

not a fan.

updated & expanded

BECOMING A COMPLETELY COMMITTED
FOLLOWER OF JESUS

kyle idleman

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Not a Fan Updated & Expanded

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part 1

fan or follower? an honest diagnosis

D.T.R.

Are you a follower of Jesus?

I would say the chances are pretty good that you just skipped over that question. You may have read it, but I doubt it carried much weight or had any real impact. But would you let me ask you this question again? It's the most important question you will ever answer.

Are you a follower of Jesus?

I know, I know. You've been asked this question before. Because it's so familiar there is a tendency to dismiss it. Not because it makes you uncomfortable. Not because it's especially convicting. The question is dismissed mostly because it feels redundant and unnecessary.

Chances are that if you are reading this book you fall into one of two groups:

1. The "Jesus fish on the back of my car" group. You are serious enough about your faith that you shop in the Christian section of the bookstore. In which case, when I ask you "*Are you a follower of Jesus?*" it seems rhetorical and you're ready to put the book down, or at least go back and look at the table of contents to see if there is a chapter that might be helpful. You recognize that this is an important question for many to consider, but asking you? Well, it's like walking into a Boston pub and asking, "Who cheers for the Red Sox?" It's an important question, but you're so sure of your answer that your mind quickly dismisses it. You've already dealt with it. Asked and answered. But before you move on too quickly, let me clarify what I am not asking. I am not asking the following:

fan or follower? an honest diagnosis

Do you go to church?

Are your parents or grandparents Christians?

Did you raise your hand at the end of a sermon one time?

Did you repeat a prayer after a preacher?

Did you walk forward during a twelve-minute version of “Just As I Am”?

Do you own three or more Bibles?

Have you ever appeared in a church directory?

Did you grow up going to VBS and/or church camp?

Is your ringtone a worship song?

When you pray are you able to utilize five or more synonyms for God?

I can keep going. Seriously, I can.

Have you ever worn “witness wear”?

Is the KJV the only real version of the Bible?

Have you ever kissed dating good-bye?

Under “religious views” does your Facebook page say “Christ follower”?

Did you dog *Harry Potter* and rave about *Lord of the Rings*?

Did you get a purpose driven life in 40 days or less?

Do you say “Bless their heart” before speaking badly about someone?

Do you understand phrases like “traveling mercies” and “sword drill”?

Here’s my point: many of us are quick to say, “Yes, I’m a follower of Jesus,” but I’m not sure we really understand what we are saying.

To quote Inigo Montoya, “I do not think that means what you think it means.”*

One of the most sobering passages of Scripture tells of a day when many who consider themselves to be followers of Jesus will be stunned to find out that he doesn’t even recognize them. In the gospel of Matthew chapter 7 Jesus tells of a day where everyone who has ever lived will stand before God. On that day many who call themselves Christians and identify themselves as followers will stand confidently

*If you recognized this quote as being from *The Princess Bride* then give yourself an extra point. It’s a favorite among Christians (even though Kirk Cameron isn’t in it).

in front of Jesus only to hear him say, "I never knew you. Away from me." If you've just assumed you are a follower of Jesus, I pray that this book would either confirm that confidence or it would convict you to reevaluate your relationship with Jesus and reaffirm your commitment to follow him.

2. The "Why is there a fish on the back of my friend's car?"

group. If you are a part of this group, then you likely didn't buy this book. In fact, you would never spend your own money on it. But somebody who cares about you, and who probably has a fish on their car, gave it to you. Because it was a friend or a relative you figured you would at least read the first chapter to be polite. And maybe you skipped over the question *Are you a follower of Jesus?* It's not that you're against the question or offended by it. It just doesn't seem relevant to you. But it's irrelevant to you in a different way than the people in group number one. It's not that you have already answered the question; it's that the question doesn't seem worth answering. You mean no offense; you're just not into it.

It doesn't bother you that some people choose to follow Jesus. That's cool, but it's not your thing. Kind of like your friend who's so into *Star Trek* that he asks you things like "ta' SoH taH HoD?" (That's Klingon for "Do you think Spock should be captain?") And you don't really care. If that's what he likes, fine. But you don't get the appeal.

But . . . what if? Would you pause for a moment and ask yourself, *What if all of life comes down to this one question? What if there really is a heaven and there really is a hell, and where I spend eternity comes down to this one question?* That may seem completely ridiculous, but if there is some part of you that considers this a minute possibility, then isn't it worth thinking through that question? As you read this book I hope you would at least consider that this may be the most important question you ever answer. I believe that the reason we were put on this earth is to answer this one question. And the truth is, whether or not we do so consciously or intentionally, we all answer this question.

*Please note that I did not personally translate this nor do I speak a word of "Klingon." I do have a friend who speaks some Klingon. I ridicule and mock him, and I always do so in an actual language of real people.

I want you to know up front that I'm not here to "sell" Jesus. I'm not going to try and talk you into following Jesus by presenting the parts that are most appealing. Because here's the thing, and don't tell the people in group #1 I said this, but many of them assume they are followers of Jesus, but the truth is they have never heard the unedited version of what Jesus taught about following him.

My guess is that after reading this book there will be people in group 1 and group 2 that turn down the invitation to follow Jesus. After all, when we read in the Gospels about Jesus inviting people to follow him, some people signed up, but most decided to walk away.

Time for the D.T.R.

So where do you start in determining if you really are a follower of Jesus? How do you decide if this is even something you would want to consider? Let's begin by having a D.T.R. talk with Jesus. Some of you will recognize what the letters D.T.R. stand for. If you're not sure, let me give you a hint. For a young man involved in a romantic relationship, these letters are often enough to strike fear into his heart. He likely dreads the D.T.R. talk. In fact, many young men will postpone, run away from, and put off the D.T.R. for as long as possible. I have even known a few guys who have terminated the relationship when they sensed that the D.T.R. talk was imminent.*

Now do you want to guess what DTR stands for?

Define the Relationship.

This is the official talk that takes place at some point in a romantic relationship to determine the level of commitment. You want to see where things stand and find out if what you have is real.

In high school I went out on a first date with a girl that I really didn't know very well. We sat down in a booth at a restaurant and began the awkward first date conversation. During the appetizer I learned a

*True Story: One of my friends faked hyperventilating to get out of the D.T.R. talk. By "one of my friends" I mean me.

D.T.R.

little bit about her family. While we enjoyed the main course she told me about her favorite movie. And then it happened. While we were eating our dessert she asked me, and I quote: “*Where do you see this relationship going?*” On the very first date she was trying to have the D.T.R. talk. I got out of there P.D.Q. That was the first and the last date.

I wasn’t ready for that moment, but there comes a time when you need to define the relationship. It can be awkward. It can be uncomfortable. But eventually every healthy relationship reaches a point when the D.T.R. talk is needed. Is it casual or is it committed? Have things moved past infatuation and admiration and towards deeper devotion and dedication? You need to intentionally evaluate the state of the relationship and your level of commitment to the person.

So here’s what I want to ask you to do. In your mind picture yourself walking into a local coffee shop. You grab a snack and get a drink and then walk towards the back where it isn’t crowded and you find a seat at a small table. You take a sip of your drink and enjoy a few quiet minutes. Now, imagine that Jesus comes in and sits down next to you. You know it’s him because of the blue sash. You’re unsure what to say. In an awkward moment you try to break the silence by asking him to turn your drink into wine. He gives you the same look he used to give Peter. Before he has a chance to respond, you suddenly realize you haven’t prayed for your food. You decide to say your prayer out loud, hoping that Jesus will be impressed. You start off okay, but understandably you get nervous and pray “Three things we pray: to love thee more dearly, to see thee more clearly, to follow thee more nearly, day, by day, by day.” You quickly say “Amen” when you realize you’re quoting Ben Stiller’s prayer from *Meet the Parents*.

Before you have a chance to make things more awkward, Jesus skips past the small talk and gets right to the point. He looks you in the eye and says, “It’s time we define this relationship.” He wants to know how you feel about him. Is your relationship with Jesus exclusive? Is it just a casual weekend thing or has it moved past that? How would your relationship with him be defined? What exactly is your level of commitment?

Whether you've called yourself a Christian since childhood, or all of this is new to you, Jesus would clearly define what kind of relationship he wants to have with you. He wouldn't sugarcoat it or dress it up. He would tell you exactly what it means to follow him. As you're sitting in that coffee shop listening to Jesus give you the unedited version of what kind of relationship he wants with you, I can't help but wonder if that question, "Are you a follower of Jesus?" would be a little more challenging to answer.

It may seem that there are many followers of Jesus, but if they were honestly to define the relationship they have with him I am not sure it would be accurate to describe them as followers. It seems to me that there is a more suitable word to describe them. They are not *followers* of Jesus. They are *fans* of Jesus.

Here is the most basic definition of fan in the dictionary:

"An enthusiastic admirer"

It's the guy who goes to the football game with no shirt and a painted chest. He sits in the stands and cheers for his team. He's got a signed jersey hanging on his wall at home and multiple bumper stickers on the back of his car. But he's never in the game. He never breaks a sweat or takes a hard hit in the open field. He knows all about the players and can rattle off their latest stats, but he doesn't know the players. He yells and cheers, but nothing is really required of him. There is no sacrifice he has to make. And the truth is, as excited as he seems, if the team he's cheering for starts to let him down and has a few off seasons, his passion will wane pretty quickly. After several losing seasons you can expect him to jump off the fan wagon and begin cheering for some other team. He is an enthusiastic admirer.

It's the woman who never misses the celebrity news shows. She always picks up the latest *People* magazine. She's a huge fan of some actress who is the latest Hollywood sensation. And this woman not only knows every movie this actress has been in, she knows what high school this actress went to. She knows the birthday of this actress, and she knows the name of her first boyfriend. She even knows what

this actress's real hair color is, something the actress herself is no longer certain of. She knows everything there is to know. But she doesn't *know* the actress. She's a huge fan, but she's just a fan. She is an enthusiastic admirer.

And I think Jesus has a lot of fans these days. Fans who cheer for him when things are going well, but who walk away when it's a difficult season. Fans who sit safely in the stands cheering, but they know nothing of the sacrifice and pain of the field. Fans of Jesus who know all about him, but they don't *know* him.

But Jesus was never interested in having fans. When he defines what kind of relationship he wants, "Enthusiastic Admirer" isn't an option. My concern is that many of our churches in America have gone from being sanctuaries to becoming stadiums. And every week all the fans come to the stadium where they cheer for Jesus but have no interest in truly following him. The biggest threat to the church today is fans who call themselves Christians but aren't actually interested in following Christ. They want to be close enough to Jesus to get all the benefits, but not so close that it requires anything from them.

An Accurate Measurement

So Fan or Follower? The problem with asking that question of yourself is this: it's almost impossible to be objective. After all, if you say, "I'm a follower," what makes you so sure? What are the measurements that you use to define your relationship with Christ? Most would determine the answer to this question by using a highly subjective method of measurement.

Many fans mistakenly identify themselves as followers by using **cultural comparisons**. They look at the commitment level of others around them and feel like their relationship with Jesus is solid. Essentially they grade their relationship with Jesus on the curve, and as long as they are more spiritual than the next guy, they figure everything is fine. That's why some fans are almost glad when it's found out that the Christian family everyone admires has a child who

rebels or a marriage that is struggling to stay together and isn't as perfect as it appeared. The curve just got set a little lower.

Have you noticed that when we compare ourselves to others as a way to measure our relationship with Christ we almost always put ourselves up against those who are spiritually anemic? I have a tendency to take this approach in measuring myself as a husband. I try and convince my wife how good she's got it by pointing to her friend whose husband never takes her on a date, or by telling her about my buddy who forgot his twenty-year anniversary. I've learned that when I start comparing myself to other husbands as a way to measure how I am doing as a husband, I am doing so out of conviction and guilt that I am actually not loving my wife the way I need to. If you find yourself measuring your relationship with Jesus by comparing yourself to others, that is likely a self-indictment.

Another measurement fans use is a religious ruler. They point to their observance of religious rules and rituals as evidence that they are really followers. After all, they reason, would a fan go to church every weekend, and put money in the offering, and volunteer in the nursery, and listen exclusively to Christian radio, and not see R-rated movies, and only drink a wine cooler at the party? *Hello? Of course I'm a follower. I'm not doing all that for nothing!*

We have other ways to determine if we are followers. Denominational measurements, our family heritage, and biblical knowledge are all ways we try to prove that we really are followers. But here's the real question: how does Jesus define what it means to follow him? Whatever measurement he gives is the one we should use.

Diagnosing Fandom

The Gospels record many examples of people having the D.T.R. talk with Jesus. In each encounter the person finds themselves in a position where the question "Fan or Follower?" has to be answered. Some are shown to be true followers; others are revealed to be nothing more than enthusiastic admirers. As we examine a number of

these encounters, think of them as case studies that reveal different “symptoms” of being a fan.

With four kids at home, we are constantly on medical websites trying to diagnose whatever ailment is being passed around. One of my favorite websites has a search function that allows you to enter in whatever symptoms you suffer from and then it gives the most likely diagnosis. For example, if you type in “runny nose” and “nausea” the website informs you that it’s likely the flu or a food allergy. If you add “lightheadedness” then it narrows it down to a food allergy. If you take away “lightheadedness” and add “fever,” then the diagnosis is more likely to be the H1N1 flu.* The more specific the symptoms, the more likely you are to get an accurate diagnosis.

The biblical accounts of Jesus requiring people to define the relationship and honestly determine if they were true followers give us some telltale symptoms of being a fan. As we study these D.T.R. encounters with Jesus they will act as a mirror so we can have a more honest assessment of ourselves. Fans often confuse their admiration for devotion. They mistake their knowledge of Jesus for intimacy with Jesus. Fans assume their good intentions make up for their apathetic faith. Maybe you’ve already decided you’re a follower and Not a Fan; well, I hope you keep reading, because one of the core symptoms of “fandom” is that fans almost always consider themselves to be followers.

So find a seat in the back of a coffee shop and read on. Let’s honestly and biblically define the relationship. Are you a follower of Jesus? Or are you really just a fan?

*I have a difficult neighbor and have wondered if he has some kind of contributing health issue. I entered in “adult acne,” “irritability,” “halitosis,” and “excessive body hair,” but no results could be found. If you’re part of the medical community I would appreciate your expertise in this matter.

a decision or a commitment?

John 3 – Nicodemus

In John chapter 3 we read about a man named Nicodemus. You should know that he wasn't just any man. He was a well-known and well-respected man of God. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, an elite group of community and religious leaders. He had been an admirer of Jesus for some time. Listening to the teaching of Jesus, he couldn't help but be inspired. He watched as Jesus worked incredible miracles, but it wasn't just his power that was impressive; it was his compassion and love.

Nicodemus was ready to take his relationship with Jesus to another level, but it wasn't that easy. It never is. There would be much to lose if he went public as a follower of Jesus. What would people think if they found out that Nicodemus was an admirer of this homeless carpenter-turned-rabbi from a nothing town called Nazareth? At the very least he would lose his position in the Sanhedrin and his reputation as a religious leader. Being a secret admirer of Jesus cost him nothing, but becoming a follower came with a high price tag. It always does.

So, Nicodemus finds himself at what would seem to be a surprising crossroads. He would have to choose between religion and a relationship with Jesus. There is no way for him to truly become a follower of Jesus without losing his religion. This wouldn't be the last time that religion would get in the way of someone following Jesus.

In John chapter 3 we read about his D.T.R. moment with Jesus. The story begins with the time of day it was when Nicodemus approached Jesus:

He came to Jesus at night . . . (v. 2).

It would be easy to overlook this detail and dismiss it as insignificant. But ask yourself, *Why would he come to Jesus at night?* He had plenty of opportunities during the day. Jesus was teaching in public places where it would have been quite convenient for Nicodemus to talk to him for a few minutes. In fact, given his position as a religious leader, the other people would have quickly stepped out of the way for Nicodemus to have the time and attention of Jesus. But Scripture says, “He came to Jesus at night . . .”

At night no one would see him. At night he would avoid awkward questions from the other religious leaders. At night he could spend time with Jesus without anyone knowing. If he could speak with Jesus at night when no one was around, maybe he could begin a relationship with Jesus without having to make any real changes. He could follow Jesus without it impacting his job. In fact, his friends and family wouldn't even have to know. He could talk to Jesus at night and quietly make a decision in his heart to believe in Jesus; that way it wouldn't disrupt his comfortable and established life. That sounds like a lot of fans I know. Fans are happy to follow Jesus as long as that doesn't require any significant changes or have negative implications.

Here is the reality that Nicodemus is about ready to have impressed on him: There is no way to follow Jesus without him interfering with your life. Following Jesus will cost you something. Following Jesus always costs something. For Nicodemus it would cost him a powerful position. It would cost him the respect of his co-workers. It would cost him his source of income and livelihood. It would cost him friendships. It would likely cost him some family relationships. This brings up a very telling question for most fans: has following Jesus cost you anything? I don't mean for that to be a rhetorical question. Take a moment and

a decision or a commitment?

jot down what following Jesus has cost you. How has following Jesus interfered with your life?

Most of us don't mind Jesus making some minor change in our lives but Jesus wants to turn our lives upside down. Fans don't mind him doing a little touch-up work, but Jesus wants complete renovation. Fans come to Jesus thinking tune-up, but Jesus is thinking overhaul. Fans think a little makeup is fine, but Jesus is thinking makeover. Fans think a little decorating is required, but Jesus wants a complete remodel. Fans want Jesus to inspire them, but Jesus wants to interfere with their lives.

Nicodemus begins his conversation with Jesus by making it clear that he has decided that Jesus really is from God. He had come to a point of belief, but where would he go from there? Jesus doesn't waste time but gets right to the heart of why Nicodemus is coming to him at night instead of in the openness of the day. He tells Nicodemus in verse 3 that he must be born again. That would have been hard for this religious leader to hear. He had memorized the first five books of the Bible when he was a boy and had spent his adult life building a religious resume. But Jesus makes it clear to Nicodemus that his righteous acts and religious rituals are not the measurements he is using. Nicodemus must humble himself and be born again into a whole new way of life.

Nicodemus had made a decision about Jesus, but that's not the same as following him. Jesus would not accept a relationship with Nicodemus where he simply believed; Jesus wanted Nicodemus to follow. Jesus didn't just want Nicodemus just at night; he wanted Nicodemus during the day too.

Diagnosing Fandom —
**QUESTION 1: Have You Made a Decision for Jesus
or Have You Committed to Jesus?**

There is a difference. There shouldn't be. But there is a difference. Many have made a decision to believe in Jesus without making a commitment to follow Jesus. The gospel allows for no such distinction. Biblical belief is more than mental assent or verbal acknowledgment. Many fans have repeated a prayer or raised their hand or walked forward at the end of a sermon and made a decision to believe, but there was never a commitment to follow. Jesus never offered such an option. He is looking for more than words of belief; he's looking to see how those words are lived out in your life. When we decide to believe in Jesus without making a commitment to follow him, we become nothing more than fans.

Imagine going to a wedding and watching a groom on his wedding day look at his beautiful bride, and with a tear in his eye he speaks words of devotion "... forsaking all others until we are parted by death." You're moved by his words and the decision he has made. But imagine if the next week you find out that while the newlyweds were away on their honeymoon the groom was unfaithful to his bride. Suddenly those words would hold no value. They would be worthless. You would conclude that those words he emotionally expressed and publicly declared meant little because they were not validated by faithful commitment.

We tend to define belief as the acceptance of something as real or true. But biblical belief is more than just an intellectual acceptance or a heartfelt acknowledgment; it is a commitment to follow. Following by definition requires more than mental assent, it calls for movement. One of the reasons our churches can become fan factories is that we have separated the message of "believe" from the message "follow." After separating the two messages, they get out of balance.

If you read through the four Gospels that tell of Christ's life, you'll find that Jesus says "Believe in me" about five times. But care to guess

how many times Jesus said “Follow me”? About twenty times. Now I’m not saying that following is more important than believing. What I am saying is that the two are firmly connected. They are the heart and lungs of faith. One can’t live without the other. If you try and separate the message of follow from the message of believe, belief dies in the process. Our churches will continue to be full of fans until we break down the dichotomy between following and believing. Following is part of believing. To truly believe is to follow.

Most fans I have talked with have been in church or in Christian communities where their belief in Jesus was constantly being emphasized and strengthened, but what it actually meant to follow Jesus was never made very clear.

For those of you who work out at a gym several times a week, you’ve probably noticed that there are a few “gym rats” who always seem to be there. At my gym you can typically spot them walking aimlessly around the weight room and staring at themselves in the mirror. But I’ve noticed something about these guys. They tend to have huge upper bodies and teeny tiny legs. They spend hours working on their chest, biceps, and triceps, but the calves and the thighs don’t get much attention. As a result they are completely out of balance. It’s the “Pee-wee Schwarzenegger effect.” They have a Schwarzenegger upper body and a Pee-wee lower body.*

This is what we have often done with our approach to discipleship. In teaching people what it means to be a Christian, we spend much of our time and effort bringing them to a point of belief without clearly calling them to follow. We have taken “believe” and we have written that in capital letters with bold print: **BELIEVE**. But everything that has to do with following has been put in small print: follow.

Maybe that’s your story. When you heard the gospel, someone talked at great length and passion about you making a decision to believe, but said little about the fact that this commitment would necessarily change the way you live. I call this “selling Jesus.”

*This description is for illustrative purposes only. Any persons from my gym matching this description need to know this is purely coincidental and should not be taken personally.

Selling Jesus

If you're in sales or have ever been around a good salesperson then you know just what I mean. They emphasize all the positive things they think you'll be glad to hear, and they quickly skip over what might be less appealing. Churches can be reluctant to shine a bright light on commitment in fear that it might hurt sales numbers.

Jesus doesn't hold back with Nicodemus. Following Jesus would require a commitment that would cost Nicodemus a great deal. As we look at what it means to follow Jesus, this will become a theme. In fact it's true throughout all of Scripture. Moses couldn't follow God without standing in front of Pharaoh. Noah couldn't follow God without building an ark that would bring ridicule from his neighbors. Daniel couldn't follow God by praying to him alone without being thrown into a lions' den. Following Jesus isn't something you can do at night where no one notices. It's a twenty-four-hour-a-day commitment that will interfere with your life. That's not the small print—that's a guarantee.

Have you ever been flipping through the channels late at night and come across an annoying infomercial telling you how to get rich quick? An obnoxious spokesperson is looking into the camera and asking questions like, *Would you like to make more money? How would you like to only fly first class? Any interest in retiring early? How would you like to never worry about finances again?* And then you're asked, *Does that sound like something you might be interested in?* Then the Billy Mays wannabe goes on to explain that all this can be yours for free. You don't even have to pay shipping and handling.

How do you respond to that? How can you say no? It costs you nothing and offers you everything. And I wonder if some well-intentioned preachers may have missed their calling as late-night infomercial salesmen. Because many people heard a gospel presentation that went something like this: *How would you like to live forever? Would you like to have your sins forgiven and have a fresh start? Do you want to spend eternity in paradise instead of burning hell?* Some take it even further . . . *Would you like to live a prosperous life? Are you ready to*

a decision or a commitment?

claim the health and wealth God has in store for you? Does that sound like something you might be interested in? And while some people rolled their eyes and changed the channel, a lot of fans signed up.

They ordered a gospel that cost them nothing and offered them everything.

So in case someone left it out or forgot to mention it when they explained what it meant to be a Christian, let me be clear: There is no forgiveness without repentance. There is no salvation without surrender. There is no life without death. There is no believing without committing.

At the church where I am a pastor, someone sent an email asking to be removed from the church membership. The stated reason for leaving read as follows:

I don't like Kyle's sermons.

That's all it said. That begs for some kind of explanation, so I decided to call the person. I checked the name of the person and got the phone number. I wanted to confirm that it wasn't my wife. That would have been awkward. I was driving in my car and called him on my cell phone. I would suggest that when making this type of call from your personal phone, first go to "Settings" on your phone, then "Show my caller ID," and then turn to "Off." Do not attempt while driving. When he answered I simply said, "Hey, this is Kyle Idleman. I understand you're leaving the church because you don't like my sermons."

There was a brief silence. I caught him off guard just as I had planned. It was awkward for a moment, and then he started talking—rambling really—trying to express what he meant. Somewhere in the middle of his lengthy explanation he said something. What he said was not meant to be encouraging, but his words caused me to breathe such a sigh of relief that tears came to my eyes. I pulled over to the side of the road, grabbed a pen, and wrote down what he said.

Well . . . whenever I listen to one of the messages I feel like you are trying to interfere with my life.

Yeah, umm, that's kind of like my job description. But do you hear what he was saying? He's saying—*I believe in Jesus, I'm a big fan, but don't ask me to follow. I don't mind coming to church on the weekends. I'll pray before meals. I'll even slap a Jesus fish on my bumper. But I don't want Jesus to interfere with my life.* When Jesus defines the relationship he wants with us he makes it clear that being a fan who believes without making any real commitment to follow isn't an option.

When Nicodemus meets with Jesus in John 3 we're left wondering what he's going to do. The silence seemed to identify him as a fan who wasn't even an enthusiastic admirer, but a secret admirer who never managed the courage to take his relationship with Jesus from words of belief to a life of commitment.

But it turns out this isn't the last we read of Nicodemus. The next time we meet up with him is in John 7. The popularity of Jesus has grown immensely. The religious leaders are overcome with jealousy and fear. We read that the Sanhedrin meet together to find a reason to silence Jesus. Part of their role as the religious leaders was to judge false prophets. They needed to drum up some kind of accusation or charge that would indict Jesus as a false teacher. Nicodemus is sitting among his peers as they conspire to bring Jesus down. He is just one of seventy-two religious leaders that were part of this ruling body. Nicodemus believes Jesus is from God, but would he say anything? Would his belief translate into any kind of commitment? I'm sure he sat there hoping someone else would say something in defense of Jesus. Surely he wasn't the only one who believed. His mind is racing with what it's going to cost him if he goes public with his conviction. Then we read in verse 51 that Nicodemus comes to the defense of Jesus:

John 7:51: *"Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"*

Though he stops short of saying what he believes, he does risk his career and reputation and publicly speaks up on behalf of Jesus. This is no longer a private conversation about what he believes. He allows what he believes to interfere with his work, his relationships, and his

financial future. In that moment he stops being just a fan, and begins the journey of following.

When he speaks out in defense of Jesus, we read in verse 52 that the rest of the Sanhedrin responded this way:

“Are you from Galilee, too?”

I know that doesn't seem very harsh, but they are clearly trying to embarrass Nicodemus for associating with Jesus. Nazareth was a small insignificant town that no one was proud to be from. Apparently they even had a saying in those days, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* The Sanhedrin laughed at Jesus because of where he was from, and now they use it to attack Nicodemus. It was meant to be a hard shot to his ego and a threat to his religious reputation that he had worked so hard to establish. It was a reality check for Nicodemus.

I've discovered there is almost always a moment like this for believers. They are put in a position where they have to decide between being a fan or a follower.

Any hope Nicodemus had that he could follow Jesus without it interfering with his life was shot down with that one question, *Are you from Galilee, too?*

At the end of John's gospel, there is one other brief reference to Nicodemus. In John chapter 19 Jesus has been crucified and his body is being prepared for burial. And then we read that Nicodemus brought “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds.” This would have been an extremely expensive and costly gesture. And make no mistake; this gesture cost him more than just money. There was no longer any chance of hiding his affection.

In fact, when most others had abandoned Jesus, or were hiding in fear, Nicodemus makes this great gesture of affection and devotion. Things had moved past words of belief expressed in the darkness of night. He was no longer a secret admirer. He wasn't just an enthusiastic admirer. It seems he had become a follower. That's the last time we

*Similar to our saying in Kentucky, “Can anything good come from Duke?”

read of Nicodemus in Scripture. Christian tradition asserts that he was martyred sometime in the first century.

If you have believed in darkness, Jesus now invites you to follow him in the light.

not a fan story

Vijay Warriar

I remember when my wife started going to church. It wasn't something I believed in or wanted to have anything to do with. I agreed to drive her to church, but I just stayed in the car and smoked a few cigarettes. Sometimes my thoughts would wander to growing up in India and being raised in the Hindu faith. My mother was a priestess in a temple, and as a boy I believed that the gods had given me favor. I was born as a Brahman, the highest caste of priests.

My marriage had been arranged, but Girija, my wife, knew that our marriage wasn't just a forced agreement that was set up by our parents; there was chemistry between us. I tried to be patient with her interest in the Bible. Girija had attended a Christian school some years back, and that was how she first learned about Jesus. Our differing beliefs didn't help our unity in marriage. Looking back on the first ten years together, I see mostly conflict and frustration.

By 2005 Girija was going to church every weekend. I'm not sure why, but one weekend instead of sitting in the car smoking, I decided to go inside for a cup of coffee. There was a small café in the church where I sat with my coffee, and I couldn't help but overhear the sermon that was being broadcast from the sanctuary onto the video screen in front of me. I listened to the preacher for a while, intrigued by his

words. From that point on, I sat in the café each Sunday morning, drinking coffee and listening to the sermons.

One week, Girija asked me to come with her to a prayer room. “We have so many problems,” she said. “We need someone to pray with us.” Even though I didn’t believe in this kind of prayer, I went with her. In the prayer room, we met a husband and wife named Linn and Carol, and they spent some time praying for us.

Full of questions after hearing so many sermons, I began to ask Linn about Christianity. Over the next year, he and Carol answered many of my questions. Linn studied the Bible with me, praying for me often. Still, I wasn’t familiar with the idea of just one god. This went against everything I had learned as a boy. Even worse, I knew that if I were to become a Christian, my family back in India would disown me. They would be so disappointed in me.

But after much studying, prayer, and support from church members, I began to realize something incredible. For forty-two years, I had been looking for something, for someone. That person was Jesus. I decided to allow him to work in me. I needed it. My marriage needed it — we’d already had divorce papers drawn up and begun living separately. It was now or never and I knew only Jesus could save me.

So the next Sunday I professed my belief in Christ and was baptized. Right after being baptized, I baptized my two sons, who also chose to believe. That same day, I moved back in with my family. God has a plan for me, and he can heal all wounds and answer all questions. My name is Vijay Warriar, and I am not a fan.