

Get Off The Fence!

By Dan Hayes

Their enemies were always giving the early Christians serious problems. They crucified them; they hung them; they speared them; they burned them; they fed them to lions. Sometimes they even stole their property and sold their children into slavery. They ridiculed these “religious weirdoes.” These frustrated adversaries were not indifferent to people who had been given the ridiculous title (at the time) “Christians.” In fact, they once shouted, with tears of rage in their eyes, “The people that have turned the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6). The implication was, “What have we done to deserve this?”

Isn't that interesting? The enemies of Jesus might have thought His followers demented, demonic, or dangerous; but they never thought them insignificant.

What about today? What about your campus, your town, your church, your . . . Self? Are the Christians where you live “turning the world upside down?” Are they even nudging it a little bit? Does anybody even take them seriously enough to notice?

A few years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury said, “Wherever the Apostle Paul went in his day, he touched off a revival or a riot. Wherever I go today, they serve tea!” That about sums it up.

I live in Atlanta, Georgia. This has been touted as the most Christian part of America. The Gallup Poll discovered that, though it has only 17% of the US population, the South as 43% of the people who call themselves “born-again Christians.” So you might think the campuses and cities of the South would be veritably aflame for God.

But, on the contrary, when I walk into a fraternity or dorm at virtually any campus around here, I'll ask a guy: “Say Fred, you know any Christians in here?”

Fred will say, “Sure. Joe's a Christian; Sam's a Christian.”

“Great, Fred, what about you? Are you a Christian?”

“Naah!”

“Why not?”

“Well, because Joe's a Christian and Sam's a Christian. Why would I want to be like them? I've got problems enough of my own!”

What's Fred saying here? He's looked at Sam and Joe and doesn't like what he sees, so he prefers to take his chances on some other option.

You see, most Christians today (and not just in the South) are “on the fence” for Christ. I mean they've got one foot in the world and one foot in the Kingdom. When they want to play around with Christians for a while, they go this way. They are riding the fence because they can't decide which way they want to go.

I was speaking on this subject in Arizona one time to a group of fraternity men. Right in the middle of the talk, a guy jumped up and blurted out—“I can't stand it, I can't stand it!” I asked, “You mean the talk?”

“No,” he said. “I mean, I've been on the fence for Christ so long, I feel like I am the fence.” Then he turned to his fraternity brothers and said, “You guys know it. I'm sorry. I've been a bad example. I'm getting off this fence right now!”

Well, you could have heard a pin drop. Their mouths hung open. And, by the way, they really listened to the rest of the talk.

Being on the fence for Christ is a real problem. Consider what Jesus said in the Bible: “I would rather that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16). Remember, Christ said it; I didn't.

Lukewarm!—another way of saying, “on the fence.” Doesn't it strike you as odd that Christ would have such a bad reaction to those who are tepid than to those who are antagonistic and cold?” Why does He feel this way?

I have a theory. I think that “on the fence” people, by not deciding which way they want to go, block the doorway for those who are not yet Christians, and obscure their view of who Jesus really is. So Christ is saying: “Either get really hot for Me, full on and full out; or get really cold for me, far, far away; but get out of the doorway so that those who do not know Me can see Me as I really am.”

And who is He, really?

Most people have two stereotypes of Christ. One is of a mean, old man leaning out over the battlements of heaven trying to spot someone who's having fun. As soon as He spots him, he says, “Aha! Fun—F-U-N, the first three letters in FUNERAL!” And then He mashes him (squish!).

Or else people think of Him like pictures they saw in childhood—long blond hair, white flowing robes, blue contact lenses, sunken cheeks, little lambs and bunnies hopping around Him, floating three inches above the ground saying in a high, squeaky voice, “Follow Me!”

With these mistaken views of Him, no wonder people shy away. But He is not really like either of those. Rather, He is the One who spoke and 100 million galaxies were flung into space. He is the One who cleansed the lepers, raised the dead, brought peace to the bereaved, joy to the depressed. He is the tough and tender One who drove the money changers out of the Temple, but gathered the children into His arms. He's the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is right here, right now, ready to embrace each of us as He did 2000 years ago on the cross bearing all the wrongs we have ever done, are doing now, and ever will do.

And when we who are Christians are on the fence, we block the door so that those who want to see who He really is get a twisted view. Instead of the true Christ they see Christians who live “under the pile” or “for the weekend” or “for the bucks” or “to

party” and who just can’t make up their mind about how they want to live. Such vacillation only makes others think there isn’t anything too fantastic about knowing and being committed to Him.

Why do we get into this “on the fence” mode? How does it happen? Sure, there are lots of different reasons. A tragedy occurs, and God seems far off, doesn’t seem to answer our prayers. We move far away, soon finding ourselves lukewarm about Him. Or we get into a dating relationship with someone who is skeptical or questioning about Christ. We really like him or her and it seems easier to doubt or brush off this Christ whom we can’t see and touch for the sake of some dear person who we can see or touch.

Or perhaps we’ve seen hypocrites in the church and been hurt by a member of the clergy or a “good” Christian, and we respond by dumping Christianity. It might even be scientific or intellectual doubts that put us on the fence for Him. Maybe somebody told us not to ask questions, just “believe.”

Or maybe we’ve done some things we feel guilty about (but still enjoy them). We’ve tried to stop, but it seems we can’t. So, we drift farther and farther from Christ. From time to time when we do look back, He seems so far away, and we’re sure He could never really forgive us for our sins now. And even if He could, it would still take Him a couple of years to get over it! (At least that is how we feel)

Well, you could probably think up even more reasons, very personal and very substantial. But no matter what the reason, the person for whom being on the fence for Christ is most damaging and painful is not the confused non-Christian observer, but rather the vacillating Christian.

Jesus Christ’s unbelievable presence in our lives is rarely (if ever) felt or noticed by lukewarm people, but rather only by “go for it- let Christ take the throne of my life” people. When we receive Him as Savior and Lord, He intends for us to experience His pardon, purpose, peace and power. These are actualized and manifest in our daily experience as we allow Him to be on the throne of our lives- not as a cold, authoritarian Commander in Chief, but as our gracious, loving totally- just Savior and King. He lives inside of us to produce His character and life!

When we ride the fence, we short circuit His power and “the thrill is gone.” It feels like an elephant is sitting on our air hose; the spiritual oxygen is choked off. Guilt rises in our lives, we don’t want to be around others who are excited about Christ, yet neither are we fulfilled and happy in the presence of those who ridicule and reject Him. We cannot feel comfortable in either world. It hurts.

No doubt, part of the problem is that at some point Christianity becomes rules to us instead of a relationship. Isn’t everybody just sick of rules of Christianity? I know that I am. People are always trying to cram one more rule into their lives so they can be “good Christians.” Then nobody can get near them because they are afraid they’ll drop one of those rules on the floor and break it!

Jesus did not primarily come to set up rules. He came to set up a relationship. When that dawns on a person, he no longer wants the fence. He wants off. He wants to spend time with the One who died and rose for him and who promises His daily presence to “cheer and to guide.” Perching on a fence is actually a big bore. Following Christ is an adventure- not easy, not cheap, not painless, but definitely not dull.

Never have I met a person who has been “full on and full out” for Christ (not wild and fanatical, but rather committed) for all his life who is sorry. Nobody ever says on his death-bed, “I wish I had spent more time on the fence for Christ.”

Bill Bright once put it this way: “Christian or not, I am going to have trouble in this life. Christian or not, I will one day die. If I am going to be a Christian at all, then I want to experience all that Christ has for me. And if I have to suffer anyway and one day die, then why not suffer and die for the highest and the best: for the Lord Jesus Christ and His gospel?”

One college student, after making this discovery himself, wrote me to say. Thanks, Dan, for helping see that Christ is a relationship not a religion. That has changed my whole life.”

So how about you? Honestly now, are you “full on” and “full out” for Him- or are you fence riding? Are you atop pickets trying to straddle them (ouch!) or do you want to let Him bring you adventure and purpose and significance and love?

You are the one who has to make the decision. He is not going to give you a magic carpet ride off. But, if you want to, you can get off that fence. It involves a decision of the will which you can express to Him through prayer. It is not your words, but it is the attitude of your heart that matters. If following helps, though, here is a suggested prayer:

“Lord Jesus, I admit I have been on the fence for you. Please forgive me. I want to get off right now. Thanks for dying and rising again for me. I offer you the throne of my life. You take it. You make me the person you want me to be. Please live your life through me- and please keep me off the fence. Help me to be “full on and full out” Thank you for hearing my prayers as you promised. Amen.

When you pray this prayer, tell somebody who is fired up for Christ (maybe the person who gave you this article) so you can be helped on your exciting journey with Him to experience the adventure of living OFF the fence.