless Jesus was/is who he claims? With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain major portions of the Old Testament predating the time of Christ, we can now prove that these prophecies were indeed written before the events they foretold.

Ultimately, no matter how much evidence I, or anyone else, presents for Christianity, the final step is one of faith, even though there is solid evidence upon which to base that faith. For example, I can't prove that Napoleon lived, but I can show overwhelming evidence that he did. By faith I believe

Napoleon lived, and by faith I believe Christianity is true—based on evidence and the fact that it works.

A simple way for you to test the truthfulness of what I've said is for you to honestly seek God on his terms [as best you understand], with a willingness to follow the truth, whatever you discover. Then either way, you win. If you encounter God, you win. If you conclude that all this God stuff is a hoax, then party and screw around all you want. You can live life however you please—until they bury you. Not to seek God is to gamble with your soul. Not to decide is the same as saying "No."

The story is told of a young woman who received a phone call at 2:00 A.M. from the emergency room of a hospital stating that her dad was deathly ill and may only have hours to live. She threw on some clothes, jumped in her car, and began speeding the 200 miles she had to drive to see her father. As she was going through a small town, she looked in her rear view mirror, and there was a police car chasing her. Because she was going so fast, the officer didn't merely give her a ticket, he arrested her. The next day she appeared before the judge who told her that for going 50 miles per hour above the speed limit, her fine would be \$300 or three days in jail.

She pleaded with the judge: "Your honor, you don't understand. My father is dying, and when I left home, I forgot my money. The judge said, "I'm sorry, young lady, but the law says you must pay \$300 or spend three days in jail."

She began to weep. For some reason, it touched the old judge's heart. To the surprise of everyone in the court, he stood up, stepped down from the bench, took off his robe, put on his sports coat, walked around in front of the bench, pulled out his checkbook, wrote a check for \$300, and laid it on the bench. Then he put back on his robe, and resumed his seat. He said, "Young lady, the law says you must pay \$300 or spend three days in jail, but I see someone has paid the fine for you. Case dismissed!"

In essence, this is what the Bible says God did for us. God took off his robe of deity, entered this world in the person of Jesus Christ [Philippians 2:6-11], and died to pay a fine we could not pay, which was death [Romans 3:23; 5:8; 6:23]. The good news is that if we receive his gift of salvation [John 1:12], when we stand before God on the day of judgment, we will be standing before the one who died for us.—"Case dismissed!" [Romans 4:7,8; Ephesians 2:8,9; I John 4:16-18; 5:11-13.]

If you still have doubts about what I've said, you might pray something like this, "Dear Jesus, if you're there, and what Bart says is true, please show me. Give me the courage to know and accept the truth."—Praying this prayer will not make you a Christian, but it is an honest start.

If you already know and feel in your heart that what I have said is true, please don't procrastinate. Life is short, and eternal

issues are at stake. I have worked with hundreds of dying patients. There is an undeniable peace I see in those who know the Lord and have lived their lives for him. While some may find Christ on their death beds [better late than never], how much better to have known the love of Christ for a lifetime, to have lived with a sense of purpose and destiny.

The night I became a Christian I prayed a prayer like this: "Dear Lord Jesus, I thank you for loving me. I am sorry for the sin, pride, and lack of trust that has kept me from you. I believe you died on the cross and rose again to pay for my sin. As best as I know how, right now, I invite you to come into my life. Forgive me of my sin, and make me the person you want me to be. Calm my fears, carry my burdens, and open my heart to receive your love. Thank you for hearing this prayer. Amen."

If you have never asked Christ into your life, or you are not sure, I encourage you to do so now. The words of this prayer are not magical. The important thing is that they come from the heart.

Once you receive Christ, I encourage you to find a loving church where the Bible is both honored and taught. Shop around, pray, and let God's Spirit lead you to the one that feels right for you [Colossians 3:15]. Get baptized, read the Bible, and pray daily. Also, sink your teeth into some good Christian books.

If I did not believe these things to be true, and that they are of utmost importance, I wouldn't have risked sharing with you. Again, I will gladly discuss any of these issues with you. If you choose not to, that is ok. It will not affect my side of the friendship. May his grace and peace be yours.

With love and respect,

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