

# Beyond a Good Christian

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*Beyond a Good Christian*

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## Growing up in a middle-class family

My summer days as a child were filled with Colorado's sunny skies, fresh air, and green grass. We had a swing set in our back yard. I would sit on a swing and pump my legs with its motion to move myself higher and higher into the sky. As I swung back and forth, I sang songs from Disney movies or musicals like *Camelot* and *The Sound of Music*. I had a happy childhood.

My sister and I lived with our dad and mom in a middle-class house in a middle-class neighborhood. Our dad was a chemistry professor at a state college. Our mom stayed at home to raise me and my sister until we were in junior high; then she began teaching kindergarten at a small Christian school. Our family always had enough for our needs, and sometimes we had extra for something special like a dinner at Taco Bell or a store-bought outfit. With my mom, I sewed teddy bears, poured decorative candles, and learned to crochet. She taught me to explore my creativity. With my dad, I played board games, worked jigsaw puzzles, and alphabetized student papers after he graded them. He gave me a love for learning. I grew up feeling safe and loved.

## A little Christian

I was raised as a Christian. My dad never attended church, but he supported my mom in raising me and my sister as Christians. I remember snippets of Christian activities I attended as a young child—playing Farmer in the Dell with a large circle of kids in a church's Fellowship Hall and, at a different church, sitting on a crowded bench in a dark room hearing a Bible story—but my strongest memories are of Good News Clubs. During my early years of grade school, my mom taught Good News Club at our house after school. She told Bible stories using paper figures on flannelgraph boards. We sang songs printed on large flipcharts. My favorite song was the Countdown Song. It still comes easily to mind. "Somewhere in outer space, God has prepared a place, for those who love him and obey. Jesus will come again, although we don't know when. The countdown's getting closer every day."

Every Sunday, my mom took my sister and me to church. I remember Sunday school in a large room divided by movable panels. On one panel was a chart of children's names. I got to put a star sticker on the chart

after my name as I learned memory verses. I remember sitting in the sanctuary with other students, passing the attendance pad back down the aisle. Someone had filled in the blank under denomination after my name with “Pres.” Not knowing what denomination meant, I wondered how someone knew I wanted to be president. I remember playing handbells in the sanctuary with other kids when I was in junior high. I always seemed to be a bit late in ringing my notes. And I remember being baptized when I joined the church.

## A young Christian with the Bible

Although my mom raised me in the church, it was her love of the Bible that most shaped my faith. Her Bible was a large, black book whose leather-like cover had been softened through frequent use. Its pages had tight columns of small print. The margins contained her notes in neat cursive. I wanted to love the Bible like she did.

I first read through the entire Bible as a freshman in high school. While at a Christian bookstore with my mom, I found a devotional book that listed a reading for each day, explained the key point in a few paragraphs, and provided notes which explained unfamiliar words and terms. My mom purchased this for me. Each morning before school, I then made a point of reading my Bible. When I made it all the way through, I felt such a feeling of accomplishment that I still have my dogeared copy of the book. I read through the Bible again in my junior and senior years of high school when my church offered a two-year study of the Bible. We spent one year in the Old Testament and one in the New. At the end of the program, I co-preached a sermon with the two other graduating seniors. I felt comfortable standing in the pulpit sharing what I had learned.

After I graduated from high school, I attended college, the same college where my dad taught. During college it was easy to keep attending church since I continued to live at home. I also continued to study the Bible. In my freshman year at college, one of the leaders of the school’s Intervarsity Christian Fellowship program trained me in studying the Bible and guided me in leading a Bible study with a few friends. However, as college continued, studying for my classes became a greater priority. With each year that passed, it seemed I had less time for Bible study and Christian activities.

# Marriage, nurturing and teaching

At college I met my future husband, Gary. We married after we graduated and remain happily married. Gary's work took us to the small town of Gainesville, Texas. Gainesville was the halfway point between where he worked in the oil fields of southern Oklahoma and where I worked in Dallas, Texas. Each workday, he drove 70 miles north and I drove 60 miles south. When Sunday morning came, we didn't always make it to church, but I did listen to Christian talk radio throughout the week. I remember hearing the slow, southern drawl of Vernon McGee. His *Thru the Bible* program explained each book of the Bible in a clear, understandable way. I enjoyed Chuck Swindoll's Bible teaching and hoped to sometime find a pastor like him. I passed the time by listening to Focus on the Family's parenting and special interest programs on the evening drive home.

I stopped working when our first son was born so that I could stay home to raise him. Soon after our second son was born, we moved to Midland, Texas. We joined St. Mark's United Methodist Church, and about a year later I started attending Bible Study Fellowship. It was through Bible Study Fellowship that I finally began to share in my mom's love of the Bible. Bible Study Fellowship gave me the accountability I needed to study the Bible each day. Each week's lesson provided background information on the book we were studying, and each day there were verses to read and questions to answer. Once each week all the ladies participating in the study would meet to share answers and to hear the study leader teach on what we had read and discussed. I developed a love for daily time devoted to careful and thoughtful reading of the Bible.

After my first year in Bible Study Fellowship, I was asked to help teach the preschool children that attended the program with their mothers. To become a children's leader, one was required to also serve in one's church. Although I hadn't been very active in my new church, I had become the church's historian. That was enough, and I became a children's leader. The training I received in Bible Study Fellowship, then helped my church. I started helping with children's church and Vacation Bible School. Later, when no teachers could be found to teach the high school Sunday school class, I began teaching the high schoolers.

When my sons reached school age, they could no longer attend Bible Study Fellowship with me. I had been teaching my boys preschool at

home. I now needed to put them in school, find childcare or stop attending Bible Study Fellowship. After much prayer, I quit Bible Study Fellowship. The next fifteen years of my life were focused on educating our sons. During this time, I continued studying the Bible on my own. I also remained active in my church and eventually became an adult Sunday school teacher.

## Spiritual thirst

I considered myself to be a mature Christian, and yet I wanted more. I wanted a more integrated understanding of the Bible and a more intuitive ability to live as a Christian. In the New Testament, the gospels felt like random collections of stories rather than coherent accounts. The Gospel of John was mystifying. I thought I understood Paul's letters, but I struggled to see his flow of thoughts. I wrestled with ideas that seems to contradict each other. I knew the Bible's overall framework and the arc of the story, but I couldn't understand how it all fit together to inform Christian living. Sometimes a subtle, unexpected shift of viewpoint clarified an area of struggle and gave me a fuller, deeper, and truer understanding of the account. I hoped that eventually my understanding of the Bible would hold together as a cohesive unit that would also guide me to think and live more instinctively Christian.

I desired meaningful work to do. As my sons neared their high school graduations, I began to consider what I should do next. I began weekly visits with a church member who was confined to a nursing home because she wanted to read through the New Testament with someone. I soon added volunteer work helping English language learners and teaching a citizenship class. Finally, after both of my boys graduated from high school, I enrolled in an online apologetics program through Houston Baptist University. Over the next three years, I diligently completed the coursework—reading books, participating in online discussions, and writing essays. The apologetics program was challenging and thought-provoking. I thoroughly enjoyed learning, but still didn't know what work to do next.

I also had nagging questions about my salvation that I wanted answered. In the gospel accounts, the most educated and careful of the Jews of Jesus's day, the Pharisees, hadn't recognized Jesus as God's Son. That bothered me deeply. How could the Pharisees have missed their own

Messiah? If I had lived then, would I have recognized who Jesus was? Might I somehow be like the Pharisees? My questions were compounded when the church member I regularly visited at the nursing home suddenly died. We had just finished reading the entire New Testament together, a few chapters at a time, the week before. I thought that believing in Jesus's divinity was essential to salvation, but my friend had struggled with that idea. What was I to think about her death and its timing? Despite being a good Christian, deep within my soul I was still spiritually thirsty.

## Drinking at a new well

### New sermons

Six months before the church member's death, my church received a new pastor, Rev. Yong Sub Sim. When Rev. Sim came, he said he would only preach Jesus from the gospels. I thought this would quickly get boring, but it did not. Although I was very familiar with the gospel stories, I was accustomed to sermons that used them as anecdotes. The scripture's stories would be used to offer words of encouragement or an example to follow. A sermon on Jesus's calling of Peter might focus on how challenging it was for Peter to respond to Jesus's request. Peter would be held up as an example to follow or take encouragement from. Peter was the focus of such a sermon. When Rev. Sim preached from this scripture he focused on Jesus. He considered the meaning of what was revealed by the account as it related to Jesus. In his sermon, Rev. Sim revealed how Jesus's call completely changed the direction of Peter's life. I now saw the beautiful story of what happens when a person truly meets Jesus. I could feel the marvel of the account and the truth of it. I desired this type of relationship with Jesus for myself.

Rev. Sim always roots his sermons in the books of the gospel, and he always preaches the gospel of Jesus. Rather than being boring, I am amazed at the great depth of each of his sermons. Each Sunday we walk with Jesus in Galilee. We meet Jesus as a living person. We hear Jesus's gospel clearly explained using modern words and terms. As a result, the gospel becomes clear, understandable, and meaningful for today. I frequently say, "I never heard that before!" because each sermon brings fresh, new insight. The spirituality of Jesus is endless in its depth. It is because I meet the Spirit of Jesus in Rev. Sim's sermons that every sermon brings something new.

## New worship

Even though I always attended church worship services, I never considered their purpose. I went because the Bible said to keep gathering together.<sup>1</sup> I went because it seemed important to go. But without knowing why church services were important, my focus was on the social community. If visitors came, I wondered if they appreciated the diversity of our community. During sermons, I considered who needed to hear what was being said and wondered how they might be responding. I knew that worship services had songs, prayers, liturgies, a sermon, and an offering, but I had never thought about how the elements reflected our spirituality.

When Rev. Sim arrived, he reorganized our worship services so to focus on worshiping God in the name of Jesus and revealing his Spirit. Now, each Sunday, I meet Jesus during the service. The elements of the service now have a flow to them. During the week, Rev. Sim prepares the service using the lectionary's gospel reading for the week. He draws out the theological meaning for our lives and pours it into each element of the service. On Sunday, I meet this theological meaning in the worship service, and it refreshes me each week. Once a month we celebrate holy communion. The communion service further reveals Jesus and reminds me of the Jesus's gospel. It is holy and traditional, as are our worship services. In our worship services, I now feel the holiness and authority of God.

## New leadership

The more I got to know Rev. Sim, the more deeply I was impressed by him. Not only did he preach sermons and prepare worship services that spoke into my heart, but he also lived with integrity and courage. His pastoral leadership comes from a strong vocational spirituality rooted in Jesus. This enables him to clearly see the problems of the church and to know how to correct them. In addition to changing the worship service, Rev. Sim led us to clean out the classrooms, fix the sanctuary lighting, and replace the church sound system. When some within the church opposed his leadership, he stood firm because he knew who he was before Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 10:25.

Rather than being swayed by those who are discontent, Rev. Sim keeps his focus on leading the church to walk with, work with and follow Jesus.

Each solution that Rev. Sim has provided has always been rooted in a theological and biblical understanding of Jesus and the church's spirituality. As a result, we have experienced spiritual encouragement as we have followed his leadership. Soon after the classrooms were cleaned out, a small school asked if they could rent the upstairs classrooms. After we fixed the sanctuary lighting, we felt the difference in worship, and visitors once again mentioned how they were impacted by the sanctuary's cross. Replacing the sound system noticeably improved our worship experience. Shortly after it was installed, several new families began attending the church. Rev. Sim also led us to reformat our Sunday school classes. We now have class meetings in which members share about their personal lives and their response to the previous Sunday's sermon. Through these discussions, class members are growing in spiritual understanding and feel encouraged in their walk with Jesus.

I have seen that Rev. Sim always walks with, works with, and follows Jesus. He loves Jesus, and he loves the church as the living body of Christ Jesus. After I became the church's secretary, I observed Rev. Sim's personal life displays the same integrity as his pastoral life. His whole life is rooted in Jesus's heart and spirit as found in the original source, the New Testament.

## Spiritual counseling

During Rev. Sim's second year as the church's pastor, I asked him to help me. His spiritual life was deeply attractive to me, and I wanted my faith to be more like his. Rev. Sim agreed to help. He gave me several weeks of spiritual counseling. He began our first session by explaining how human beings see and know ourselves. This was not where I expected to start. He explained human life with psychology and philosophy. I struggled to connect what he was saying with my understanding of Christianity and kept trying to find biblical analogies. Rev. Sim challenged me to try understanding Jesus in a new way. He asked me to set aside my constraints and to understand Jesus's emotional and spiritual heart as shown by the Gospel writers.

Rev. Sim's psychological, philosophical, and spiritual questions and answers freed my heart, mind, and soul. As we talked, I grew in

understanding of myself and of Jesus. The first question he helped me answer was my nagging worry that I might be like the Pharisees. Rev. Sim helped me see that my deep desire to find answers in Jesus showed that I wasn't like the Pharisees. The worry completely disappeared and has never returned. But compared to where I am now, it is as if I was blind. I didn't know the living Jesus. As I look back at my old self, I see God's grace acting in that nagging doubt. I was at a crossroads. I could have taken the easy path of ignoring my doubt and blindly accepting the assurances of cultural Christianity, but God, in his mercy, sent Rev. Sim to my church when I most needed him. He guided me to a deeper dimension of Christianity than the one I previously knew. He guided me to meet the living Jesus.

## Empathetic reading of the Gospels

At Rev. Sim's suggestion, I tried to read the Gospel of Mark in a new way. Previously, when I had read the Bible, I read it as one would read a history lesson. I studied it, learned the facts, and looked for cause-and-effect relationships. I tried to figure out what worked and what didn't, and then I tried to apply what worked to my life. Now, as I tried reading Mark anew, Rev. Sim wanted me to feel the heart of Jesus. He wanted me to have an empathetic relationship with Jesus and his situations. He wanted me to see a human Jesus preaching, teaching, and healing people in Galilee.

I struggled to move past the facts and cause-and-effect relationships. I knew that John the Baptist preached from the wilderness because he was called by God, but I had no idea of what that call might have felt like or why it drove John to preach. I couldn't sense John's passion or what motivated it. I couldn't feel Peter's deep desire to follow Jesus or even the freeing joy of those whom Jesus healed. Mark's words continue to pass through my mind like a history lesson. Trying to empathize with the gospel accounts felt like an impossible task, but I kept trying.

Finally, I glimpsed Jesus's heart several weeks later when reading the Gospel of Matthew. As I was reading about Joseph's decision to wed Mary despite her improbable story, a feeling of gratitude, love and pleasure regarding Joseph swept over me. I understood Jesus's parents in a new way through empathetic reading. The following is a poem I wrote at the time.

## Mary's Wedding

A little girl dreams of a marvelous wedding,  
of food, family and rejoicing with friends.  
But the Lord disrupted my wedding planning,  
and in doing this shattered my childhood dream.

A wedding, a marriage, and then a child—  
that's the order in which life's to be.  
But I am with child without the marriage,<sup>2</sup>  
and so there's no celebration for me.

"Rejoice, O favored one! The Lord is with you!"<sup>3</sup>  
I ponder these words in my heart.  
But I'm far from home when my child is born  
so I've nothing to give him but more broken dreams.

Years pass, and my son grows in wisdom and stature.<sup>4</sup>  
At times I still grieve for my little-girl dreams.  
The joy of weddings still brings me a sadness,  
though I cherish the glimpses of favor I've seen.

I go with my son to a wedding celebration.<sup>5</sup>  
When they run out of wine, my sadness grows.  
"Fill the jars with water," my son tells the servants.<sup>6</sup>  
His gift of wine helps heal my soul.

My heart has been pierced—so many dreams broken—  
and yet I've received this gift from the Lord:  
I no longer miss my wedding celebration;  
I'd much rather have the favor of the Lord.

## Writing about my feelings

Rev. Sim regularly writes poetry from the Gospel of John for the church's newsletter. He also encouraged me to write about my feelings and ideas through essays and poetry. I find such writing difficult but beneficial.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:5

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:28

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:52

<sup>5</sup> John 2:1-2

<sup>6</sup> John 2:7

Writing an essay requires me to consider an idea and explore where it leads me. When I follow the idea carefully and honestly, I sometimes gain new insight that delights me. Writing poetry is even harder than writing an essay. My best poems have come when I caught a feeling and then expressed the situation surrounding the feeling in a way that conveyed the emotion.

With Rev. Sim's help, I am beginning to see that emotions and complex ideas can be better expressed through poetry and metaphor than they can through bare facts and technical reasoning. At the beginning of the pandemic, I watched through the church office window a little girl playing on the playground. That day I caught the feeling of heaven.

### Like a Child

A little girl runs, her pink sneakers  
expressing her sun-loving joy.  
A crisp white top, rosemary-green shorts,  
and a white mask printed with a bouquet of bright flowers,  
to protect against unseen danger.

Exuberant, noisy—small children  
swarm around their parents,  
delighting in the unexpected walk.  
They've come to see Jesus, to feel the warmth of his touch,  
but the disciples reject them and send them away.

The children laugh, unmindful,  
playing games with each other,  
until a voice calls, "Come," and they look to see  
Jesus kneeling down, his arms wide open.  
And they all run to Jesus in a tumbling hug.

The little girl runs with blonde hair streaming  
through the bright summer grass  
in the joy of play, of sunshine warmth,  
of life to be lived despite the dangers.  
The mask forgotten and untouched on her face.

I catch a glimpse of heaven.

## Theological structure of my faith

During this time, Rev. Sim earned his Doctor of Ministry at Southern Methodist University. He wrote about Christian vocational spirituality for the entirety of Christian life. Proofreading his dissertation brought together his sermons, worship services and leadership, the spiritual counseling, gospel readings and exploratory writing. It provided me with a theological structure that put words to what I was learning spiritually. I am deeply grateful that Rev. Sim entrusted me with proofreading for him.

Rev. Sim explains Jesus's ministry using philosophical and psychological terms. The first chapter took me several readings because I was unfamiliar with Martin Heidegger's philosophy, Heinz Kohut's psychology, and Paul Tillich's theology. Carefully reading and considering Rev. Sim's explanation, however, began exposing misconceptions I had formed about commonly used Christian terms. His dissertation raised and then answered questions. How are human beings creations of the earth's dust and God's breath? What does it mean to have the image of God? What does it mean to be alive? What does it mean to be human? What is the human predicament? Is this the same thing as sin? How does Jesus save people? What is the good news? What does it mean to be spiritual? How is spirituality different from being religious? Was I spiritual or religious? These questions felt dangerous because they required me to reevaluate foundational terms of my faith but working to understand Rev. Sim's answers brought me to a deeper understanding of Jesus and his ministry. Now, I can feel the spiritual thread that runs through the New Testament books and holds them together.

## Living in the light of salvation: Christian vocational life

Five years have passed since Rev. Sim first became my church's pastor. During this time, he has kept his focus on Jesus, and Jesus's ministry has been his ministry. Under his pastorship, I have been freed from the oppression I felt under my own Christian legalism and dogmatic understandings. I have moved beyond studying the facts of the Bible to meeting Jesus, a spiritually astute, passionate, young man of Galilee who deeply desires that others know God as he knows him. I walk with Jesus each Sunday in the worship service and in communion celebrations. I hear his Gospel proclaimed for today's people in the sermon. I am sent forth to walk with Jesus throughout the week. Sunday's service shapes this walk. I

pray using the service's opening prayer. I think further on the sermon. As I do this, my walk with Jesus has begun shaping my work. His focus is becoming my focus; his priorities are becoming mine. Using Rev. Sim's terms, Jesus is becoming my ultimate self-object and I am finding the excellent way for my life through him.

Rev. Sim earned a Doctor of Ministry because he desired to share his understanding of Christian vocational spirituality with others. His dissertation summarizes his lifetime ministry of helping others meet the living Jesus, hear Jesus's call and respond to Jesus's sending. My changed life testifies to the effectiveness of Rev. Sim's ministry, but I have also witnessed a transformation at my church.

Under Rev. Sim's leadership, the church has been transforming visually and spiritually. The building is cleaner and brighter. During the week, the laughter of children fills four classrooms and pours out into the playground. The sanctuary's holiness has been restored, the cross returned to prominence, and the service is a service of worship. The older members of the church are meeting Jesus anew through the sermons and worship services. New members have come, felt the renewed spirituality, and joined in.

Change has come slowly. Rev. Sim is not offering a quick fix. But change does come because Rev. Sim's ministry is based on Jesus's ministry. Because of the depth of his own relationship with Jesus, Rev. Sim has led me and my church to a deeper relationship with Jesus. The depth of a relationship with Jesus is beyond measure. There is so much more to explore. If you want to meet the living Jesus, if you desire the most excellent way for your life, if you want to know ultimate love, or if you want to see Rev. Sim's ministry for yourself, then I invite you to St. Mark's United Methodist Church. At St. Mark's, you will receive the spiritual leadership needed for the journey of life. If you will commit three years of your life to meeting Jesus, walking with him, working with him and following him, I am confident that you will also experience the living Jesus.