



A welcoming invitation to freedom (Appalachian Trail). CHRIS HIGHLAND

The curious apostate in the pew



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Apostate: one who has renounced a belief; from a Greek word for runaway slave. One who commits apostasy — abandonment of a religious belief. Defection.

I'm a serial visitor to congregations across the spectrum—secular to evangelical. Call me a curious person (on several levels) but with years of experience as a “bridge-builder” I'm drawn to see and hear for myself what communities are saying and doing. I'm sometimes disappointed but often pleasantly surprised.

Now and then I'm recognized (“I read your column”) but mostly I'm the anonymous guy sitting near the back. My Christian wife or a secular friend might be with me. I'm always wondering how I'll be greeted and if I feel welcomed. I can usually tell if they are inclusive or exclusive by the setting, interaction, the language, the message. Each sanctuary has its own curiosities.

If the first thing someone wants me to do when I walk in the door is stick a name tag on me, it puts me off, but that's just me — I've never liked being singled out with a label. If someone wants to meet me and converse, they can approach and ask.

I like sitting near the back or middle of the sanctuary so I can observe and participate in the whole experience. I've sat in a pew alone. It's an odd feeling but I know from years in the church that people have their preferred seats. It doesn't particularly bother me anymore.

It can be awkward when a church is serving communion and I'm the only one not partaking, or when there are special rituals or songs that everyone seems to know but me. I try not to be too self-conscious.

Visiting a local church one February day, I knew it would be challenging. I sensed even before going that it would take me back to younger days when I was very centered on Jesus, praise and prayer songs, hearing sermons asking for more faith and deeper devotion. But I knew one of the pastors and my curiosity drew me in the door.

Some folks came over to give my hand a friendly shake, offering a welcoming smile. This particular Sunday morning a preacher read from the biblical book of Jude near the end of the Bible. It's very short, like a pamphlet. He referred to it as the “Acts of the Apostates” as compared to the “Acts of the Apostles.”

It is said that Jude was the brother of Jesus, concerned with preserving the true faith in his famous sibling. He appeals to the faithful “to contend for the faith,” because “intruders have stolen in among you” (I wondered if people would turn to look at me). These intruders were “ungodly,” “perverting” the gospel through “licentiousness” (an old word for choosing to live free of accepted rules). These terribly “godless” people dared to “deny our only Master and Lord.”

The biblical writer manages to highlight a whole series of awful consequences for these apostates: condemnation, destruction, eternal chains in deepest darkness, punishment of eternal fire. It's not looking good for those who freely choose not to believe the way Jude believes.

According to Jude, those who have “fallen away from grace” practice “immorality” (having no ethics?) daring to reject the authority of the church and eat whatever they want at church potlucks (“love-feasts”). These disrespectful disruptors are “waterless clouds,” “autumn trees without fruit,” “wild waves of the sea” and “wandering stars.” Poetic images from nature warning believers to avoid worldly apostates.

What should the faithful do? According to the preacher, “don't defend but extend the faith.” And what is “the faith”? The “essential” Christian teachings about Jesus. Those who have fallen away must be rescued.

In the secular community, a person doesn't “lose” their faith or “fall away” — they actually take a leap to freedom. This connects with the original sense of apostate — a runaway slave.

I don't think I was ever a “slave” to my Christian faith or the church, though there was certainly a “Master” and I was to be “His servant.” Now, however, as a confirmed apostate, I'm willing to engage believers, especially those who feel my non-belief is a threat to their faith. I would ask them if Jude's fearful, defensive and judgmental message from 2,000 years ago really speaks to us today. After all, he and his community believed they were living in “the last time,” surrounded by dangers from ... people like me.

I was glad to hear the preacher emphasize Jude's hope for his beloved community: “May mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.” As I told my pastor friend after the service, I think we all — apostle or apostate — share that hope.

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