

Bearing Faithful Witness - Resources

Exploring what it means to become a community that responds to "our people" by living and communicating a good news story.

RESOURCE #10

Fox News' Highly Reluctant Jesus Follower

Of all people surprised that I became an evangelical Christian, I'm the most surprised.

Kirsten Powers

Just seven years ago, if someone had told me that I'd be writing for *Christianity Today* magazine about how I came to believe in God, I would have laughed out loud. If there was one thing in which I was completely secure, it was that I would never adhere to any religion—especially to evangelical Christianity, which I held in particular contempt.

I grew up in the Episcopal Church in Alaska, but my belief was superficial and flimsy. It was borrowed from my archaeologist father, who was so brilliant he taught himself to speak and read Russian. When I encountered doubt, I would fall back on the fact that he believed.

Leaning on my father's faith got me through high school. But by college it wasn't enough, especially because as I grew older he began to confide in me his own doubts. What little faith I had couldn't withstand this revelation. From my early 20s on, I would waver between atheism and agnosticism, never coming close to considering that God could be real.

After college I worked as an appointee in the Clinton administration from 1992 to 1998. The White House surrounded me with intellectual people who, if they had any deep faith in God, never expressed it. Later, when I moved to New York, where I worked in Democratic politics, my world became aggressively secular. Everyone I knew was politically left-leaning, and my group of friends was overwhelmingly atheist.

I sometimes hear Christians talk about how terrible life must be for atheists. But our lives were not terrible. Life actually seemed pretty wonderful, filled with opportunity and good conversation and privilege. I know now that it was not as wonderful as it could have been. But you don't know what you don't know. How could I have missed something I didn't think existed?

Very Open-Minded

To the extent that I encountered Christians, it was in the news cycle. And inevitably they were saying something about gay people or feminists. I didn't feel I was missing much. So when I began dating a man who was into Jesus, I was not looking for God. In fact, the week before I met him, a friend had asked me if I had any deal breakers in dating. My response: "Just nobody who is religious."

A few months into our relationship, my boyfriend called to say he had something important to talk to me about. I remember exactly where I was sitting in my West Village apartment when he said, "Do you believe Jesus is your Savior?" My stomach sank. I started to panic. *Oh no*, was my first thought. *He's crazy*.

When I answered no, he asked, "Do you think you could ever believe it?" He explained that he was at a point in life when he wanted to get married and felt that I could be that person, but he couldn't marry a non-Christian. I said I didn't want to mislead him—that I would never believe in Jesus.

Then he said the magic words for a liberal: "Do you think you could keep an open mind about it?" Well, of course. "I'm very open-minded!"

Even though I wasn't at all. I derided Christians as anti-intellectual bigots who were too weak to face the reality that there is no rhyme or reason to the world. I had found this man's church attendance an oddity to overlook, not a point in his favor.

As he talked, I grew conflicted. On the one hand, I was creeped out. On the other hand, I had enormous respect for him. He is smart, educated, and intellectually curious. I remember thinking, *What if this is true, and I'm not even willing to consider it?*

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A few weeks later I went to church with him. I was so clueless about Christianity that I didn't know that some Presbyterians were evangelicals. So when we arrived at the Upper East Side service of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, I was shocked and repelled by what I saw. I was used to the high-church liturgy of my youth. We were meeting in an auditorium with a band playing what I later learned was "praise music." I thought, *How am I going to tell him I can never come back?*

But then the pastor preached. I was fascinated. I had never heard a pastor talk about the things he did. Tim Keller's sermon was intellectually rigorous, weaving in art and history and philosophy. I decided to come back to hear him again. Soon, hearing Keller speak on Sunday became the highlight of my week. I thought of it as just an interesting lecture—not really church. I just tolerated the rest of it in order to hear him. Any person who is familiar with Keller's preaching knows that he usually brings Jesus in at the end of the sermon to tie his points together. For the first few months, I left feeling frustrated: *Why did he have to ruin a perfectly good talk with this Jesus nonsense?*

Each week, Keller made the case for Christianity. He also made the case against atheism and agnosticism. He expertly exposed the intellectual weaknesses of a purely secular worldview. I came to realize that even if Christianity wasn't the real thing, neither was atheism.

I began to read the Bible. My boyfriend would pray with me for God to reveal himself to me. After about eight months of going to hear Keller, I concluded that the weight of evidence was on the side of Christianity. But I didn't feel any connection to God, and frankly, I was fine with that. I continued to think that people who talked of hearing from God or experiencing God were either delusional or lying. In my most generous moments, I allowed that they were just imagining things that made them feel good.

Then one night in 2006, on a trip to Taiwan, I woke up in what felt like a strange cross between a dream and reality. Jesus came to me and said, "Here I am." It felt so real. I didn't know what to make of it. I called my boyfriend, but before I had time to tell him about it, he told me he had been praying the night before and felt we were supposed to break up. So we did. Honestly, while I was upset, I was more traumatized by Jesus visiting me.

Completely True

I tried to write off the experience as misfiring synapses, but I couldn't shake it. When I returned to New York a few days later, I was lost. I suddenly felt God everywhere and it was terrifying. More important, it was unwelcome. It felt like an invasion. I started to fear I was going crazy.

I didn't know what to do, so I spoke with writer Eric Metaxas, whom I had met through my boyfriend and who had talked with me quite a bit about God. "You need to be in a Bible study," he said. "And Kathy Keller's Bible study is the one you need to be in." I didn't like the sound of that, but I was desperate. My whole world was imploding. How was I going to tell my family or friends about what had happened?

Nobody would understand. I didn't understand. (It says a lot about the family in which I grew up that one of my most pressing concerns was that Christians would try to turn me into a Republican.)

I remember walking into the Bible study. I had a knot in my stomach. In my mind, only weirdoes and zealots went to Bible studies. I don't remember what was said that day. All I know is that when I left, everything had changed. I'll never forget standing outside that apartment on the Upper East Side and saying to myself, "It's true. It's completely true." The world looked entirely different, like a veil had been lifted off it. I had not an iota of doubt. I was filled with indescribable joy.

The horror of the prospect of being a devout Christian crept back in almost immediately. I spent the next few months doing my best to wrestle away from God. It was pointless. Everywhere I turned, there he was. Slowly there was less fear and more joy. The Hound of Heaven had pursued me and caught me—whether I liked it or not.

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This article is located at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/november/fox-news-highly-reluctant-jesus-follower-kirstenpowers.html> - [posted 10/22/2013]