

Becoming Christian

Six Beginning Steps



Father Larry

Introduction

This little essay is meant to serve as a kind of primer for both serious inquirers and the merely curious as to how one becomes a Christian. In its attempt to explain this spiritual becoming, it describes a six-step process. I grew up and began my ministry in a denomination that saw such steps as distinct and rather linear, so there was much discussion about the point at which one becomes a Christian, or in the terminology of that denomination, the point at which one is “saved.” It has now been many decades since I thought in this way. Nevertheless, in reflecting on the how of “Becoming Christian” it may be helpful to think along the lines of a step-by-step process, as long as we keep in mind this is nothing more than a kind of fictional scaffolding, to be dismantled once the constructive work is finished. In reality, the six steps described here are simply six different ways of thinking about one existential experience – one event. So, when you are finished reading this essay try to hold the six as one – look for the *gestalt*.

I also think it important to say that I do not see the Christian religion as a “barter system” – a system of reward and punishment. For vast numbers of modern men and women the motivation for becoming Christian has had to do with being “good” so as to avoid the torments of hell and enjoy the bliss of heaven. However, in the earliest Christian tradition the desire is for a rewardless reward: that mysterious “something more” to life for which we all hunger-- the desire to see God, to know God. It is, in the words of C.S. Lewis, the desire for “the direct experience of God as immediate as the taste of color.”

Once we realize that Christianity is about more than saving our skin, it frees us from mean attitudes toward other religions and allows us to see and learn from the beauty and truth they possess, while at the same time helping us to appreciate the differences which expose the beauty and depth of the Christian tradition. For example, Eastern religions (and this is obviously an over simplification) emphasize the goal of life as absorption into the cosmic consciousness. Christianity sees life more like being pursued by a cosmic lover, with spirituality defined in terms of living in conscious love for God and others.

Those who grow up in an environment believing God is always spying on them in order to catch them doing something wrong, something for which they can be shamed or horribly punished, may become adults in whom the very mention

of church and God provokes intense anxiety, and perhaps anger as well. Even if they do continue to embrace the Christian faith as adults, they frequently do so as people who hate and fear vice more than they love virtue. If your experience has been anything like that, I hope that after reading these pages you come to think better of God.

With these disclosures in mind I hope you find what follows helpful and –since I am unequivocally Christian – appealing.

The Awakening

Becoming Christian begins with a spiritual awakening. Just as we may awaken from a night's sleep slowly or suddenly, so our experience of awakening spiritually may be sudden or gradual. It may be an experience so dramatic that we remember it vividly for ever after; or unfold so slowly, so quietly, so imperceptibly, that it is only with considerable difficulty, if at all, that we can locate it on the map of our spiritual pilgrimage. Our awakening may come as an experience of beauty in nature or art or music; it may come as an intellectual realization; as a sense of gratitude or joy; or as a vague or acute sense of longing and restlessness for "something more;" or it may come in the desperation of a dark night. The truth is that we are all innately equipped in such a way as to experience the numinous – to sense the divine mystery that is God. In his book *Will and Spirit*, Gerald May reports this experience of a corporate attorney:

I was on vacation in the mountains. Two friends and I had hiked most of the morning and we were very tired. I lay down by a tree stump and slept. When I awoke it was late afternoon and everything had become quiet. The crickets and cicadas had silenced their chirping and even the breeze stopped. All I can say is that moment was an eternity, and it was the moment of my birth. I was forty-five years old, but in those few minutes I was born. I had no thought at the time – everything was just there. I had no reaction except for a deep quiet and peace. This is hard for me to say, but at some point I remember thinking "There is a God, there is a God."

The question is not whether we all have spiritual experiences of one kind or another, for we most certainly do, but whether, like this attorney, we recognize them for what they are – transcendent moments in which we hear the silent speaking and see the invisible light that shines through the unknowing cloud of our own minds.

Crossing the Threshold

In Joseph Campbell's description of the archetypal myth known as "The Hero's Journey," a spiritual awakening can be characterized, as it is in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, as a *call*. The hero is called from his or her ordinary world to an epic adventure. The hero, feeling the fear of the unknown may initially delay or refuse this call, but eventually, if he or she is indeed of heroic stature, commits to the journey, and crosses an invisible threshold that leads into a new region – into what Lewis further described as "the region of awe."

In the journey of becoming Christian, commitment and the crossing of this threshold may be conceptualized in multiple ways. It is descriptive of that moment when we come to *belief* or *faith*. Christian faith has often been caricatured as "believing what no one in their right mind would believe otherwise." But faith is infinitely more than "believing" that certain ideas or propositions are factual. Faith and belief, which are used synonymously here, can be understood in four ways:

- **First, faith is mentally agreeing, or assenting, that a particular statement or assertion is true.** Certain affirmations are central to Christianity. Becoming Christian means affirming the reality of God. What the great Jewish scholar and mystic Abraham Joshua Heshel said of God as understood in Judaism is equally true of Christianity, "There are no concepts which we can appoint to designate the greatness of God or represent Him to our minds. God is not a being whose existence can be proved by our syllogisms. God is a reality, in the face of which, when becoming alive to it, all concepts become clichés." Becoming Christian means having faith, believing, in the truth of a mysterious "something more" at the heart of life – at the center of all reality. This God affirmed by Christians is also personal. God is obviously more than a person as we conceive

personhood, but God is not less than the best and highest and deepest we are capable of meaning when we use the word “personal.” It is possible to have an encounter, a mutuality, a direct and immediate relationship with God that can only exist between persons.

Christian faith also affirms Jesus Christ as the disclosure of God. Jesus is full of the truth of God, the life of God, the way of God – the way billions of men and women have discovered to live in conscious contact with God. Christians can say, without denigrating any other religious faith, that Christ is our hope of salvation, salvation not only in the evangelical sense, but in the comprehensive sense of Scripture: as that which makes life large, spacious, expansive, and free of everything that would narrow or constrict life.

And thirdly, Christians believe Scripture is inspired, literally the breath of God, that somehow the lives and discourses of its writers were energized to show us life in communion with God as supreme. This does not require us to see the Bible as free of all discrepancies, errors and problems, but is instead a very deep recognition that whatever puzzling or perplexing difficulties exist, one can still see, with wonder and amazement, signs of transcendence and hear God speaking in the text. It is this deeper hearing and seeing that makes Scripture sacred to Christians, so that they affirm it as the word of God, capable of being understood in the light of reason, tradition, and experience.

- **Biblically faith or belief carries within it the meaning of radical trust: to have faith or belief in anyone or anything is an act of trust.** Every wisdom tradition, every enduring faith tradition of the world, every great religion, every school of psychotherapy, believes that our human sense of wellbeing rests in our trust that at the heart of all things is something or someone completely good and trustworthy. Distrust produces chronic anxiety. Trust is the mother of peace and of that happiness that does not depend on what happens. Christians see that in this world the situations they find themselves in are not always trustworthy, but God is. The original sin, as we find it in the Eden story of Genesis, is not the literal eating of some sweet but forbidden fruit, but the failure to trust the loving goodness of God – it is the illusion that “we can wrest satisfaction from life” if we trust our own instinct to manage well. A man who had been attending our church for several months asked how much of this “stuff” he had to

believe before being baptized. I responded by saying that I had no idea, and asked in turn, “How much will you need to believe before you can entrust your life to Christ?”

- **Faith, as Marcus Borg points out so well, may be understood as “vision.”** Faith is far from blind, as it has so often been characterized. Indeed, faith is a way of seeing deeply. Scripture is rich in metaphors about how faith, hope, and love enable us to see, even in our dark night experiences, where we are going – it shines like a light in the dark so that we can find our way. We can see, and therefore, live life from a number of perspectives. We can, for example, see life as hostile and threatening and spend all our days in the survival mode. Or, we can see everything, absolutely everything, as a gift to be received and lived in gratitude, with all we have been given to be savored and enjoyed by ourselves and used for the good of others.
- **Faith, biblically speaking, also refers to “loyalty.”** In Scripture disloyalty, unfaithfulness to God, is frequently described as “adultery,” meaning that, just as sexual disloyalty in a marriage violates the deepest vows and the profoundest commitments of love and devotion one person has made to another, so spiritual infidelity is a betrayal of our love and consecration to God. And so sometimes we hear a leader of some cause talk of “keeping the faith,” by which they mean remaining loyal to the cause or principles at stake, no matter what the cost. Before the seventeenth century, the English word we now use to translate the original Greek of the New Testament term for “belief” meant to prize, to give cherished significance, to love and be loyal to. The great creeds of the Christian church are called “creeds” because of the first two words in each – “I believe.” “I believe” is a translation of the Latin word *credo*.” *Credo* could be understood as simply saying, “I give my loyalty to, I pledge myself to, or I give my love to God the Creator, Christ the Redeemer and the Sacred Spirit, the Giver of Life.” Believing is not a matter of agreeing unequivocally with the literal and factual truth of every statement in the Creeds, but of giving our heart: to God, to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, to the Community of faith, the church, to a way of life.

These are all ways of understanding belief or faith that take us well beyond a conventional and superficial understanding. It is not that faith is to be considered now from one of these perspectives and later from another, but that at every moment faith, or belief, is held within us as something embracing each of these understandings -- a mysterious and ultimately inexplicable reality.

A Change of Heart

Just what is involved in the change of heart and mind in becoming Christian is aptly expressed in the first three of The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous:

- 1) Admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable
- 2) Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- 3) Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care and will of God as we understood God.

This change of heart and mind is an essential change in the direction of one's life. The word for it in the original Greek New Testament is *metanoia*, and you may recognize it as the much abused English word "repentance" which has perhaps become a bit of religious jargon in need of some rehabilitation.

There is a Frank and Ernst cartoon in which one of these two goofy characters is standing on a busy city sidewalk holding a sign that says: "Repent! Avoid the Doomsday Rush." It's a good cartoon. It demonstrates how clergy and teachers and many professed Christians, perhaps with good intentions, have diminished and made small something large and important, and incredibly helpful. "Willingness," it has been correctly said, "is the essence of all spiritual progress." Repentance is that change of heart in which an individual recognizes that the self-centered life is constantly off center, that blind self-will is at the root of human bondage, that self-deification is the source of human affliction, and that the way to life lies in the direction of self-sacrificing love, self-surrender, openness, receptivity, attentiveness--whatever you want to call it--to the loving will of God.

The Promise

An important word for anyone wanting to Become Christian is the Greek *homologein*. It can be translated as “to promise,” “to assure,” “to concede,” or “to confess.” *Homologein* refers to a solemn declaration of faith, and also to an admission of sin. It was translated into Latin as *confessio*, in which we can hear the English word “confession.” *Confessio* originally referred to the tomb or burial place of a martyr, someone who had borne witness to the wonder, beauty, goodness, truth, freedom and life they had discovered, and experienced firsthand in Christ, at the cost of torture and death. Hence, one becomes Christian by promising, by confessing, loyalty to Christ – consecrating one’s heart to the way of Christ.

Perhaps more problematic for many people is confession as the acknowledgement of sin – another one of those terribly abused and misused words from the Scripture. “Sin” simply means that we have missed the mark – have failed to live up to the highest to which we can aspire, that we have failed to love God or others as we ought. Kathleen Norris put it wonderfully in her book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*:

Comprehensible, sensible sin is one of the unexpected gifts I’ve found in the monastic tradition. The fourth century monks began to answer a question for me that the human potential movement of the late twentieth century never seemed to address: If I am O.K. and you are O.K., and our friends (nice people and like us, markedly middle class, if a bit bohemian) are O.K., why is the world definitely not O.K.? Blaming others wouldn’t do. Only when I began to see the world’s ills mirrored in myself did I begin to find an answer, only as I began to address that uncomfortable word, “sin,” did I see that I was not being handed a load of needless guilt so much as a useful tool for confronting the negative side of human behavior.

There is a moral law written within (rather than imposed upon) reality that we ignore at great peril to ourselves -- to our humanity. Quite simply “there is a way to live and a way not to live. A way that gets results and a way that gets consequences.” Confession is a part of the process by which we discover the way and the freedom “for which Christ has set us free.”

The Initiation

Baptism is the principal rite of initiation into the Christian faith and community. Yet to refer to baptism as a rite of initiation does not quite convey its spiritual significance as archetypal metaphor and symbol. Baptism is a visible expression of an inexpressible inner reality. This is why most Christians in the world refer to baptism as a sacrament. The New Testament sees baptism as a death and burial – a letting go of absolutely everything, a renunciation and relinquishing of the old life, the old way of being. If one can let go, can surrender his or her self without resentment to the Infinite and Sacred, that act has the power to radically and positively restructure the whole of life. Consequently, the action of baptism not only symbolizes a kind of death and burial, but also new birth – new life. “I don't know Who, or what,” said Dag Hammarskjold, “put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone, or Something, and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.” For Christians baptism is, as Saint Peter asserted in his first little epistle, the saying of a radical and loving “yes” to Christ.

Christian baptism is also a baptism into a mystical union, an intimate communion with Christ. And it is a baptism into the “body of Christ” – into the community of faith, into the company of the committed. There can be much banging into one another, and that sometimes hurts, but this too is part of the journey. The church is a school in which we learn through real life experience how to be not only with one another, but with God.

Unending Journey

Becoming Christian is not like taking a flight that begins in Los Angeles and lands in Tel Aviv. No matter how far we travel, we arrive at no fixed destination. It is a forever adventure, an unending journey. Indeed, Christian perfection is not a point beyond which no further improvement is possible (whatever that means), but rather continuous progress in becoming like Christ – an unending growth towards having the same consciousness in ourselves that was in Christ.

For Scripture Reflection:

Acts of the Apostles 17:22-28

The Gospel According to John 1:1-18; 17:3; 13-23

1 John 1:1-4

Hebrews 11:6

Romans 10:8-13

Acts 2:38-39

Romans 6:3-4

1 Peter 3:21-22

Philippians 2:5-11

Galatians 2:20-21

The Gospel According to Matthew 5:1-7:28

Galatians 5:13-26

Ephesians 1:15-23

1 Corinthians 2:6-9

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