

Why am I a Christian? Hard to say. Not because I don't know. I know too much. It's like asking why you love your mother or your country. As soon as you stammer out an answer, you can sound like you aren't sure. You can sound like you are on the defensive, as if you had to prove to someone that you love your mother.

Maybe the first answer is to say, "I am a Christian, because I love God, and I believe in Jesus Christ." That might be enough. It's not enough for me. I want to know: how did I get started as a Christian, and what keeps me going as a Christian, and what makes the experience so intense?

The answers span my whole life, and that has become a long story. How can I possibly do justice to my faith in a few minutes? But I have to try. So, I sorted through memories of turning points, which convey the central meaning of my life. The two I chose happened by the time I was 20, but the meaning of both has colored my life time after time for decades.

Back Seat Epiphany and God at the Gate

Gary Fagan was a high school friend who had cars. He even had a '57 Chevy. One night, five of us were riding in Gary's car (not the '57 Chevy). I sat in the back seat behind Gary. Without warning, Gary slammed on the brakes and put the car in reverse. I had no idea what was happening. It was a hitchhiker. No one knew him. Gary offered him a ride. The guy accepted and got in the front seat between Gary and another boy.

Gary started almost at once to tell him about Christ and how to become a Christian. I had never seen anything like it. The hitchhiker gave one-word answers. He was uncomfortable. I was uncomfortable. He told Gary he wanted to get out. Gary stopped the car but kept talking. The boy next to the door didn't move until Gary finished talking. It was evangelism by intimidation.

I was sitting there saying nothing, feeling pity for the hitchhiker, when the meaning of that night changed completely. Gary quoted many Bible verses. Without warning, Something beyond me stirred within me. I knew many of those verses, even though I had not said them or even thought about them for years.

They were verses I had memorized in order to ride my bike to Mrs. Stokes's house on a Saturday morning and recite them for her or Mrs. Kirkham. John 1:12 was one of them: **He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But to as many as received him gave he the power to become the sons of God.**

Their meaning came over me in Gary's car with such force that I forgot the hitchhiker's dilemma. I forgot the other people in the car. I was face to face with God. That's how I put it now. At the time it was just Something beyond me, stirring within me and more real than anyone or anything around me. I can remember exactly where we were on West Capitol Street, and the emotions are still fresh in my soul.

I am a Christian because of that experience. It wakened my heart and loosened my tongue so that a few weeks later I made an open declaration of my faith in Jesus and my desire and determination to believe in Him and honor Him with my whole life.

The second story did not happen to me directly. It happened to Carole before I met her, and it changed both our lives permanently. Carole was the first person on either side of her family to go to college. She wanted to be a missionary. She wanted to write children's curriculum for church ministry. She considered three Christian colleges, and only one of them offered what she wanted. It was of course the farthest from Baltimore.

Oklahoma Baptist University has distinguished itself in the sleepy Central Oklahoma town of Shawnee, population 25,000. The university invited Carole to come for an introduction to college week for high school students. She almost didn't go.

Her family may have swallowed hard, but they agreed for her to go and made reservations for her to fly to Oklahoma City. Unaccountably, her flight left out of Washington National (now Reagan) Airport. Carole's father, to his everlasting credit, hated to drive in Washington. If you don't like driving there now, you would have liked it less when there was no Metro and no crosstown freeways. Getting lost in D. C. traffic was a Smith Family ritual.

Somehow her dad managed to get Carole and her suitcase to the departure gate as the plane was loading. When Carole prepared to board, the airline representative stopped her and told her the plane was full. The door closed. The engines started, and the plane pushed back and was preparing to taxi out for takeoff. There really wasn't much to do but turn around and go back to Baltimore.

They were about to do that when a voice said, "Is Miss Carole Smith still at the gate? If she is, please come to the counter." She was and she did, and the airline representative said, "Do you still want to go to Oklahoma City?" She did. It seems that the plane had one unoccupied seat, and the airline company wanted a full plane. So, the plane pulled back to the gate, stopped two engines, opened the door, and was waiting for Carole, the last passenger, to come on board.

Carole looked at her dad, they kissed each other, and Carole made her way on to that plane and, as I like to tell the story, flew into my life; although it would be another 15 months before I laid eyes on her and four months after that before I asked her out.

I am a Christian because that event (and others like it) gave my faith staying power. It was a reality that made me believe that God is work in the essentials of my life. It gave credibility to Romans 8:28: **All things work together to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.** It gave credibility to Psalm 37:4: **Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.**

The Two-Minute Versions

It took me a while to tell you those two stories. But I also have short versions of those stories to share when speed is of the essence. So, here is a retelling of those two stories in shorter versions.

I am a Christian because of something that happened when I was 16 years old. Five of us were riding in a friend's car, when he picked up a hitchhiker. Nobody knew the guy. My friend, who was driving, immediately started telling him about Christ and how to become a Christian.

My friend wouldn't let him out of the car. The hitchhiker was really uncomfortable. So was I. And then the thing happened that changed my life. My friend was quoting Bible verses, lots of them. I started recognizing them. I hadn't heard them since my mom made me memorize them years before. One of them said: **Jesus came unto his own, and his own received him not. But to as many as received him gave he the power to become the sons of God.**

The meaning came over me with such force that I forgot about the hitchhiker and the other people in the car. I was face to face with God. A few weeks later, I openly declared myself to be a Christian.

Here's the other story in short. I am a Christian because the Christian faith has proved to be a reality that makes sense of my life. Here's an example.

Before I knew her, my wife, Carole, was supposed to go to a high school orientation at a university in Oklahoma. Her dad took her from Baltimore to the airport in Washington, D. C. She was ready to get on the plane, and the agent stopped her and said the plane was full. She was really disappointed.

All she and her dad could do was go home. As they were leaving the gate area, someone came on the loudspeaker and said, "Is Miss Carole Smith still at the gate? If she is, please come to the counter." She did, and the agent said, "Do you still want to go to Oklahoma City?" She did.

You have to understand: the plane had been pushed back and was beginning to taxi out for takeoff. They called the plane back, stopped two engines, and Carole got on the plane to OKC. She ended up at that university where I was a student. I met her, and 2 ½ years later we got married.

I am a Christian because of that event and others like it. It makes me know that God is at work in all the important events in my life. I can trust Him to take care of me.

The Rest of the Story

Now, I'd like to go deeper. What I say next might never come into any story that I tell about myself. But it gives depth to the stories I have told, and it reveals more reasons why I am a Christian. Let's go back to the first story.

The turning point in Gary's car was remembering Bible verses I learned many years before that night on West Capitol Street. I learned them out of a booklet of Bible verses published by the Bible Memory Association. I knew nothing about that organization, except that they wanted young people to memorize Bible verses.

My mom insisted that I do the memory work. But my mom did that, because Mrs. Stokes and Mrs. Kirkham told her about it and persuaded her that I should be involved. My mom knew those two women and their families, because we all went to the same Presbyterian church. My encounter with God in Gary's car took place because of an unknown organization, a local Presbyterian church, a circle of family friends, and my mom's determination. God had a network that prepared me for that night in Gary's car.

That wasn't all. Benny Curtis and I had played baseball together since elementary school days. He introduced me to Gary Fagan and a lot of other guys whom I knew and some of whom I looked up to as leaders. They all had a relationship with God that I didn't have. They made Christianity credible by being my friends. They became my new circle of friends in high school, and we did things together, one of which was to ride around in Gary Fagan's car on a Friday night.

God's network not only included an unknown organization, a local Presbyterian church, a circle of family friends, and my mom's determination. It also included a network of high school guys that had nothing to do with Bible Memory Association or Central Presbyterian Church or the adult friends of my parents. The Great Chess Master moved his pieces until He could capture my king; and then I was His for a lifetime.

One other thing came out of that night in Gary's car. I told you I had never seen anyone do to another person what I saw Gary do to that unsuspecting hitchhiker, and it made me very uncomfortable. I could not have put it into words, but I made a decision that night that I would not do to another person what Gary did to that hitchhiker, and that

decision did not stop me from being Gary's friend. In a polarized world it's a good thing to be friends with someone you disagree with sharply about important matters.

The Bottom Line

Now, I have a hunch and a hope. My hunch is that every one of you has had an encounter with God. The encounter didn't last long, and you may not have said it was God, but you know that something or Someone that you didn't expect barged into your life in a way that you'll never forget.

It might have been the answer you didn't expect to get to a prayer you offered in desperation. It might have been a dream. It might have been a vision. It might have been an interaction with the Bible like the one I had. It might have been anything. God, who never violates our freedom, offered you a chance to explore His world, the world of the supernatural. Behind the offer is a network of people and circumstances that can help you discover that world. It's like waking from a dream and finding yourself living the dream. It's like discovering buried treasure that's yours to keep.

Don't ignore it when it happens to you. Follow up on it. Read Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, or all of them. Take advantage of our Alpha Course or our Introduction to Spiritual Life Course. Talk to a pastor. Talk to a friend who seems to be connected to God. Listen to sermons with your "new ears."

My hope is that you will put into words your encounter with Jesus. Telling your story is just the best, because you are an expert on you. That's what makes a story stick in the hearts and minds of listeners. So, have your stories ready. Write out a long version and a short version of stories that illustrate why you are a Christian. Try them out on your friends. If they have stories, you can practice being a good listener, as you listen to theirs.

Bottom line: tell your story. I guarantee it is fascinating. Don't sell yourself short. God made you in His image, and if you take the time to identify what has made you a believer in Jesus, I think you'll be amazed at yourself and at God, and you will overflow with thanksgiving. You'll also be ready to tell your story at the right time and place.