

Wednesday, March 8, 2006

*Why Christianity Seems Silly to Intelligent People #5 of 5:*

## **If That's How Christians Act, Forget It!**

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One day a couple years ago, my wife smashed our car.  
So I filed for divorce.  
That makes sense, doesn't it?

My son Kristofer knows not to throw rocks in the pool,  
but one day he threw rocks in the pool.  
And he encouraged a couple of his friends to throw rocks in the pool along with him.  
So I arranged to have Kristofer executed at dawn.  
That's makes sense, doesn't it?

No, these wouldn't be the proper responses.

Smashing my car wasn't the right thing to do —  
but divorcing my wife is an inappropriate response to her inappropriate behavior.

Tossing rocks at the side of the house was not the proper behavior —  
but putting my kid up in front of the firing squad is an inappropriate response to his  
inappropriate behavior.

Any reasonable person wants to give the appropriate response in any given situation.

Today we want to look at our response to bad Christians, and see if our responses are  
appropriate.

Yes, there are some bad Christians in this world.

What's the thing that annoys you most about Christians?

I think this is a fair question.

But before we get too far down this road, we need to make sure we're actually talking  
about the same people.

We need to define a Christian.

See, some people call themselves Christians, but they really aren't.

They really don't want everything Christianity entails; they just want some of the things  
that Christianity includes —

or they want to be thought of as Christians.

But they haven't actually become Christians.

Because they don't understand that **Christianity** isn't a religion — it's a relationship.  
It's a **two-way commitment**.

Here's how it works:

**First, Jesus committed himself to me.**

The Bible says God's perfect, and we're not.

We fall short of God's standard, and we can't possibly make ourselves good enough to satisfy his perfect standard.

We need help.

But Jesus said, I love them.

I'll trade places with them.

I'll take their shortcomings, and I'll give them my perfection.

The Bible says in the Book of **Romans, chapter 5**, that we're powerless to help ourselves, but Christ died for us anyway,

He took our place, took the worst possible punishment,

so no matter how bad we could be, he would have already paid the price for our sin.

Then it says, and I'll quote word for word, from **Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."**

Why did he die?

He took the punishment that we would have gotten at the end of our life because we would have fallen so far short of God's standard.

God said,

If people will accept this as a free gift, then as far as I am concerned, they're clean.

They can spend eternity with me.

Alive!

And that's what I want, God says, because I love them.

So that's the first part of this two-way commitment:

God committed himself to me, through Jesus Christ.

But then there's the second part of Christianity, this two-way commitment:

**I had to commit myself to Jesus.**

I had to say,

Yes, Jesus, I see how much you love me.

I'll take you up on your offer.

I recognize that I'm not up to God's standard,

and that I can't possibly make myself good enough to satisfy him.

But I'll let you trade places with me.

I'll trust you, Jesus, to do what needs to be done, so that I can be right with God.

Romans 5 tells me that if I've placed our faith in Christ's sacrifice, then I've been declared innocent.

It says (**Romans 5:1**), "...**We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**"

Now it's *that commitment* to Christ that by definition makes somebody a Christian. If somebody hasn't really made that commitment to Christ, then they're not really a Christian at all, and when they call themselves Christians — whether they do rotten things or good deeds — we can't expect God or any church to take responsibility for their actions.

If somebody comes to you and says I'm from IBM, I've got a computer for you, it's fabulous, here's a picture of it, here's what it does, I'll sell it to you for \$100, and you give him the \$100 and then never see him again, you'll call IBM and complain; and they'll say, Hey, sorry, that guy wasn't really from IBM. (Maybe he was from Apple, trying to give us a bad name, who knows?)

So for purposes of our discussion today, let's set aside those people who *pretend* to be Christians — those liars, charlatans, fakes, phonies, frauds, impostors, pretenders, creeps, jerks — Let's love them, let's pray for them... but let's not waste any more time on them.

Let's concentrate on *real* Christians.  
 People who have committed their lives to Christ.  
 People who are supposedly living by a different standard.  
 God's standard!  
 What about when real Christians are real clods?  
 What about when real Christians do really scoundrelly things?  
 What about when real Christians are really embarrassing?  
 How can anybody expect us to entrust our lives to Christ if people who have entrusted their lives to Christ are such nincompoops? (Can I say that word at The Compass?)

Do you remember the Jim Bakker/PTL scandal — that didn't deepen anybody's confidence in the Christian faith, did it?  
 The Jimmy Swaggart prostitution exposé — that didn't inspire anybody here to become a Christian, did it?  
 Shouldn't God or the Church be held responsible for what they did?

I was at a department store a little bit ago, on tight schedule, in a hurry, and the sales clerk was moving like this: (slowly!)  
 There was a lady ahead of me in line, and the clerk counted out the change like this: (slowly!)  
 Even then, she counted it out wrong, closed the cash register,  
 Of course it's one of those self-locking cash registers — so she had to call for a

manager to come with a key.  
 There's a phone right there, but she dials like this: (slowly!)  
 And then she says "Nancy ... come ... to ... reg - i - ster ... 2 ... please ...  
 Nancy ... reg - i - ster ... 2 ... please."  
 Then she smiles very sweetly at the customer.  
 And what am I thinking?  
 I will never walk into this store again!

At a certain McDonald's at a certain location in a certain community which shall remain  
 nameless,  
 if you drive through and order a Big Mac and a large fries with a small vanilla milkshake,  
 you can be pretty confident when you pull up to the window  
 you'll get a quarter-pounder and a small fries with a large Diet Coke.  
 What do I think when that happens?  
 I will never buy lunch at this McDonald's again!

The express lane at the grocery store.  
 Is it just my imagination, or do they always assign the express lane to the slowest  
 cashier in America?

I have a bad taste in my mouth for a certain high-speed Internet service provider here in  
 the area.  
 It is in fact the high-speed Internet service provider that hooked up the cable modem in  
 my home.  
 Why do I have a bad taste in my mouth?  
 Because the guy who handled my job was a great big class A jerk.

How responsible should the owners be for the employees?  
 How responsible should the teacher be for the students?  
 How responsible should the parent be for the children?

Let's face it, we can look around and see that there are good salespeople and bad  
 salespeople for every point of view.  
 And unfortunately, there *are* plenty of bad salespeople for the Christian point of view.

One day when my children were very young I was with them in the park,  
 and there was a man building a spectacular sand castle with his kids.  
 This woman walks up with her kids, they get to talking.  
 The guy's kid says "We're making the castle from Beauty and the Beast!"  
 And the woman puffed up and said, real loud, so the whole park could hear,  
 "Oh, that's a fairy tale! Fairy tales aren't very healthy for children, spiritually! We prefer  
*Bible* stories for our children!"

Now regardless of how you feel about fairy tales vs. Bible stories for your children,  
 I would say that the way she expressed herself made her a bad salesperson for the  
 Christian faith.

I wanted to mash her face right into that sand castle.  
Of course then I would have been a bad salesperson for the Christian faith.

Have you ever found yourself in traffic, and somebody is behind you trying to get past,  
they're honking at you or yelling at you,  
and they finally get around you and blow down the road, and you see a little fish on their  
bumper?

A bad salesperson for the Christian faith.  
At least they didn't flip you the bird.

When I lived in Chicago I had an accountant who happened to be a *leader* in the  
Southern Baptist church.  
In the Southern Baptist tradition, there is a very strict prohibition against using tobacco.  
So the leaders within that church choose to make a personal commitment to abstain  
from using tobacco.  
One day I was driving along the highway on my way to work, and I passed this car, and  
there was my accountant — smoking a cigarette.  
And he didn't see me, so I honked and waved, and I saw him go *Pfft! Ouch!* (dropping  
the cigarette in his lap, trying to put it out)  
Not to make any comment on smoking vs. not smoking —  
but because of his hypocrisy, I would say he was not the ideal salesperson for the  
Christian faith.

I have a friend named Denise who attends another church, a great big church that has  
to hire a city police officer for their parking lot because they have such traffic  
congestion.

One day Denise was talking to this policewoman on the parking lot.  
“Do you attend church here?”

*No way.*

“Uh-oh, that doesn't sound good. What seems to be the problem?”

*This is just the rudest bunch of drivers I've ever encountered.*

(This woman has been on the police force for years.)

*I hate this part of my job more than anything else I do.*

I'm sorry to report that the folks in that church are bad salespeople for the Christian  
faith.

And then some Christians are bad salespeople for the Christian faith *not* by their  
wrongdoing, or their “sinfulness”;  
the problem isn't spiritual, it's more — cultural. Or social.  
They may have big fancy Bibles on their coffee tables, but they don't live by what's  
inside.  
Instead, they have attached to their faith certain practices, certain traditions, certain  
rituals, which are ... depending on the perspective of your own background ...  
more or less — odd.

Some people can only speak “Christianese.”

Some call each other “brother” and “sister.”

Not that this is wrong; it just doesn’t necessarily help people outside the Christian faith to appreciate the Christian faith.

Some people say “Praise the Lord” even in situations where it doesn’t seem to be appropriate.

Or they have a certain inflection in their voice when they talk about spiritual things.

“Jeeeeee-sus!” “Father Gawd!”

My uncle was a missionary for many years; he had a regular old Midwestern accent, except when he said the phrase “Holy Spirit” — at which point he switched to an English accent: “Holy Spiddit.”

Not that these things are wrong; they just don’t necessarily help people outside the Christian faith to appreciate the Christian faith.

Various groups have various rules as part of their particular tradition or brand of Christianity.

No movies. No bowling. No mixed bathing. No dancing.

No pants on women.

Don’t play cards.

(I came from a tradition like that.

You can imagine my shock when I met my wife, who as it turns out is a mean poker player.

I don’t mind the poker playing so much — it’s her chomping on those big fat smelly old cigars that drives me crazy. OK, I’m kidding. Sorry)

Some don’t watch TV. Others don’t watch TV on Sundays.

I’m just saying some Christians seem like they want to stick out in a crowd.

They seem to look down their noses at outsiders.

They seem to see everything in black and white.

Some are harsh with those who disagree or misunderstand.

They don’t seem to listen, they only seem to talk.

Some Christians, frankly, have made themselves repugnant to non-Christians.

The Scottish author J.M. Barrie was asked where he would choose to spend eternity, and by what criteria he would choose, and here’s what he said:

“Heaven for climate. Hell for company.”

Some Christians don’t paint a very pleasing picture of the Christian faith.

They can be obnoxious.

And they can sin!

Not just immature Christians.

I mean even good Christians fail.

The Apostle Paul was probably the best Christian who ever lived.

God used him to write great big chunks of the New Testament.

He traveled and taught the Word of God all over the place.

And even *he* said, in **Romans 7:15,18,19:**

**I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do....**

**I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.**

**For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing.**

That's in the Bible!

So we know that God is not surprised that Christians fail, that they sometimes reflect badly on him.

**Romans 2:23,24** even talks about people who “**brag about the law, but ... dishonor God by breaking the law. God's name is blasphemed ... because of you.**”

In other words, because of you people turn *away* from Christ, not *toward* him!

**Colossians 2:20-23** asks the Christian, “**Why, since you entrusted your life to Christ, do you still submit to the world's rules:**

**“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”?**

(“The world's rules.” God says These aren't my rules.

Some human being made these up.)

**“These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and human teachings.**

**“Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value.”**

Down through the centuries, Christians have taught the world what religion is about.

That it's about what you don't wear

and what games you don't play

and what places you don't go —

or how oddly you can stick out in a crowd,

or how uncomfortable you can make non-Christian people in a social situation!

But is that the product God is really selling?

Or have we just been the victims of bad salespeople?

Do we really understand this phenomenon of “becoming a Christian”?

Are our expectations accurate?

Let's see what the Bible actually says.

The Bible makes a very important distinction that a lot of us don't realize:

**Becoming a Christian is instantaneous.**

**Becoming like Christ is a lifelong learning process.**

In the fall of 1862 Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation — It said, as of January 1, 1863, all the slaves would be free.

Did the slave owners of the Confederacy start making plans for hiring new employees

after the first of the year?  
 Did all the slaves go free on New Year's Day?  
 No.  
 They were legally free — but they were not yet free by experience.

The moment I trusted Christ, I was clean.  
 I was free.  
 Not free from temptation. God didn't promise me that.  
 Not free from failure. God didn't promise me that.  
 Not free from being a moron sometimes, from doing the wrong thing, from reflecting badly on the Church and on God.  
 God didn't promise that, and he doesn't expect that.  
 But at the moment I trusted Christ, I was instantly his child — free from the penalty of spending eternity away from God because of my sin.  
 I'm going to spend eternity *with* God, *in spite of my sin*.

There is no place in Scripture that says you trust your life to Christ, and then there's a waiting period, a probation period, a trial period, where you work and work and work as hard as you can to see if you become good enough to get into heaven.  
 No.

In **Romans 7:25** and **8:1** the Apostle Paul tells us Christians still struggle with their old sinful nature, but there is “**no condemnation**” for those who have trusted Christ. No condemnation means there is no case against them. They've been declared innocent.

My son Kristofer is adopted.  
 He was born a week before Christmas in 1990.  
 It took till April of 1992 for the wheels of the judicial system to turn and for us to appear in court,  
 but on that day in April, the judge rapped his gavel and declared that henceforth and forevermore, Kristofer would be our son.  
 From that *moment*, he was mine.  
 It was an *instantaneous* transformation.  
 But it was a transformation of his position in the world — he went from being a ward of the state to being a ward of the Brendels.  
 He would now spend the rest of his life *experiencing* that transformation.  
 Learning how to be a part of our family.  
 Growing, maturing.  
 Diving into the pool no matter how cold it is and getting those rocks off the bottom!

Here's the point I'm trying to make.  
 If we expect Christians to be transformed instantaneously into the very image of Jesus Christ, we expect something that God never promised.



Have you ever taken a course to learn a new skill?

Back when the Internet first came into being, I took a course to learn html, the code that you write websites in.

Of course I sat down in that classroom, and almost before the instructor opened her mouth, boom, I knew everything there was to know about html.

The rest of the time I spent there was really a waste.

Right?

No, of course not.

If that's what I expected to happen, I expected the wrong thing.

It took time for me to learn html.

If I want to learn to dance, I go to dance class.

But what if the moment I step onto that dance floor, you expect me to be proficient in rumba, samba, waltz, jazz, and soft-shoe?

Do you say, "I'd never go to that dance school. Look at all the clumsy people on that dance floor!"?

No, you recognize that it's a learning process, not an instant transformation.

If we expect instant transformation, we expect the wrong thing.

We look at Christians and we see them failing and we say,

"Brother! They're not very committed to Christ!"

But do you say, "Hey, that Brendel isn't very committed to dance. Look how clumsy he is!"?

No, my commitment to dance class may not be reflected in my dancing.

I can *love* to dance and still be clumsy.

Likewise, in the Christian life, we can't judge people's *commitment* by their spiritual gracefulness or spiritual clumsiness.

If I expect Christians to be transformed instantaneously into the very image of Jesus Christ, I expect something that God never promised.

In fact, God promised the opposite.

He said you're going to have problems.

He said you're going to have conflicts.

He said you're going to have stress.

But he also said Because you have trusted me with your life, I am going to use *every circumstance* to help you become more like Christ.

Every problem.

Every conflict.

Every stress.

Nothing will happen to you by accident.

**Romans 8:28** says, "**In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**"

And what is his purpose? To make us more like Christ.

But it happens over time. It's a process.  
Christians are students. They're learning as they go.

Let's take Konnor Victor, the newest member of The Compass Fellowship. How old is he? Six months?

Let's give him a spoon and some yogurt.  
She can't take that spoon and eat that yogurt?  
Well, Kendon and Gina are obviously horrible parents.  
Their kid can't even eat with a spoon!  
No ... that's not right. Konnor is learning. It's a process.

I have a friend. I did him dirty.  
So obviously, whoever my God is, he's a horrible God.  
Isn't that obvious, from what I did to my friend?  
No, I don't have a horrible God.  
The truth is, I have a wonderful God.  
But I'm still learning to eat with a spoon.  
I'm still learning to dance.  
I'm still learning html.  
I'm still learning to be more like Christ.

Has a Christian offended you and turned you off to Christ?  
Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised.  
I would be disappointed, but I wouldn't be surprised.

Of course, our culture does teach us to be easily offended.  
So I do have to ask myself, have I allowed myself to be suckered in to the culture of victimhood ...  
so that being a victim, and feeling offended,  
is more important than getting what I really need in life ...  
something that will help me?

Or have Christians embarrassed you and turned you off to Christianity?  
Our culture does teach us that Christianity is embarrassing.  
But I have to ask myself, Am I letting my culture do my thinking for me?  
Is it possible that I really just want an excuse not to mess with God at all?  
Does the idea of learning to be more like Christ give me the creeps?  
Does it frighten me? Do I wish I didn't need God at all in my life?

What have you decided about Christ?  
Have you accepted Christ?  
Are you still thinking about accepting Christ?

Today I want to challenge you to take an important step — and confront the *reason* for your decision about Christ.  
Have you rejected Christ because of bad salespeople for the Christian faith?

Are you still considering the claims of Christ, but you haven't trusted him, because you've allowed yourself to be distracted by Christians who are selling a product God isn't really offering?

Have you seen the musical *1776*?

It claims to tell the story of how the Declaration of Independence actually came to be written.

According to the musical, there was only one delegate in the whole Congress who was sold on the idea of declaring independence.

It wasn't Thomas Jefferson,  
it wasn't Benjamin Franklin.

It was a fat little man from Massachusetts named John Adams, who actually described *himself* as "obnoxious and disliked."

He was so loud-mouthed, so pushy, that everybody hated him.

Anything he suggested, the Congress would throw out, simply because he was so unlikable.

According to *1776* the musical, Adams tried to persuade the Congress to declare independence; he tried many times, and failed.

Finally he realized that what he needed was someone likable to propose his idea. So he persuaded a handsome, popular fellow from Virginia to bring the resolution to the floor of the Congress.

And that is why the Declaration of Independence was submitted to the Continental Congress by someone many Americans have never heard of —

Richard Henry Lee.

According to this version of the story, one guy had a vision for the United States to become a new country.

Nobody else had the vision for it.

But that one guy made such a bad impression,  
the truth of his message got lost —  
the power of his perspective was dissipated.

If you were a delegate to the Continental Congress in 1775,  
could you have seen through John Adams' obnoxiousness and pushiness and loud-mouthiness and bad social graces?

Or would you have said, like the rest of the delegates,  
"Sit down, John!"

Would we be celebrating our nation's birthday every 4th of July if it had been up to you?

And by the same token,

can you see through all the stupid things Christians have done,  
yet in spite of all that,

get a hold of what God really wants for your life?

Will you blow a whole lifetime of potential for yourself because somebody else was a fool?

Will you spend eternity kicking yourself because you had the chance to receive God's love — and you let somebody else's bad manners or bad morals distract you from what was really important from an eternal perspective?

That would break God's heart.

That would be such a waste.

God wants to be involved in your life in an intimate way, in a way that's healthy and helpful for you.

Nuts to all those confusing, distracting people who get in the way.

The longing of his heart is to have a relationship, a friendship, with you directly.

You know, we all need God.

But let me suggest something that may seem odd to you:

If you've been hurt or offended or disgusted by people who call themselves Christians,  
*God needs you.*

That's right.

You know firsthand the kind of bad impression that Christians can make.

If you give your life to Christ, God could use you to be a good salesperson for the Christian faith.

God needs people who aren't hung up on how long your hair is or whether you play card games.

God needs people who are sensitive to how they come across to others.

God needs people who can live in the world, and communicate the love of Christ, simply and without a lot of hoopla — and through that simple love, inspire other people to discover the difference God can make in their lives.

Do you sense that God could be calling you to be an intelligent, sensitive Christian today?

Let's pray.

*Father, help us accept your offer of grace, to become Christians instantaneously, and then begin the journey of a lifetime —*

*learning how to become like Christ,*

*and experiencing the joy of every circumstance having value, because of your working in every detail of our lives.*