

Christians at the Roundtable of World Religions
“Why Am I a Christian?”
Mark 1:4-11

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Christian theologian C.S. Lewis once said that Christianity is a religion that you could not have guessed. It is not the sort of thing that anyone would make up. That the Almighty would humble Himself and become a human being in order to suffer and die on a cross to bring new life to His own creation, well, who would have thought it? How odd of God. Yet, it is here that Christians are distinct from other religions of the world.

So, I want to begin this series of sermons on world religions by asking myself a personal question. Why am I a Christian? I invite you to entertain that question too.

I AM A CHRISTIAN BECAUSE I WAS BORN INTO A CHRISTIAN FAMILY.

In Psalm 139, the psalmist says, *“God created our innermost being. He knitted us together in our mother’s womb.”*

I don’t believe in predestination. I don’t easily march to the beat of anybody’s drum. I like the concept of free will. But recently I’ve come to realize that I am not as free as I thought I was. I didn’t ask to be born. I didn’t choose my relatives. While my parents were far from perfect, they believed in God, and dedicated themselves to the mission of making their children believers.

People ask me how I became a minister. Jokingly I reply, “If you were pinned against a hot, tin roof on a sultry, summer day with the awful smell of tobacco consuming you every breath, you would get a calling to something too.”

At the tender age of 17, I declared myself a candidate for the ministry. Thirty-eight years later, I discovered from a former pastor that my mother made a deal with God about my vocation when I was only five. I did not choose the ministry; the ministry chose me!

I have the highest regard for those who came to Christ differently than I. At times I’ve envied their dramatic conversions. Some, like Paul of old, have been knocked off their high horses of self-centeredness by the dramatic light of Christ. Some, like C.S. Lewis, have reasoned their way to faith. Others, like Johnny Cash, have had a godly wife who would not let them go. God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. I am a Christian because I’ve never been anything else.

I AM A CHRISTIAN BECAUSE I’VE BEEN NURTURED IN A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

By the waters of baptism I was initiated into Christ’s Holy Church. I’ve been

claimed and cleansed in a community of faith. I've been affirmed and acknowledged by a denomination of people. It was the Church that communicated the Holy Spirit's message, "You are my son, whom I love, and with you I am well pleased." The Church has provided me a place to be, a place to belong, a place to become what I was created to be.

No church is perfect. If it were, you and I could not belong to it. The body of Christ has its warts. Congregations have faults. The little country church of my childhood gave me a foundation of faith. A little group of farmers up in Bardstown, where I served as student pastor, refused to let me drop out of seminary, even though none of them had been to college. Through the years, when I have faltered and fell, embarrassing myself and others, caring people would not let me go. When I got "too big for my britches" as my daddy would say, my superiors have been there to cut me down to size. After forty-two years of standing in a pulpit almost every Sunday, it's not what I have given to the Church, but what the Church has given to me that causes me to rejoice.

I AM A CHRISTIAN BECAUSE I CONFESS JESUS CHRIST AS MY LORD AND SAVIOR.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). I knew those words long before I understood their meaning. In fact, after two seminary degrees and a lifetime of ministry, I'm still not sure I can grasp the wonder of it all.

When I first professed faith in Christ as an eleven-year-old kid, living ten miles from the nearest sin, I was more interested in friendship than forgiveness, acceptance than atonement. What I found was a deep, abiding, long lasting understanding of friendship of a divine kind.

When I'm scared, I sing. I figure my singing will even cause the devil to run. When I can't remember the words to a song, I just make up my own as I go along. Back in 1997, when I first started this battle with cancer, I was laying on a gurney in the hallway of a hospital, half-naked, for what seemed like an eternity. With the hopes and fears of future years flashing through my mind, I began to sing:

My God and I go down this road together,
We walk and talk, as good friends should do,
He clasps my hand as I shiver in the shadows,
My God and I are going to see this through.

All other religions place salvation on the shoulders of human beings. If we try hard enough, pray long enough, keep coming back often enough, we will eventually find God. Christians say we cannot save ourselves. So, we let Christ do it for us. Salvation is a gift of God's grace. I thank God daily that I've had the sense to receive it.

I AM A CHRISTIAN BECAUSE I BELIEVE CHRIST IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE.

Christ is the way! There is an exclusive interpretation to that statement. *"If you*

confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). The early Church formula still has merit, but not exclusive merit.

There is also an inclusive interpretation of that statement. Christ is the way for those who have never heard. Romans 2:14: *“Gentiles, who have no law, follow the law written on their hearts which will defend them on the Day of Judgment.”*

Christ is the way for those who practice the faith they have. Romans 4:3 states: *“Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.”* Christ is the way for the chosen ones. In Romans 11:26 Paul says, *“All Israel will be saved.”*

Without surrendering to pluralism or universalism, some of us believe that there is “wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea and that there is a kindness in God’s justice, which is more than liberty.”

Christ is the truth! Seventy-five years ago, E. Stanley Jones was a missionary in India. His approach to evangelism was a roundtable discussion where all religions were represented. His approach was founded on these convictions: all religions share a common search for God, there is some truth in all religions, you tell me your experiences of God and I will tell you mine.

In a world where we feel compelled to defend the faith, fight the foe, conquer evil, we might do well to remember that the Christian Crusades conquered Jerusalem and found in the end that Christ was not there.

Christ is the Life! On the one hand, life has us. She gives us what she wills. Buddhists say escape it. Hindu’s say keep coming back until you get it right. Muslim’s say it is the will of Allah, bear it. Christ says you have life. *“I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly”* (John 10:10). Turn your troubles into testimonies. Turn your miseries into ministry. Find grace sufficient for every situation. Peer into the grave and dare to say, *“O death, where is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.”*

Gandhi once said, “I might have become a Christian, but for the Christians that I have known.” O that we who call ourselves Christians, might become what we call ourselves!