

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

April 18, 2012

Christian Beliefs, or
WWJD
(What Would [Thomas] Jefferson Do?)

I've been attending Christian services since the beginning of this year. Having not "been to church" since I was a Catholic kid decades past, I come to these events without the indoctrination with which most other people experience these events. There are multiple guest sermonizers, each doing their own style of ministry, which gives me a wide variety of experiences to sample.

First of all, I love the singing, the praise, giving the glory to God with fellow Christians. This makes each service a wonderful, enlightening, uplifting experience. Would I get the same effect by enjoying live music and singing with a group of people, such as at a concert or in a bar? I think not. It is the act of giving glory to God that makes it a profound experience.

Now the sermons, on the other hand, seem to me to be what each guest sermonizer happens to feel is important based on his (or her) interpretation of the Bible. Yet I see these guys all around me slavishly hanging on every word of these speakers as if it is the word of God coming down from Mount Sinai. I'm sorry, but it's not. Some of them make good points, can persuasively weave together Biblical quotes with inspirational insights. But others are ideologically-driven demagogues looking for followers for their own brand of Christianity.

Becoming a Christian - a follower of Christ - does not mean checking your common sense at the door. It means making a commitment to surrender your will to the will of God to the best of your ability. It is no easy task to subsume your will to that of God, or to even know for sure what God's will is for you. Jesus said two very important things (I'm paraphrasing): Love God with all your heart and soul; and, love your neighbor as yourself. Do these two things and you'll live a blessed life to the greater glory of God.

All the other Christian teachings - creationism, strict observance of sabbaths, or even whether the "Seventh Day" means Saturday or Sunday - are personal preferences based on what God has spoken in an individual's heart telling him to believe and to do.

I have devoutly Christian friends, none of whom seem to be following the same set of beliefs and observances. Yet each of them has a sacred link with God through Jesus which you can see in their eyes and reflected in the way they live their lives.

What has any of this to do with Thomas Jefferson, you may ask? In the April 9, 2012 issue of Newsweek there was an article titled The Forgotten Jesus, by Andrew Sullivan. As he decried the lack of Christ's teachings in modern American Christian religion, he related how Thomas Jefferson went through his personal Bible and cut out all the direct teachings of Jesus and used them to create his own personalized mini-Bible. He believed that as a Christian he should follow the teachings of Christ and not be distracted by all the other Biblical rhetoric which people routinely construed to support their own agendas.

Sounds like common sense to me. What do you think?