

COMING TO FAITH IN CHRIST

(This is an excerpt from Tom Wright's brilliant book, 'Simply Christianity'.)

The Bible is clear that no one is a Christian merely because they are quite moral, or are born one, or because they give mere intellectual assent to the facts of Christianity. The Bible is clear that a person needs to become a Christian. But how does this happen? And what can we expect to experience?

People experience coming to faith in Christ differently

What happens when you wake up in the morning?

For some people, waking up is a rude and shocking experience. Off goes the alarm, and they jump in fright, dragged out of a deep sleep to face the cold, cruel light of day.

For others, it's a quiet, slow process. They can be half-asleep and half-awake, not even sure which is which, until gradually, eventually, without any shock or resentment, they are happy to know that another day has begun.

Most of us know something of both, and a lot in between.

Waking up offers one of the most basic pictures of what can happen when God takes a hand in someone's life.

There are classic alarm-clock stories. Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, blinded by a sudden light, stunned and speechless, discovered that the God he had worshipped had revealed himself in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. John Wesley found his heart becoming strangely warm, and he never looked back. They and a few others are the famous ones, but there are millions more.

And there are many stories, though they don't hit the headlines in the same way, of the half-awake and half-asleep variety. Some people take months, years, maybe even decades, during which they aren't sure whether they're on the outside of Christian faith looking in, or on the inside looking around to see if it's real.

As with ordinary waking up, there are many people who are somewhere in between. But the point is that there's such a thing as being asleep, and there's such a thing as being awake. And it's important to tell the difference, and to be sure you're awake by the time you have to be up and ready for action, whatever that action may be.

God wants to give us the gift of new life

Waking up is, in fact, one of the regular early Christian images for “what happens when the gospel of Jesus—the good news that the creator God has acted decisively to put the world to rights—impinges on someone’s consciousness. There’s a good reason for this. “Sleep” was a regular way of talking about death in the ancient Jewish world. With the resurrection of Jesus, the world was being invited to wake up. “Wake up, sleeper!” writes St. Paul. “Rise from the dead! Christ will give you light!” (Ephesians 5:14).

The earliest Christians believed, in fact, that resurrection was what every human being really needed—not just in the end, in the new world that God will eventually make, but in the present life as well. God intends, in the end, to give us a new life, in comparison with which the present one is a mere thing of shadows. He intends to give us new life within his ultimate new creation. But the new creation has already begun with the resurrection of Jesus, and God wants us to wake up now, in the present time, to the new reality. We are to come through death and out the other side into a new sort of life; to become daytime people, even though the rest of the world isn’t yet awake. We are to live in the present darkness by the light of Christ, so that when the sun comes up at last we will be ready for it. Or, to change the image, we are already to be penciling the sketches for the masterpiece that God will one day call us to help him paint. That’s what it means to respond to the call of the Christian gospel.

It isn’t, in other words, a matter of “having a new religious experience.” It may feel like that, or it may not. For some people, becoming a Christian is a deeply emotional experience; for others, it’s a calm, clear-eyed resolution of matters long pondered. Our personalities are gloriously different, and God treats us all gloriously differently. In any case, some religious experiences are profoundly un- or anti-Christian. The ancient world was full of all kinds of religions, many of them deeply dehumanizing. Though we don’t always recognize it, the modern world is like that, too.

The Gospel is the message about Jesus

So what is involved in hearing and responding to the Christian gospel? What does it mean to wake up to God’s new world? What does it mean, in other words, to become a member of God’s people, of Jesus’ people—of the church?

The gospel—the “good news” of what the creator God has done in Jesus—is first and foremost news about something that has happened. And the first and most appropriate response to that news is to believe it. God has raised Jesus from the dead, and has thereby declared in a single powerful action that Jesus has launched the long-awaited kingdom of God, and that (by means of Jesus’ death) the evil of all the world has been defeated at last. When the alarm clock goes off, this is what it says: “Here’s the good news. Wake up and believe it!”

What it means to believe

This message, though, is so utterly unlikely and extraordinary that you can't expect people simply to believe it in the same way they might believe you if you said it was raining outside. And yet, as people hear the message, at least some find that they do believe it. It makes sense to them. I don't mean the kind of "sense" you get within the flatland world of secular imagination. There the only things that matter are what you can put into a test tube or a bank account. I mean the kind of sense that exists within the strange new world which -we glimpse, even if only for a moment, in the way we glimpse a whole new world when we stand in awe in front of a great painting, or are swept off our feet by a song or a symphony. That kind of "making sense" is much more like falling in love than like calculating a bank balance. Ultimately, believing that God raised Jesus from the dead is a matter of believing and trusting in the God who would, and did, do such a thing.

This is where our word "belief" can be inadequate or even misleading. What the early Christians meant by "belief" included both believing that God had done certain things and believing in the God who had done them. This is not belief that God exists, though clearly that is involved, too, but loving, grateful trust.

When things "make sense" in that way, you are left knowing that it isn't so much a matter of you figuring it all out and deciding to take a step, or a stand. It's a matter of Someone calling you, calling with a voice you dimly recognize, calling with a message that is simultaneously an invitation of love and a summons to obedience. The call to faith is both of these. It is the call to believe that the true God, the world's creator, has loved the whole world so much, you and me included, that he has come himself in the person of his Son and has died and risen again to exhaust the power of evil and create a new world in which everything will be put to rights and joy will replace sorrow.

Christian faith isn't a general religious awareness. Nor is it the ability to believe several unlikely propositions. It is certainly not a kind of gullibility that would put us out of touch with any genuine reality. It is the faith which hears the story of Jesus, including the announcement that he is the world's true Lord, and responds from the heart with a surge of grateful love that says: "Yes. Jesus is Lord. He died for my sins. God raised him from the dead. This is the centre of everything." Whether you come to this faith in a blinding flash or by a long, slow, winding route, once you get to this point you are a real Christian.

Receiving undeserved forgiveness

The more conscious we are of our own inability to get it right, perhaps even our own flagrant disloyalty to the call to live as genuine human beings, the

more we will hear this call as what it most deeply is. It is the offer of forgiveness. It is the summons to receive God's gift of a slate wiped clean, a totally new start. Even to glimpse that is to catch your breath with awe and gratitude, and to find an answering, thankful love welling up inside. As we saw earlier, just as you can't set up a staircase of human logic and climb up it to get to some kind of "proof" of God, so you can't set up a staircase of human moral or cultural achievement and climb up it to earn God's favour. From time to time some Christians have imagined that they were supposed to do just that, and in their efforts they've made a nonsense of everything.

Seeing the connection between trust and obedience

But the fact that we can't ever earn God's favour by our own moral effort shouldn't blind us to the fact that the call to faith is also a call to obedience. It must be, because it declares that Jesus is the world's rightful Lord and Master. (The language Paul used of Jesus would have reminded his hearers at once of the language they were accustomed to hearing about Caesar.) That's why Paul can speak about "the obedience of faith." Indeed, the word the early Christians used for "faith" can also mean "loyalty" or "allegiance." It's what emperors ancient and modern have always demanded of their subjects. The message of the gospel is the good news that Jesus is the one true "emperor," ruling the world with his own brand of self-giving love. This, of course, cheerfully and deliberately deconstructs the word "emperor" itself. When the early Christians used "imperial" language in relation to Jesus, they were always conscious of irony. Whoever heard of a crucified emperor?

What it means to repent

When we see ourselves in the light of Jesus' type of kingdom, and realize the extent to which we have been living by a different code altogether, we realize, perhaps for the first time, how far we have fallen short of what we were made to be. This realization is what we call "repentance", a serious turning away from patterns of life that deface and distort our genuine humanness. It isn't just a matter of feeling sorry for particular failings, though that will often be true as well. It is the recognition that the living God has made us humans to reflect his image into his world, and that we haven't done so. (The technical term for that is "sin," whose primary meaning is not "breaking the rules" but "missing the mark," failing to hit the target of complete, genuine, glorious humanness.) Once again, the gospel itself, the very message which announces that Jesus is Lord and calls us to obedience, contains the remedy: forgiveness, unearned and freely given, because of his cross. All we can say is, "Thank you." *To believe, to love, to obey (and to repent of our failure to do those things): faith of this kind is the mark of the Christian, the one and only badge we wear.*

The analogy of birth

What's more, you are giving clear evidence that a new life has begun. Somewhere in the depths of your being something has stirred into life that

was previously not there. It is because of this that many early Christians reached for the language of birth. Jesus himself, in a famous discussion with a Jewish teacher, spoke of being born “from above”: a new event similar to, though distinguished from, ordinary human birth (John 3). Many early Christians picked up and developed this idea. As a newborn baby breathes and cries, so the signs of life in a newborn Christian are faith and repentance, inhaling the love of God and exhaling an initial cry of distress. And at that point what God provides, exactly as for a newborn infant, is the comfort, protection, and nurturing promise of a mother.

Summary of this article:

- *Coming to faith in Christ happens differently for different people. In the same way that one person can wake up slowly and another very suddenly, so different people can become a Christian slowly or very suddenly.*
- *God will one day resurrect the whole universe into ‘new life’ but, ever since the resurrection of Jesus, he has already started to give ‘new life’ to people who have responded to his wake-up call.*
- *God in his goodness has acted decisively in this world through Jesus his Son. Through Jesus’ death he has broken the power of the evil that enslaves us, and through Jesus’ resurrection he has launched his kingdom, which now advances to restore all of creation, starting with humanity. This is the message of the Bible and the church. This is the Gospel.*
- *We become Christians by believing in and trusting in God and Jesus. This belief has a logical component, but is so much more than mere mental assent.*
- *We will never be able to earn the forgiveness that God seeks to give us as we trust in Jesus, who died to forgive our sins.*
- *We are called to trust Jesus, which - especially when we consider that Jesus is emperor and king - implies giving him total allegiance and obedience too.*
- *When we see how we have failed to live the lives we were meant to, and see God’s willingness to forgive and change us in Jesus - we own up to our failure - and we reach out to Christ to forgive and change us. That is what it means to repent.*
- *Becoming a Christian is analogous to birth.*