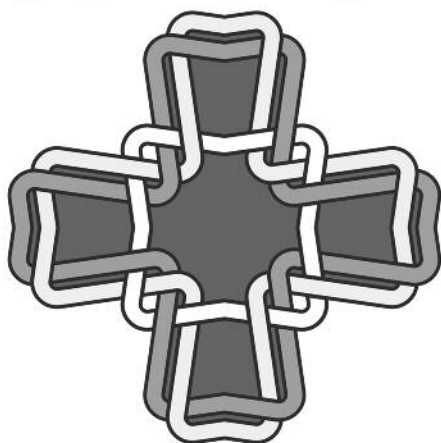


CAUGHT
UP IN
CHRIST



Spiritual First-Aid
for Believers and Seekers

Rick Merfeld



RIVER BIRCH PRESS

Daphne, Alabama

Caught Up in Christ: Spiritual First Aid for Believers and Seekers

by Rick Merfeld

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*To my wife, Dagmar,
and our three sons,
Erick, Eli, and Ehren...
for giving me grace and space
to change and grow*

Introduction

Can you feel it—the heartbeat of a country out of rhythm... the heart of churches throbbing in crisis...a friend or family member who can feel their heart pounding at the sight of a spiritual wound. Perhaps you have been searching your heart for any feeling at all and are ready to give up and surrender to the numbness of a flat-lined faith life.

We wake each morning to a world that is more and more anti-God and anti-Christian. Confusion and fear runs rampant in our emotionally charged, hyper sexualized, me-driven society. Unanswered questions lead to doubt and, if left unchecked, mature into total disbelief. People hear about the latest mass shooting and stand by utterly dismayed and perplexed by the increasing presence of evil in our world. With everything going on in our country, around the world, in our homes, and in our hearts, should we be surprised that many of us are in need of spiritual first aid?

In these trying and revealing times, you may have doubts but continue to attend church because it has been the center of your spirituality for years. As the world around you questions the very existence of God, holding true to your beliefs may be getting harder. My Roman Catholic sisters and brothers may find it harder to hold true to church doctrine. If you are not sure that Christ died and rose from the dead, it will be hard to believe that He is present in the Sacraments.

You may be part of a second or third generation of families who have been enjoying beautiful and meaningful fellowship in your church since the doors opened, but you fear your faith is empty. You may have been born into a Catholic family and survived twelve years of Catholic education but have not been to church since your high school graduation. You may have walked away from church and no longer believe in God, period.

You might be at the other end of the spectrum and still believe in God and have a fulfilling personal relationship with Jesus Christ

but are fearful of the failing faith of family and friends. Perhaps you are one of those who have been hurt by a member of the clergy or a pastoral minister or others. You may also be a newly confirmed member of the faith and wonder what all the fuss is about.

Perhaps you are a member of the clergy or a non-Catholic Christian concerned for your Catholic family and friends. You see them hurting, angry, confused, and searching for answers but are unsure about how to care for them.

This book is for all of us. Our faith is about Christ reaching out to us with a life-giving and life-changing relationship with the one, true, living God. Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Christian faith and the cornerstone of Catholicism. This book will encourage you to get caught up in the grace and mercy of Christ, not fear and despair; caught up in the qualities of Christ, not the elements of church; caught up in clarity and not confusion; caught up in healing, not hurt.

We will go beyond the warm and fuzzy metaphysical discussions about heaven and the intriguing debate about hell. Faith must be more than a pass card to the streets of gold or simple fire insurance against the flames of hell. We will go beyond the simple tips and tricks of Christianity and talk about a faith that can generate a measurable difference in how you experience the world and how the world experiences you.

The singular goal of this book is to invite you into a conversation that will impart spiritual first aid, uncover evidence, answer questions, and help you set or reset your faith firmly on the foundation of Christ. How we traverse our todays and transition into any tomorrows does not depend on how many times we genuflect in sacred spaces. However, it does depend on our inviting God into our heart, professing that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and living out the full extent of the Gospel message. I invite you to join me now as we get caught up in Christ.

1

Jesus Among Other Voices **Fighting for Faith in a Noisy World**

Have you ever watched a dog chase a rabbit in a field? The dog turns right and left, jumps over fences and runs under trees, trying to catch the rabbit. It's a crazy scene but it makes sense. Take the rabbit out of the picture. The scene no longer makes sense, and the dog just looks crazy. Many people think Christians are crazy. They don't see the rabbit we're chasing.

Our world can be a noisy place. Many voices call out to us about what matters, offering explanations for what is happening around us, giving answers to our questions and solutions for our pain, and promising vastly different versions of peace, pure thoughts, and power. Voices will tell you to set aside faith in anything larger than self and encourage you to pursue your every desire. It's hard to escape the influx of perspectives and belief systems that differ from the Christian worldview.

There have always been voices declaring that God is dead

and that the Jesus story is a bunch of nonsense. Today, however, these voices are ever-present, boisterous, aggressive, and even oppressive. Combine all these voices with the issues facing the church, and you have a great recipe for a modern-day exodus. This time, however, the exodus is not people moving toward God; it's people moving away from God.

Once Christianity was the predominant way of thinking in our country, but those days are gone. In our diverse society no single, dominant worldview now exists. Many beneficial and beautiful elements exist in our pluralistic culture. However, we also need to recognize along with the rich histories, cultural distinctions, and a bountiful harvest of great tasting food, we are also presented with many different spiritual and a-spiritual voices.

We can no longer assume that people believe in God and know the story of Jesus, the Nazarean. Is this an isolated phenomenon or are there other ideas in flux around us? Our parents and grandparents would have never guessed that self-identified socialists would campaign to be the president of the United States. Members of the older generations think of a "45" as a small, plastic record for playing their favorite music while younger readers think it's a handgun used for killing innocent people. Everything seems to be changing. Come on! The Cubs even won a World Series!

Because Jesus is but one voice among many, spiritual first-responders need to meet people where they are and be ready to start with the basics. Vince Lombardi, the legendary football coach of the Green Bay Packers, was known for starting every year with the same simple lesson. He would gather his players around and declare, "Gentlemen, this is a football."¹ As we engage in spiritual first aid, we too need to

start with the basics about the faith: what lies at the heart of our faith is the person and deity of Jesus Christ.

There are, however, many voices that deny the revelation of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you've heard some of them: "The Jesus story is just a myth;" "We all worship the same God, so Jesus doesn't matter;" "Jesus was a good teacher, but he didn't die on the cross and rise from the dead;" "It might be true for you, but it's not true for me." These voices openly denounce Christ. There are quiet and deceptive voices too. Let me explain.

I love music. I remember learning about the Pandora music service with great excitement. There are other similar music services available in the market now, but I understand they all work about the same. You enter a song, musician, or type of music that you want to listen to, and you are immediately served up a selection. You sit back and enjoy your favorite tunes as Pandora becomes your own personal jukebox! (Younger readers may need to Google that!)

Over the first few months, I created "stations" dedicated to 80's rock and roll, show tunes, John Denver, and instrumental movie themes, to name a few. I thought I had my love of music by the tail! But then I learned a disturbing feature of the service. I would start off listening to powerful movie themes by John Williams and before I knew it, I was listening to country music! I learned that I had to use the buttons on the screen to like or dislike a certain song. If I didn't stay in charge of what I was listening to, I would be carried off on a musical train that was going in a totally different direction than I had intended.

We need to guard against this Pandora effect as we encounter different voices. If we are not careful, we'll start off in

pursuit of our Christ-centered faith and find out later that we are tied into beliefs, views, and even behaviors that are not in keeping with the teachings of Christ and the Word of God. For example, have you heard about the Progressive Christian movement? For people who identify as Christian and also tend to be progressive in their political views, this might sound like a great thing. After all, they profess to believe in Jesus, but (watch for the Pandora effect) also declare that He is only one of the many ways to experience the sacredness of life.

They also believe that you find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questions than in answers.² Jesus made the bold statement that He is the way, truth, and life. He didn't claim to be one of the ways, but THE way. Wouldn't this make the Progressive Christian movement non-Christian?

Surrounded by societal cries for inclusivity, should we be surprised that the world has a problem with the exclusivity of Christ? Winston Churchill once said, "The truth is so valuable that it should be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies."³ With so many different voices in our ears, what are we to do? How do we know to whom we should listen? Is there an authoritative voice we can turn to?

Roman Catholics have historically tuned into the voice of the Church. But one of the consequences of the Church's turmoil has been a decreasing level of loyalty to and confidence in its leadership and teaching. About a year ago, our parish invited members to attend listening sessions to express their concerns in light of the latest wave of abuse allegations. Parish staff and diocesan leaders were aware that people were grumbling, concerned, and even in crisis over the persistent problem.

The ongoing allegations have even eroded confidence in the extra-ordinary status of the ordained. Church doctrine includes belief about papal infallibility in certain situations, but I would argue that priests, in general, have often been thought of as having special status or special authority. Part of the world's response to the abuse scandal is an outcry that priests are men first, flawed human beings, just like the rest of us. All of this raises doubts and leaves many people looking outside the Church for answers.

What about our confidence in the voice of our education system? One Sunday evening during a recent Easter season, our seven-year-old granddaughter told us what she had learned about Jesus the previous week. "Jesus lived, died, rose from the dead, and is dead again." After a quick chuckle, I began to wonder. Was this simply her way of understanding the Easter story at her developmental stage, or was she repeating what she had heard from one of the voices at school?

I reached out to her teacher. She received me graciously, and I walked away from our conversation feeling that our little girl was in good hands, in general. However, I remained concerned about what was being taught about God's Word. As we talked about God's Word, the teacher informed me that she had been taught in college that many of the stories in the Bible are just that—stories. The teacher explained that the story of Adam and Eve is just a story, and the great flood never really happened. She believed that the stories were helpful in teaching us things about God and who Jesus is, but that the stories themselves are not true.

The teacher was open to further conversation, so we discussed evidence for the biblical stories and compared them with the alternative secular explanations for things like the

genesis of life. If we believe that certain stories in the Bible are just stories, who gets to decide which ones are true and which ones are just stories? And if some stories are not true, do we also get to determine if some of the teachings of Jesus are untrue? The teacher walked away from our conversation questioning what she thought was true. I walked away wondering what our granddaughter and her classmates would learn next in class.

Many voices in our world today can easily bring us to doubt the truth about the Triune God, but just as many voices exist that can bring us to a solid, supported, and secure faith in God the Father, Christ the Son, and the ever-present Holy Spirit.

At the heart of the faith is the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Either Jesus is who He says He is, or He is not. C.S. Lewis wrote that everyone who considers Christ will come to one of three conclusions about Jesus: He is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord.⁴ Is this oversimplifying our faith? Consider what Jesus said as recorded in Mark 10:13-15.

The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, He became indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me. Do not prevent them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen I say to you, whoever does not accept God's kingdom like a child will not enter it."

Could it be that Jesus knew that people would have a tendency to complicate things? Could it be Jesus knew those who stood against Him would only have to complicate things enough to create doubt in the mind of a believer to claim vic-

tory? In a courtroom, a defense attorney does not have to prove “who dun it”; the defense attorney only needs to create a reasonable doubt, and the accused goes free. Complications raise doubt. Doubt erodes confidence.

The Judeo-Christian faith has always been a free-market faith where you and I are at liberty to give our love freely to God or withhold it completely. The question that lies before us today is the same question that people have been wrestling with for over 3000 years.

Now therefore, fear the Lord, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth; and cast out the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. If it is displeasing to you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 24: 14-15).

Whom or what will you serve? Whom or what lies at the heart of your spirituality?

I've been journaling now for nearly fifteen years. The first entry was recorded on May 19, 2006. After giving a talk on study at our parish CEW (Christian Experience Weekend), I was invited to join a Living Last Supper Ministry team. The team acts out the Lord's last supper. During the following Lenten Season, I had the honor of being in the role of Jesus. During Mass on Easter morning, I realized how humbling and deeply meaningful that Lenten season had been.

As preparation for the ministry that year, the team read through Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life*. Here is that first

journal entry: “I am almost finished with *Purpose Driven Life*. It has made a big difference. Warren suggests journaling. Here we go.” My journals now chronicle how my life has changed since I took hold of my faith and committed my life to Christ. Each day, I am more and more confident that how we experience the world and how the world experiences us depends on who or what lies at the heart of our spirituality.

Reflection

1. What “voices” are you currently listening to that are informing and shaping your spirituality?
2. The Bible declares “Oh, that today you would hear His voice: Harden not your heart as at the rebellion” (Hebrews 3:15). If God were to speak to you today, would you listen?
3. What impact is the media and social media having on your thinking? Does it create doubts, questions, or confusion for your faith?