

# A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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## “Getting Started”

*The First in a Series entitled, On Being Christian*

**Luke 3: 21-22; Acts 8: 9-24**

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So... if someone... some strange person that didn't know you... some person you'd never see again... came up to you and asked you how to become a Christian... or how to be Christian... how would you respond?

Would that be easy to answer?

A no-brainer?

“**Why you just \_\_\_\_\_**”, and the blank gets filled in?

Or would you need some time to think on it?

And some of you are thinking, “**why would anyone need time to think on their answer? This is Bible School 101... you just pray the sinner's prayer at the back of the tract. You just get saved.**”

Of course, someone down the pew might be thinking... “**Well, it's a journey and the journey begins by receiving Baptism from the Church.**”

And back in the back, someone else is answering my question... only it's different in their minds and they're saying, “**Well, you don't choose it... it chooses you.**”

So... my simple little question, you begin to see... has a lot of potential answers.

Just for fun, why don't we imagine a table full of Christians. They all just happen to be sitting together at a dinner table at the Golden Corral in Muleshoe, Texas, where they're snowed in on the way home from a ski trip.

They all got stuck there and the place was so packed with stranded folks that they all, strangers though they were, had to sit at the same table. And surprise of all surprises, they all happen to be Christian and luck of all luck it's All-You-Can-Eat-Catfish night.

Evelyn the Evangelical, spoke up first. She had a on T-shirt she got on the slopes that said, **Jesus would Do Black Diamonds**... It's got a picture of Jesus on a mogul. Evelyn, with great zeal, suggested that as long as they were going to be stuck there in the Golden Corral for hours that they should probably get to know one another... and why not “*share their personal testimonies about the Lord.*”

Evelyn of course volunteered to go first, quoting that verse about never denying Christ before men.

Evelyn said that she had become a Christian at a Young Life Camp. She hadn't been raised in church but some friends talked her into going and on the last night, during the invitation, she felt convicted of her need to be saved and she walked the aisle and asked Christ into her heart. Upon returning home, she of course joined a local church and was baptized and she's been walking with Jesus ever since.

When she finished, she said with great enthusiasm, “All right, who's next?”

It was quiet for a moment... awkwardly so... until an older gentleman spoke up. “**The name's Kendall,**” he said, “**and I'm Catholic.**” And between bites of hush puppies, he spoke slowly, with a bit of an accent, about having come from a long line of Christians. And about how he was sprinkled as a child, and how every Saturday they went to confession and every Sunday they were at communion. “**There were some years when it was all kind of boring for me, but now,**” he said choking up, “**I weep every time I receive the host.**”

The younger man to his left, who looked like he lived in a business suit, looked concerned and serious as he took in the older gentleman's testimony. “**When I became a teenager in my church, we went through a course where we learned the teachings of the Church. Who is God? Who are we? What is our state? I was taught about the meaning of the incarnation and the death and resurrection of Jesus.**”

**At the end of it, when they were certain I believed, I was confirmed. My name's Roger and I'm a new elder at a Reformed Church. And I sure love this catfish."**

This sharing went on for some time... these different Christians, sharing about how they became Christian.

There was Nancy the Nazarene... who said she couldn't really remember not being Christian... it was just always **"in her,"** she said.

And Peter the Pentecostal who said he knew he was a Christian finally when he had received the Baptism of the Spirit and spoke in tongues.

There was Olivia the Orthodox woman who said she'd become a Christian as she was moved by the beauty of the Orthodox churches.

And there was Mike the Methodist, who spoke mostly of following Jesus and doing his best to be like Jesus and to be obedient.

There was even Ned the New Ager... He said, though he'd never ever gone to church... but that one day he **"was, like, snow boarding down this gnarly black slope and I kind of got off on a trail that no one else, like, even knew about... man. And I just plopped down in the powder. And it was so soft... and so beautiful... I just said out loud, "Wow, God, dude... with a capital D... this is so amazing"...**

**And all of a sudden... I don't know... something just sort of moved over me and all into me. And I felt changed, you know. I'd seen God and was never the same. A couple of years later I started reading about Christianity and was eventually even dunked and I'm so there, man... I'm down with JC."**

I could go on at the Golden Corral but you get the point. As simple as some of us may think the answer is to my original question, "how do we become Christian," in our own experience we know, in some very real sense, that there isn't one answer.

And I do think scripture reflects that... that while there are always consistently some things present... there is a great variety of experience.

Sometimes folks confess their belief and then are baptized. At other times, for instance in Acts 10, folks are filled with the spirit first... and then they're baptized.

In our story from Acts 8... The folks down in Samaria were believers, but the Apostles decided to lay hands on them because they had (did you hear it?) **"only been baptized in the name of Jesus."** Apparently, they needed something else... they'd received an external ritual but now it seems they needed something more direct and internal.

This is what you see in scripture. There is no predictable pattern to becoming Christian. But... there do always seem to be some things present.

There's a person, of course... a human being who is hungry... a human being who is willing. There's a will. A decision. A someone saying yes...

... Like the Ethiopian eunuch saying, **"Here's some water, why shouldn't I be baptized?"**

There is this person who at some time decides to trust... to surrender. Even Jesus does that. His baptism was that, I think. He has a will and he surrenders it to God. It seems like that's one of the elements always there.

But there's always another. It's never just you... There's a person... The Church... The witness of faith through someone or scripture. There is some mediation...someone's hands...

And sometimes it's a sermon and sometimes it's a sacrament. The Church baptizing and in the process imparting something.

There is a person with a yes to offer as we've said, but there's also an aisle of a church and a preacher to take by the hand and pound you on the back as the choir continues to hum "Just as I Am."

It seems... like that's always the case. There is a Philip, on behalf of the church, preaching and baptizing down in Samaria... some Paul... some Apollos offering what the Church has to offer.

So there's someone saying yes... and there's always some community, some sacramental, proclaiming community. But that's not all and the New Testament makes that clear.

When Jesus is baptized, the Spirit of God descends upon him in a bodily, physical way... like a dove would. And in that moment Jesus has this experience of being deeply blessed and knowing he is deeply loved...in union with the Father.

So there's someone's yes to an invitation and there's something mediating God's invitation... but there's also something wild and empowering and unpredictable.

It's that something that Jesus was trying to tell Nicodemus about... **The Spirit will give birth to you and the Spirit... is like the wind... it blows where it will...** it is not form dependant. Nor can it be called up or conjured up... or manipulated.

So... How do we become Christian? How do we get on our way in this journey?  
What would you say, if you were asked?

Is it a person's choice? **"I believe... I choose Jesus."** **"Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."** It is an act of the will, isn't it?

Or... is it something that comes to you because God gifted the Church with the power to make it so. **"I give to you the keys of the kingdom and whatever you set free will be set free."** Jesus breathes on the disciples. **"I'm sending you into the world and whoever you forgive... they're forgiven."** How do we become Christian? It's sacramental, isn't it?

Or is it something God does... And it happens to you. Whether you're a first century gentile who starts speaking in tongues or whether you're a ski dude off in some snow drift. Like Helen Keller who (as I understand it), after she read the gospel, says, **"somehow I already knew this."** How do we become Christian? It's mystical... charismatic, isn't it?

The Church throughout history has tried to answer my question and I'm thinking you could organize a Church History course around how various traditions answered. You can see these components fleshed out...

The Orthodox and the Catholics and the Anglicans, so centered in beautiful form and so strong in their conviction that it really does matter... That it really does give you something.

Or Baptists and other Evangelicals who say it's a decision you make. **"You can't be born Christian,"** they'd say. You invite Jesus to live within you and he does.

Or Quakers... just sitting in the quiet, waiting for the Spirit to move...

Or Pentecostals... praying for, looking for some sign that God's spirit is alive within you. Believing that Christians, especially, ought to be alive with God.

All of these are Biblical... all of them with their strengths. And as we know, all of them with their weaknesses, usually when they lose one of these elements. And you can see it... find it...in history and around that table at the Golden Corral, probably.

Folks of form... they do the form and they get it right... assuring their entrance into heaven having gone through the right motions enough. But when the heart of things is lost... form is no longer Sacramental... it doesn't mediate spirit and we start thinking we can manufacture faith with our form.

We get off somehow, don't we?

Or maybe it's the folks who've emphasized spirit... Who prayed loudly over their catfish at Golden Corral... And they're so "sincere." And... so hungry for experience and dependent on it... They'll do just about anything to get it... Like Simon... even buy it. It's not held by anything mature.

Or there are those of us... who have shrunk being a Christian down to me and my Jesus and my decision that I made that Monday night at camp...during the last verse of "Pass It On!" And we'll even say explicitly, **"The Church can't save you, baptism does nothing for you... Forms are for the pagans or for the birds really. It's all about what you do in your heart."**

See what happens... We... individually and collectively... get one part of the equation down and make it the whole nine yards.

We decide doctrine is the deal and we get it down and get it down and fine tune it and tweak it... and just wring the spirit out of everything in the process.

Or we punt on form thinking it's anti spirit... because we haven't learned that, like a river, spirit flows most vibrantly when there is form--banks and containment... and lack of it tends to dissipate real Spirit out into what we'd call a spiritual swamp. But some folks don't understand that...

Have you been in churches like that where everyone's having to work real hard to **“keep that spirit up... hey, hey, hey... Keep that spirit up. Gimi a J...” Formlessness gets exhausting.**

Do you see the problem? Baptists, for instance, of all people... minimizing baptism by saying things like, **“It's only a symbol and we just do it on Sunday nights.”** And the message was, **“because it's not all that significant.”**

Ours is an incarnate faith... and our confession is that God comes to us through us... and through creation and through all sorts of things... especially the gifts of Baptism and Communion given to the Church.

So how do you become Christian? If you were stranded in Muleshoe, down at that the Golden Corral... what would you say?

I'm going to be preaching on this for a while... for a few weeks... “On Being Christian.” It's not so obvious a thing... But I think the Bible does teach us about what is involved in it.

There is a person... a unique and one of a kind creation, who is known by the Creator. Who is pursued by the Creator. That hunger and longing you feel is a gift... and while you'll always have a will, even the desire to raise your hand and say yes... is grace.

But still it's your call... you are free... to follow or not... And that's clear from Scripture.

And what's also clear is that you aren't going to get this on your own. For sure, God will do what God will do, but God moves most apparently in the Church... and in our life together. The Church is bearing a mystery to you... in every service of worship... every prayer... every sermon... every baptism... every loaf and every cup... in every friendship or cup of cool water. The Church offers salvation and that's clear in scripture.

And even with all our wonderful forms and with all that will... the Bible teaches us that when it comes to your heart... God alone is the transformer. It is the Spirit... that unpredictable third person of the Trinity. What the Celtic Christian symbolized with a wild goose... that reality... that changes you... that makes of you a new creation. That's clear from scripture.

Can we be a church shaped by all of this good biblical truth? Not running from form... not worshipping it either. Calling people to decision... but remembering that really, it's only God alone who can move us...change us.

Alive to Spirit...Remembering tradition...Reverencing mystery...Forever saying yes... and inviting Jesus into our hearts... into all we know of who we are... every day.

Every day...

--surrendering our wills

--living in Christ's church

--that we might be transformed by God's Spirit.

I hope that's the answer we'll all give...next time we're snowed in at the Golden Corral in Muleshoe.

Amen.