

## Is Christianity a journey, a lifestyle or both? Part 1: Human Development

Growing up, I always understood Christianity as a way of life. For me, the title “Christian” was somehow synonymous with “nice person”. This meant people who went to church, but it also implied people who lived according to values like honesty, integrity, compassion, and justice. I was frustrated by people who claimed to be Christian while pronouncing judgement on others even though the Bible tells us to leave judgment to God. Indeed, the angry, hateful, and bigoted words and actions coming from people calling themselves Christian made me ashamed to admit that I was one.

That made me angry. But then I felt ashamed for being angry at other Christians. At least they could admit their faith. I only wore my cross on Sundays and avoided talking about my spiritual life while at work – even though I was in my profession (health and human services) because of my faith.

To me a life of faith implied going to church and living a moral life. I had also never considered my faith something that I could work on and grow. For me, God was God, I was myself, and our relationship was – well, static. My responsibility as a Christian was to follow the rules, be a nice person and figure out how to share my faith – though I had no idea how to do so without “imposing” my faith on others like the hypocrites I feared becoming.

Shortly after becoming Lutheran (a story for another time) I read an announcement for a class taught by a retired pastor named Fred Castor. The class was called “Spirituality”. I had no idea what it was about, but a little nudge inside told me to go. To my surprise, the nudge was enough. I screwed up my courage and attended my first class.

The group met on Wednesday night – the night when there were many church activities. We were in brightly lit room in the education wing. Long wooden tables formed a square. A cross section of members filed in, laughing, and chatting. I took a seat near the door thinking I could use my kids as an excuse to leave if necessary.

Once we were seated, Pr. Fred Castor passed out a photocopied packet stapled in the corner. We began by reading and discussing the handout. Someone read a paragraph and we would discuss if anyone wanted or move on if no one chimed in.

The texts themselves were unlike anything I had read. Rather than reading the Bible or theology (*ideas about* God), these texts described people’s own journeys *with* God. The authors wrote about their own lived experiences both good and bad. They described moments of clarity and confusion. At times they felt called in a particular direction and other times they felt abandoned by God. In their stories I saw my own journey for the first time. I was stunned to read people from hundreds of years ago describing the same things I was going through now.

That is when I realized that I wasn’t alone. If people living hundreds of years ago had the same questions, experiences, and struggles that I did with God, then maybe my faith wasn’t just in my own head. Maybe faith wasn’t simply a set of beliefs and behaviors.

That led me to wonder if spirituality was more like other forms of human development? As a psychology student I had learned about many ways’ humans develop (physically, cognitively, socially, emotionally, linguistically, etc.) Was there such a thing as spiritual development?

This question opened me up to the possibility of spiritual growth. And the idea of spiritual growth opened me up to an entirely new path in life – one that was far more lifegiving and challenging than the path I had been on.