

# Of Peelings and Pedestals

by John Fischer

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*The sermon explores the struggle to maintain authenticity in Christianity and the importance of peeling away external expectations to get to the heart of Christ.*

**Scripture:** 1 Samuel 16:7, Matthew 23:27, John 4:23, John 8:32, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 13:2, Galatians 5:6, Colossians 2:8, 1 John 4:20

**Topics:** "Authentic Faith", "Cultural Christianity"

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## Description

John Fischer reflects on his upbringing in a mainline evangelical denomination, where he excelled in following Christian expectations but struggled with the authenticity of his faith. He describes the process of peeling away traditional Christian layers to discover genuine emotional responses to God and true obedience. Fischer grapples with the challenge of differentiating between cultural Christianity and a personal relationship with Christ, emphasizing the importance of seeking truth and honesty in one's faith journey.

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## Transcript

I grew up under the watchful eye of a mainline evangelical denomination. Every Sunday I attended Sunday School in the morning and Christian Endeavor at night. Once a month I stayed late for a Sunday-night sing after church. I remember the sings because there was often a trumpet trio playing a double-tongued version of "Wonderful Grace of Jesus." The best ones could triple-tongue the last verse.

I remember a diagram someone once chalked on a church blackboard that divided my life up like a pie. The spiritual pieces included going to church, reading my Bible, praying, and witnessing. I did all those, and then I went on to a Christian college. I kept all the pieces in place.

I have always been an insider at church, a perpetual "after" in terms of the "before" and "after" of being a Christian. I have always worn a white hat. I'm the guy all the mothers in church referred to when they nagged their sons, "Why don't you be like him?"

I wasn't very popular with my friends.

Once I wrote the following poem:

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I hate it here  
Up on this pedestal  
How did I get here anyway?  
Did someone put me here  
Or did I climb up  
All by myself?  
Never mind how I got here--  
I just want to get off.

I hate it here  
Up on this pedestal.  
I know what I'll do. . .  
I'll jump!

And when everything is splattered on the floor,  
Then whatever stands  
Will have to stand on its own,  
And whatever rises  
Will have to be real.

I'd like to think that I've jumped but I'm not so sure I ever have. It's hard to tell, because I've learned to act out the acceptable Christian life so well. If I have really jumped, I think I've crawled back up more times than I realize.

As a result of this familiarity with Christian society, my salvation story has not been so much about conversion as it has been about extraction, like peeling away the outer layer of traditional Christian expectations from the orange of my Christian experience, trying to determine what to keep and what to throw away.

It's not a simple process at all, not a succulent ball with a thin, white skin separating easily from its curling peel. No, real emotional response to God has had to be wrung from a thousand stirring musical chords, real obedience pried from layers of traditional Christian expectations. Heart has had to be shaken out of assumption, love distilled from law.

A question arises as I tear at the incorrigible fusion of fruit and peel. While sticky juice squirts in my face and rolls down my wrist, I discover part of the flesh adhering to the peel, pulling away from the meat of the orange. I wonder, How do I keep from throwing away good pieces of fruit along with the peeling?

It's a battle not to fall into cynicism at this point. It's inevitable

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that I will at some point tear away good fruit. If I openly discuss this process, I may hurt someone by condemning some good thing that has been born in myself or someone else. I have decided I must take this risk.

I used to think it was only necessary to speak the truth and let it go at that. If people misinterpreted it, that was not my problem. But I think differently now. The role of the prophet is to stand before truth and cause it to shine in relationship to current situations. Part of that illumination process is to reinterpret what has been misinterpreted. The Old Testament prophets and Jesus all did this.

There is too much in America that labels itself Christian; it cannot all be true. The difficult thing about being a Christian today is that it has become too easy. I can't help but think that some folks are coming along merely for the ride. But so what if they are? I cannot judge them. My responsibility is to reinterpret the message for myself and be honest about this personal interrogation. So I peel away at this orange, not because I want to destroy anyone, but because I want, with all my heart, to get at the truth.

It would be easy to say, "I'm a Christian today because my good parents taught me the Word of God from childhood, because I spent all those hours in church, because I enjoyed a consistent family altar, because so many Christians around me provided fine examples, etc." All of these things are noble, all valuable in their own right. But in fact, I'm a Christian today because God has chosen to have a relationship with me, and I, in turn, have chosen to have one with Him.

To return to such an elementary understanding -- what would be natural baby steps for a new convert from outside the conclaves of the Christian subculture -- has been (and continues to be) like peeling this orange. The more I work at it, the more I discover it is a very thick-skinned orange, the kind that makes me wonder, as I stare at the pile of orange-and-white chunks in the sink and then at the squishy pulp in my hand -- was there more peel here than orange? More Christianity than Christ? More fundamentalism than faith? More law than love? And if there was, how much is still there?

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