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Notes about living as a  
Christian

## continuous conversion

### The distance between humans and God

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Photo courtesy Dr. Z. A. Tusek



**A chasm.  
Would you  
span it with  
a bridge or  
a cross?**

Typically it's understood in Christian circles that there is a vast chasm of sin (the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden) separating humans and God.

#### HUMAN TO GOD

A bridge could indeed reconnect man and God. This "bridge" concept is found in most major world religions: the observant Muslim directs his prayers to Allah, using his obedience as the bridge. The observant Buddhist or Hindu has certain rituals (meditation, temple observances) that provide the bridge to those concepts of god.

Pagans (from the Latin word for "person from the country," indicating that after Christianity became the official religion of urban Rome, worship of local gods continued in the countryside for centuries, and indeed goes on today) connect to their gods through ritual and sacrifice, the traditional ways to reach the mysterious and unknowable spiritual realm.

If you consider man's search for god to be the driving force behind "religion," then a bridge is a perfectly adequate means for connection. If you are simply seeking "god," whatever that means to you, any bridge that appears to get you there is acceptable.

In this regard, Jesus can be seen as a bridge, reconnecting humans to God. Why, then, did Jesus die on a cross? Why has the symbolism of the cross remained so valuable to Christians for two millennia?

#### HUMAN TO HUMAN

What makes the Christian different is that connecting to God is only part of the believer's job. Connecting to man is, as the cross implies, equally important.

Jesus Christ is the only means for bridging that chasm: He provided, through the cross, a reestablishment and restoration of the perfect human/God relationship broken in the Garden of Eden.

#### BRIDGE OR CROSS?

You may have noticed a mixed metaphor in this simple analogy. When you think of spanning chasms you think of bridges. Who would use a cross, which has the requisite horizontality but adds a mysterious verticality, to provide access from one side of a chasm to the other?

This question seems elementary, and even unnecessary to many Christians. God used the cross; God knows best; end of discussion. But I wonder if there might be a gem of wisdom to be extracted from God's use of the cross, when our human mind would use a simple bridge. It seems that a one-dimensional metaphor doesn't express the whole "mended" relationship between God and humans that the Christian experiences; a bridge is not enough.

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Christianity owes much of its concept of reaching God to its Hebrew roots, (and is, in fact, the worship of a Hebrew: Jesus, or Jeshua). The Hebrews had exacting codes of conduct involving human relationships. For example, the fields of crops could not be stripped bare at the harvest; the edges were left intact, so that the poor could glean from them and not starve.

Giving a tithe to the temple, not neglecting the destitute and physically crippled, caring for all community members (including the widow and children of a dead man)—these were practical Hebrew laws that protected humans from being mistreated by those who might become too intent on reaching their god, to the exclusion of all else.

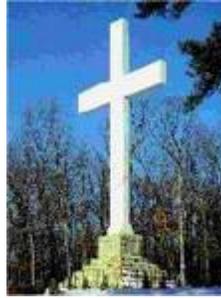
The “spiritual” person who leaves his or her dependents to search for God is a familiar and highly-revered figure in most major religions, but not in the Jewish or Christian faiths. Caring for fellow humans is a living out of worship of God for Jews and Christians. Seeing all humans as being God’s creation, and therefore worthy of respect, concern and compassion, is a distinctly Jewish and Christian attitude.

This is not to say that only Jews and Christians treat other people well. Of course, we all know pagans and atheists who are kinder and more loving than some professed Jews and Christians. My point is that being kind and loving are personal choices for some people, but for Jews and Christians, kindness and love of other people are requirements for reaching God.

### That “pesky” crossbar

I must admit that I would often prefer that following God was strictly between me and Him. My dear friend and Christian mentor Father Dan Herzog used to joke about the Episcopalian whose favorite saying was “Jesus and me and my prayer book makes three.” A more strictly Protestant version of this saying might be “Jesus and me and my Bible makes three.”

Whenever I find myself feeling good about my relationship with God—I am praying, reading the Bible, asking for the counsel of the Holy



The Cross at Sewanee

Spirit, etc.—I am quickly reminded (by the Holy Spirit!) that being in right relationship to God is not enough.

That “pesky crossbar” on the cross represents my horizontal, earthly relationships. Jesus specifically reminded his disciples that the ancient Hebrew formula of “hear, o Israel, the Lord your God is the only God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength” must also include the “crossbar”:

“and love your neighbor as yourself.”

### My biggest challenge

I freely admit that loving my neighbor as myself is much harder for me than loving God. I am often shamed by Paul’s admonition that we cannot claim to love God, whom we cannot see, if we don’t love our neighbor, whom we see every day.

Loving God is so much easier and more fun than loving humans. God loves me back, and gives me wonderful gifts of peace, tranquility and healing when I spend time with Him. He forgives me; He comforts me; He’s on my side.

Humans, on the other hand, can “give me grief.” They are not always forgiving or appreciative of my efforts to help them. In fact, it’s very often true that those I’ve done the most for, and for whom I’ve “sacrificed” my time and attention, are the most unpleasant and downright mean to me.

### The paradox of the cross

Of course, my “sacrifices” for others are really for God, as they are motivated by my love for Him. And my sacrifices are as nothing compared to His sacrifice for me on the cross: “His yoke is easy and His burden is light.”

Paradoxically, the more I make the effort to honor the crossbar of Jesus’ cross by loving people (however poor and clumsy my efforts are), the closer I draw to God. The mended relationship between human and God includes a reconciliation between human and human. The cross, then, is a kind of bridge after all; it’s the perfect way to span the chasm of sin.

**“Jesus and me  
and my Bible  
makes three”**



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