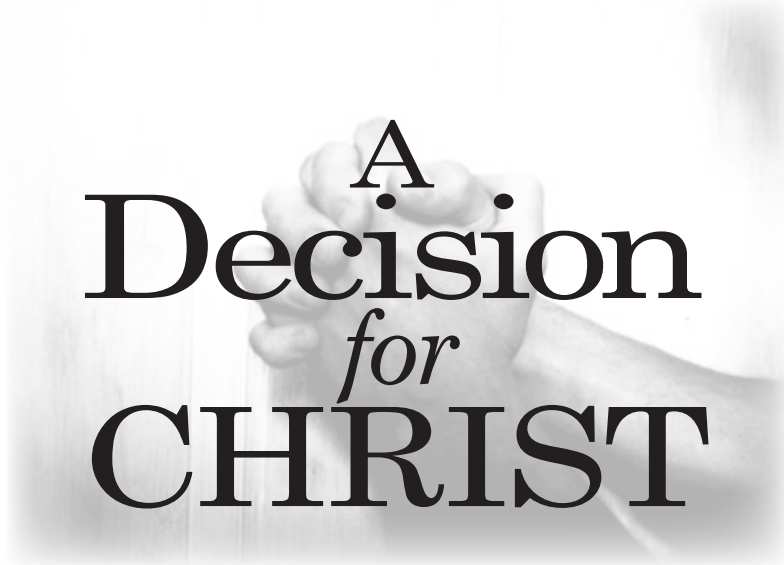


FREE



A
Decision
for
CHRIST



A
Decision
for
CHRIST

Back in the early '70s, in the prime of the Jesus Movement, I responded to my first altar call at a youth rally in downtown Washington, DC. Growing up Catholic, altar calls were unheard of. But that night the musicians were very persuasive as they spoke about Jesus Christ between each compelling song. They, like Billy Graham, were there to lead people to make a decision for Christ. Having lived a reckless adolescence, I knew I was morally bankrupt, and I was looking for relief from my screaming conscience. Who could reject the story of such an amazing man as Jesus Christ!? Yes, I wanted to make a decision to follow Him. I couldn't wait

to become a true follower. These people were speaking about Him in a way that I'd never heard growing up in the Catholic Church.

Eagerly, I went forward, just as thousands have at Billy Graham's Crusades, to receive Jesus Christ. The experience that night seemed so much more personal than listening to the droning Latin masses I had attended as a young boy, or having sat in a darkened confessional booth to speak with the priest behind the dark, veiled window.

Afterwards, I anxiously inquired,

"So, what are we gonna do now?"

"What do you mean, we...?" he responded.

"Now that I've become a Christian, what are we going to do now?" I asked.

"Well, *you're* going to need to find a nice, Bible-believing church so you can grow up in your faith. And *we* are going to continue on in this evangelistic ministry the Lord has given us," he replied.

"Whaaat?!... Oh, ok..." I answered. Puzzled all of a sudden, I thought to myself, "What happened? I feel abandoned.

Why can't I be with these people who just persuaded me to follow Jesus?" Now, loneliness began to engulf me like a black cloud as they packed up to leave the auditorium.

In the months to follow, I tried to be true to what I had prayed, but somehow my own personal weaknesses and hurtful ways got the best of me as I spent so much of my time alone. The Bible-believing church wasn't very helpful after Sunday morning service. It wasn't long before I found myself crumpled up against the railing of our front porch with my body

writhing in pain. The door had just been slammed by my father who had authoritatively let me know that I was no longer welcome in his home. "Don't come back until you're willing to come under my authority!" he proclaimed.

"Fine!" I disrespectfully retorted. I hardly cared anymore about anything. My heart was hardening like stone. "Mom will let me go and live with her," I assured myself. Boy, was I ever in for a surprise. Mom and her boyfriend didn't take too kindly to my rebellious, cocky attitude either. I sure had to

do some fast talking to the officer that she invited in the apartment to speak with me about my drug usage.

Turning 18 years old came as a real shocker. My mom's boyfriend figured he could now legally, violently take out on me what he had been longing to do for quite a while. "Hey! What's going on!" Before I knew it, I was in worse shape than I'd been on my dad's front porch. I was grateful to get away alive.

"Jesus, if you're really there, help! My life's a mess!" These

were my thoughts as I was heading out to the road to stick out my thumb. It seemed as though I was hurting just about everyone I knew, including myself. This had become my daily existence. Maybe my dad would be willing to take me back if I'd humble myself. After all, he was hurting pretty badly from my older brother's shocking suicide a few years before. Now, with me coming back home and wanting to follow the Lord, perhaps he'd have some consolation.

The next couple of years back with my father and his wife seemed

to have ironed out my life. Regularly going to church and “Young Life” meetings with my high school friends appeared to fill the void, at least when we were together, or when I was blasting my Christian music on my audio player.

After relocating to western New York and enrolling in a state college, I was lost in the crowd. These secular studies, especially in psychology, left me frustrated because it seemed that everybody’s problems were diagnosed to the tee, but no real solutions were given to understand the enigma

man is to himself. My attempts to share my puny faith found a few positive responses, but by and large, I was extremely insecure.

My dad’s close friend at the time, Sid Roth, a popular Messianic Jewish evangelist, seemed to have the direction I needed as I began to flounder in my Christian conviction. “What you need to do is go to Bible school!” This was his response to my longing question: “How can I really be a disciple?”

On the outside, my life had been cleaned up. I was ferociously reading my Bible, but somehow

I was still dissatisfied about my relationship with the Lord, and the lack of depth I was experiencing with fellow believers around me. Countless times, I would respond to rededicate my life. Maybe Sid had the right answer, and I was getting desperate, so I took his advice and applied for Bible college.

My years in Bible school were a mixed bag. On the one hand, I was being filled with Bible knowledge and the social life seemed a little deeper than what I had experienced in secular college, but I was a little uneasy to realize the way we were

being groomed to assert ourselves as God's mouthpiece. My lack of willingness to serve in menial ways was troubling to me as I read the scriptures and heard countless sermons about how Jesus lived His life. It seemed so easy to get caught up in the drive to be God's man of faith and power, looking for opportunities to preach before the multitudes.

Of course, after graduation from Bible school, there was a subtle, but very real pressure to get involved in full-time ministry. My father's desire was for me to jump right into the

Messianic Jewish ministry with Sid, with both feet. This I did, and within a year, I was traveling with Sid to present a "cutting-edge" message of what God was doing among the Jews to wrap things up before Jesus' return. But over the next few years, I was sad to see that there was no difference between the ways of the large corporations of the world, which vie for public attention and dollars, and the way ours and a number of other prominent ministries were being operated, replete with all questionable marketing tactics.

Hoping to get away from the spotlight of the big-name ministry, I decided to move our family back up to rural, western New York, get a menial job, and volunteer some time to work with the teens in our local church. Before long, the pastor was asking for me to work with him full-time.

Shockingly, within a matter of months, the pastor read his letter of resignation at the annual business meeting, due to a personality conflict with a newly elected member of the church board. In the weeks ahead, my in-

laws and different members of the congregation urged me to stay on in the midst of the turmoil.

Pastoring that congregation over the next five years made clear to me that something was profoundly different between our lives and the life that was being experienced among the disciples of the early church described in Acts 2 and 4. The immense contrast I was observing, not just in our local church, but evident also as I traveled abroad, ended up leaving me empty and frustrated after eight years of ministry. In

despair, I began to question the depth of my “decision for Christ” in comparison to the response of the early disciples, like Peter, who abandoned everything to become a disciple.

Peter had said in Mark 10:28, “We have [literally] left everything to follow you,” showing that he had done what the Master commanded in Luke 14:33, “So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.”

Please understand, everything seemed fine on the surface. The

congregation was numerically growing, with the tithes and offerings seemingly assuring that God was blessing us. The outside of the cup¹ appeared good, but inside, I wasn’t being saved from a deep pit of selfish corruption within. What Paul spoke to the Galatians about in chapter 5 seemed to be the “norm” in Christianity, in one form or another:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy,

¹ Matthew 23:25

outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envyings, drunkenness, carousings, and things like these, of which I forewarn you... that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

I had heard for years that until Jesus returned, the divisions between Christians couldn't be dealt with, and everybody would just need to settle for a mediocre, mystical unity, where you just do your best to tolerate those who are just like you. I was beginning to see

that a love for the world permeated our lives. Why else would we all continue to hold on to our own possessions, personal ambitions, and selfish goals? Without fail, as a new trend would arise in the world, a Christian version would soon follow — Christian rap, Black-Belts for Jesus, and on and on. I often wondered how Christianity could ever be a light to the world, when in reality the world's ways were leading us.

Somehow, I desperately needed to discover the root of what was so wrong. I could no longer settle

for the compromise and selfish indulgence that I was filled with. I decided to take a break from the full-time ministry, get a job working with my hands, and discover the source of my lack of peace and confidence.

It was during this period of soul-searching that I encountered a couple who spoke to me about the common life they were living in northern Vermont with other believers in the Son of God. They were living just like the first disciples in the book of Acts, sharing all things in common. This couple

was passing through our town on the way to visit some friends. Their simplicity and honesty profoundly affected me, and I couldn't help but feel ashamed in their presence. They obviously were experiencing the reality of the life as disciples which the scriptures describe. I had a vague sense that the life they lived together was what I had longed for when I thought that I was making a decision for Christ years before.

For a while, I was jealous and saddened that I hadn't discovered the same life in all my years of wandering in Christianity. Looking

back, I see that I needed more time and circumstances to really come to terms with the poisonous nature of my selfishness and the fruit it was bearing in my life, before I would be ready to respond to the sacrifice of Messiah's life with an absolute, utter surrender of my own life. I came to see that any true "decision for Christ" had to be lived out daily in an environment with other disciples, as the scriptures call for.² In time, I knew that I needed to come to terms with the evidence I was being presented with. Could it be the answer to the cry of my

heart for all those years?

So, I traveled northward to view one of these communities firsthand. At first, I was defensive of my own independent "Jesus-and-me" existence. This sprang out from all my years of mistrust, but in time I was taken aback by what I found — the life of love and friendship which I observed. It was more true to the Word than anything I had ever seen. I'm not talking about something flashy to the natural eye, or a show being put on, but I found a genuine life shown by how

² Luke 14:33; Hebrews 3:13; Eph. 4:15-16

they really loved each other, the weak and the strong together. This assured me that they could possess a true confidence (not like the plaguing doubt which was my daily existence) that they had passed out of death and into life.³

This is what was so deeply missing in my life: being in an environment where I was able to consistently love and be loved like this. No wonder I lacked confidence and assurance. I could see before my eyes the difference between the sinking sand of independence

that I was stuck in, and the living demonstration of a life of loving which is the rock-solid foundation laid by the apostles and prophets.⁴ Now, I could see why Christianity had been in apostasy since the time they left the foundation laid by Paul, John, and the other apostles.

It was becoming clear that for the Son of God to actually get what He prayed for⁵, the desire of His heart, it would have to be realized in believers who had completely abandoned their independent lives, no longer living for themselves. I

was hearing now that He deserved a real, spiritual nation.⁶ These disciples were faithful to live and speak the faith I needed to hear to be obedient to the gospel to forsake everything to follow Him together with those who had done likewise.

Now I could see the gospel right there in Abraham's response to leave everything in obedience to God's voice in his heart.⁷ Paul told the Romans in chapter 4 that Abraham was the father to all who believe, and who show that belief

³ 1 John 3:14 ⁴ Ephesians 2:19-22 ⁵ John 17:20-23 ⁶ 1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 2:19-20

by walking in the same footsteps of obedience. How could I have thought that I or Billy Graham or anyone else could lead someone to make a “decision for Christ” that would change his eternal destiny apart from hearing a message that would call for the same obedience that Abraham and the first disciples had?⁸

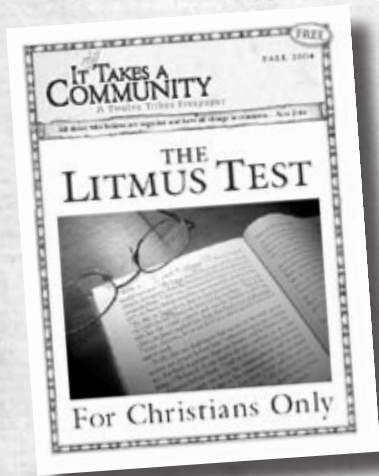
If you’re not satisfied, as I wasn’t, with the results of the “decision for Christ” that you and countless others might have

made, or couldn’t make because you knew it was too shallow, then please come to one of our communities and see where you can walk in the footsteps of our spiritual father, Abraham. You can join us in forming a spiritual nation that will show the world that God sent His Son, because they can see His life of love and unity being fleshed out before their eyes.⁹

Stephen



⁷ Genesis 12:1; 1 Peter 2:9 ⁸ Matthew 28:19-20 ⁹ Matthew 21:43; 24:14; John 17:23



The Litmus Test

A *litmus test* is a test in which a single factor is decisive in proving the presence or absence of something. "I have eternal life," many say, but passing the litmus test determines whether someone has truly believed *as the Scriptures say*.

That's why the letter of 1 John was written; its sole purpose was that those who read it could know whether they had actually received saving faith, for the Savior and the apostles knew that it was possible *to believe in vain*.

"Test yourselves – are you living the life of the faith [as the first Church recorded in Acts 2&4]? Put yourselves to the test; surely you realize that Jesus Christ is among you, unless you prove unequal to the test?"

(2 Corinthians 13:5)

Visit the web site: [**www.TheLitmusTest.org**](http://www.TheLitmusTest.org)