

## **From Chris to Christopher**

© 2008, James J. Gettel

Chris didn't have much time in his life for God, but he was troubled by the way his life was going. A friend stopped to listen and asked if it was OK if she prayed for him. She gently told Chris not to forget that God wants to be part of his life, even when it's not going well.

In time Chris and his friend returned to this discussion. She invited Chris to get together with a group of friends that regularly considered God's part in their lives. They read the Bible together. The discussion wasn't academic; and they weren't looking to pluck verses out of the Bible and take them as universal statements of absolute truth. They talked about how their personal stories might fit into God's story.<sup>1</sup> This wasn't as simple as finding and following certain prescribed rules, it was about being more aware of God and their own responses. At the end of each meeting, they prayed. Chris wasn't too uncomfortable because someone just asked about his concerns and thanksgivings before beginning to pray for them. Within a few weeks, Chris saw God working amid the joys and sorrows of the experiences people prayed about. This group only met for a few weeks, and Chris hated to miss any meetings; he was glad when he was invited to join another group.

Chris found that his new friends in these groups weren't trying to change him, but to help him be more aware of God's presence. They listened to his concerns and challenged him with the deepest, most personal and loving question: Where is God in your life these days? The personal faith experiences they talked about gave him glimpses of what God is trying to do in his life, the lives of others, and the world around us, and how Chris might respond to that.<sup>2</sup> Chris still has trouble believing that anyone would care about him, much less love him. These friends welcomed him, with all of his faults and differences (even things Chris felt he'd done wrong and things about him they disagreed with), and reminded him that God wants Chris – just as he is now – to have a close, loving relationship with him. Jesus isn't waiting for Chris to do something good to earn his favor; he became human to show his love and to bridge the gap between us at any cost. Chris still finds it hard to understand and accept God's love for him.

Eventually some of these friends brought Chris to Sunday worship at their church. It was different from what Chris expected.<sup>3</sup> The words that came from the Bible and the pulpit spoke to his daily life as a Christian. The liturgy, music and prayers touched him deeply and helped him experience God's presence. Chris began treating worship as a joyful response to finding God present in his life and the world, not just a place where God is present on Sundays outside the real world.

Chris accepted a new way of life with baptism. He was certain that God was calling him to surrender his life to Christ, and that would mean a new lifestyle

more dependent on God. The church community welcomed Chris as a member and committed to help him live into the role of a Christian in the world.

Chris brought other members of his family along to church, and his church friends affirmed and supported them too.<sup>4</sup> Youth leaders connected with his children and encouraged them to learn about God and be aware of his presence, and to reach out to others in fellowship and service. The family even began to pray together and discuss their faith at the dinner table.

Chris says his church helps reveal God's presence, and affirms, equips and supports him in his faith journey and ministry. He spends some time in spiritual practices of praying, reading the Bible, and worshipping, and sometimes attends retreats or conferences.<sup>5</sup> He continues to participate in small groups that help him relate his faith to his life experiences. Of course Chris helps out in church, but he doesn't feel his church is concentrating so much on what happens within the organization.<sup>6</sup> His friends remind him that they aren't only to focus on holiness or the church, but on loving, accepting and working to help the world around us.<sup>7</sup> They encourage him to recognize God in his daily life and to use his life more for God's purposes in the world. Chris recognizes that he needs to integrate his faith into his daily life, rather than just balancing his ordinary life with his church life so that he can become a more active church member.<sup>8</sup>

Chris realizes that church isn't enough and he needs to do the work of Christian ministry in his own life, family, work and community.<sup>9</sup> His everyday roles as friend, child, sibling, parent and worker are part of his Christian vocation and are opportunities to help and serve God in the world. Chris understands that Jesus and his church friends expect him to learn to live and serve as a priest in his everyday world.<sup>10</sup> To do that, Chris needs to continue learning and practicing new approaches and skills.<sup>11</sup>

Chris has discovered that the skills he needs are not just spiritual practices or knowledge and that he can't get them just by focusing on a particular topic like evangelism or Bible study or ethics or organizational development. He needs practical skills for loving others.<sup>12</sup> Chris needs to improve his skills in being present with and listening to others as children of God, and with God as a part of the conversation. He wants to become more compassionate, open and nonjudgmental so that he can offer comfort to others around the deepest concerns of their lives. He feels he even needs to understand basic first aid and counseling skills, and to know where people can find more skilled assistance with physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual problems. As Chris is more aware of and able to share his own faith story, he is also becoming better at seeing and saying how God might work in other situations. Chris asks God to work through him,<sup>13</sup> and tries to trust and permit God to help him take greater risks and do more than he is capable of doing himself when he reaches out to others.<sup>14</sup>

Chris feels he is getting better at seeing and responding to some of the physically, emotionally and spiritually hurting people around him. Sometimes, with God's help, he risks reaching out to them. Not long ago, Chris spent time with a co-worker and empathetically listened to her story of the challenges she was facing with a serious disease. Christopher asked if he could pray for her and her family, and gently told her not to forget that God wants to be part of her life, even when it's not going well.<sup>15</sup>

*Jim Gettel is a church growth consultant and the author of God's Love, Human Freedom and Christian Faith (Chalice Press, 2003).*

---

<sup>1</sup> In The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World (Jossey-Bass, 2006), pp. 69-75, Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk write about the importance of connecting biblical narrative with our own stories:

An increasing number of people . . . neither live with nor are shaped by any specific narrative. When narratives erode and social context moves into rapid discontinuity, people feel as if they have no way to make sense of their experience. They lose direction, order and purpose. . . . Innovating missional congregations begin by engaging this lived experience to invite the people of the congregation into a journey of reentering and rehearing the biblical narrative and its implications for being God's missionary people in their own situation. . . . The narratives of Jesus' presence among us start among the ordinariness of people's lives. Jesus begins with their lived experience; he enters those experiences weaving God's story through their lived stories. He draws people into a new imagination about the nature of the good news he incarnates.

<sup>2</sup> In The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith (HarperOne, 2004), Marcus Borg writes about a transformational "emerging paradigm" in Christianity, of loving God and loving what God loves. This paradigm is replacing the centuries old paradigm of rigidly adhering to a specific set of beliefs. A church family today needs to support a personal relationship with Jesus as a spiritual reality and way of life, not an ethic or law, and focus more on religious experiences than on principles or beliefs.

<sup>3</sup> A recent study of Christianity's slipping image among 16-29 year olds is explored in unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters, by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (Baker Books, 2007). Half of young churchgoers said they perceive Christians as judgmental, anti-homosexual, hypocritical, overly political and sheltered. One-third said Christianity was old-fashioned and out of touch with reality. The harshest criticism of the church is that it doesn't act much like Jesus. The greatest attraction to Jesus for these younger people is the abundance of love Jesus offers.

<sup>4</sup> This church carries out Jesus' commissions to Peter in John 21:15-17. Jesus commissions Peter to do three things – feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep. Jesus' first instruction is to "feed or nourish" my "little lambs." Those who are new to Christ need special attention to learn about God and to help them realize that they are an important part of God's family (Isaiah 40:11). The second instruction by Jesus is "take care of, guide, govern, guard" my sheep, as good shepherds in the nature of Ezekiel 34. Jesus' third instruction is not only to take care of his flock, but to feed and challenge it with spiritual food to grow into maturity. Tending (church programs, support groups, fellowship, etc.) without feeding is not enough.

<sup>5</sup> Traditional churches have found a renewed energy in emphasizing formation in Christian spiritual practices. See, e.g., Diana Butler Bass, The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church (Alban Institute, 2004). A recent article stated that "for almost a decade the Alban Institute has been gently switching its emphasis from program-oriented and technical fixes for

---

congregations to re-basing vital congregational life on spiritual practices, including prayer, theological reflection, generosity, storytelling, discernment, shaping community, hospitality, and leadership” (<http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=5280>). Spending time with God is always rewarding and centers us in relationship for our journey with God. Then God takes us farther and back into the world.

<sup>6</sup> “A congregation must become a place where members learn to function like cross-cultural missionaries rather than be a gathering place where people come to receive religious goods and services.” Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World (Jossey, -Bass, 2006), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> The most challenging areas for renewal in traditional churches over the last four decades have been the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; John 20:21; Acts 1:8) and the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; John 13:34-35; Matthew 25:31- 40). How do we learn to act in our relationships with other people like the good Samaritan (Luke 10:33-35), the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20-24), Phillip (Acts 8:26-40), or even Jesus himself? How do we become the apostles (messengers and ambassadors) of Matthew 10 and Luke 10 as well as disciples (followers and learners)?

<sup>8</sup> Balancing, rather than integrating, church and daily life will keep people from being Matthew 10 Christians because they will be carrying too much baggage and see too much risk. Matthew 9 ends with a prayer for harvesters to be sent out into the field. Chapter 10 offers an answer to that prayer - the twelve disciples named and given authority to cast out demons and heal diseases. The apostles are sent out to represent the person who sent them – in a ministry virtually identical to that of Jesus – to prepare their people for the coming of the kingdom of God. But they must go without any baggage – possessions or ego needs – and trust in God.

<sup>9</sup> Traditional churches seem thrilled with Bill Hybels’ “shocking confessions” following Willow Creek’s multi-year study on the effectiveness of their programs and philosophy of ministry in Reveal: Where Are You?, by Cally Parkinson and Greg Hawkins. Hybels called the findings “ground breaking,” “earth shaking” and “mind blowing,” saying “some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back it wasn’t helping people that much. Other things that we didn’t put that much money into and didn’t put much staff against is stuff our people are crying out for.” Hybels said, “We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become ‘self feeders.’ We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.” Certainly Hybels is correct about the need to help people take responsibility for their own spiritual lives. A church must have expectations (from “expectare,” what the church is looking forward to for Christians). Any kind of real expectations increases commitment, raises levels of participation, and enables a group to offer more benefits to current and potential members. But it takes much more than developing life-long learners (in the secular sense); people need to learn to participate in God’s ongoing creation in the world. People are not learning to respond in daily life to the spiritual breakthroughs they have experienced.

<sup>10</sup> A “priest” in this sense is an intermediary between God and His people, a way by which God is able to approach people. See Exodus 19:6, Isaiah 61:6, 1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:5-6.

11

A revolution of hope is not just a matter of reading a book or hearing an inspiring sermon. True, a book or sermon or personal encounter may be a vehicle through which hope wins their hearts. But a revolution of hope makes radical demands of us. It requires us to learn new skills and habits and capacities: the skills of a new way of thinking, the capacities of a new way of living... it is a new way of life that changes everything.

---

Brian McLaren, Everything Must Change - Jesus, Global Crises and a Revolution of Hope. (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007), p. 283.

<sup>12</sup> There are many resources available to help support this type of training and practice, including Community of Hope (a ministry to help create Christian communities of lay pastoral caregivers, united in prayer, shaped by Benedictine spirituality, and equipped for serving); Rebecca Manley Pippert's Out of the Saltshaker & into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life (InterVarsity Press, 1999) (evangelism); weeks 5 and 6 of Rick Warren's 40 Days of Purpose, based on The Purpose Driven Life (Zondervan, 2002) (Christian life basics); and William E. Diehl's The Monday Connection: On Being an Authentic Christian in a Weekday World (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). In reflecting on the parable of the good Samaritan, Rick Warren reminds Christians of four ways to serve the needs of people the way Jesus would: to see their needs, sympathize with their pain, seize the moment to meet the need, and spend whatever it takes. This takes preparation and a willingness to take risks. And it requires "doing" to learn.

<sup>13</sup> A simple request for God's help in everyday life is Mychal's prayer: "Lord, take me where you want me to go; let me meet who you want me to meet; tell me what you want me to say; and keep me out of your way." This prayer was composed by Fr. Mychal Judge, a fire department chaplain, and worn in the helmets of New York firefighters. Fr. Judge died responding to the 9/11 World Trade Center attack with New York firefighters. The day before his death, he said at a firehouse re-dedication: "Good days, bad days, but never a boring day on this job. You do what God has called you to do. You show up, you put one foot in front of the other, and you do your job, which is a mystery and a surprise. You have no idea, when you get in that rig, what God is calling you to. But he needs you . . . so keep going. Keep supporting each other. Be kind to each other. Love each other. Work together. You love the job. We all do. What a blessing that is." [www.saintmychal.com](http://www.saintmychal.com)

<sup>14</sup> Galatians 2:20: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (NRSV)

<sup>15</sup> Christopher means "Christ bearer." This is a story of introducing an individual to closer relationship with God, welcoming him into a church family, and helping him prepare for Christian ministry. It responds to some of the "post-Christendom" criticisms of the church and integrates individual, small group and collective spiritual experiences – because our contemporaries, while often desiring a spiritual life, are initially wary of encountering the collective church. It also integrates three different classical models of evangelism. Since the Middle Ages, Christendom has frequently relied on a "cathedral" or field of dreams model: Build it and they will come because it's the most amazing thing and the center of community. This relies on having something so attractive that we don't even have to go out and get people because it's accepted and they're seeking it. Some emerging churches may continue doing this by creating new and different ministry tools or sensations, besides buildings, to capture interest; but our worship or fellowship or formation or outreach is rarely attractive enough that people will rave about them and bring others. People who support a return to hospitality and spiritual practices may have a greater affinity with a "monastery" model of evangelism. This model sees the church as a spiritual home, refuge from the world and place of pilgrimage that can set an example for life in the world. Traditional churches often avoid a "missionary" model of going into the world and living with others who need God's healing love, unless they are sending gifted specialists to do this work. We may reach more people through personal relationships that build trust and support faith sharing (i.e., The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again by George Hunter (Abingdon, 2000)).