

GOD DIDN'T COME FROM OFFICE MAX...

BY CHRISTA ADAMS

*"Oh ye of little faith, who believe that somehow the birth of Christ
is dependent upon acknowledgement in a circular form from Office Max!"*
--Anna Quindlen

I love quotes. I have them everywhere—my walls, my journal, my bathroom. My most recent find is this quote by Anna Quindlen, an American journalist for *Newsweek* and a Pulitzer Prize winner. I immediately fell in love with it because it's so multi-dimensional; I found it reminded me of different areas of my life. From real faith, to God in schools, to standing alone for what's right, I related to this quote on many levels. I grew up in a Christian home, with parents who loved me and taught me about God. Unfortunately, like many children who grew up in the church, I often believed only because my parents did—not bothering to define “trusting Jesus” for myself. Only when I reached high school did I begin to truly *love* God, not just believe in Him.

I am a proud graduate of South High School in Pueblo, Colorado. South had many things to offer—a diverse student body, many college prep classes, and a wide variety of extra curricular activities. But I walked away with far more than friends, study habits, and a good resume. I emerged with a stronger understanding of my faith and a *real* relationship with my Creator. Although I was saved at the age of six, South is where most of the growth in my spiritual journey truly began.

I've been in public school all my life. While not the right choice for some, I would not change the fact that I received a public school education. Public school often has the reputation of lower educational standards, less preparation of students for college and beyond, and students who emerge with no moral standards. I would argue that the exact opposite is true, if the public school system is used correctly. This requires more work on the part of the student and the parents, but—in my opinion— is well worth the end result.

MORE THAN CLICHÉS

In my years growing up in the church, I learned the “right” answers to all the questions, all the “right” things to say when I was around church people. It wasn't that I didn't believe the answers I was saying, I just didn't understand them. The tongue is a wicked thing when it is not controlled. James 3:5-6 talks about not just controlling our words, but about learning to use them well. Have you ever used a big word just to sound cool? Almost every time I try that, it doesn't make sense. When I say something, I should be able to explain and expound on it. If I don't know what the word means, I can hardly convey my message. Likewise, if I don't know

what these answers I'm spouting off mean, I can't convey the Christian message to anyone else. I learned that it's not enough for me to know in my head what I believe; I have to be able to relay it to others.

From day one in Honors English 10, my faith was under attack. There were people from all different walks of life. My teacher frequently claimed to play the devil's advocate, but he clearly did have an opinion in most cases. Students declared every belief from atheist to "whatever works for you is fine." Some were in between, others were undecided and easily swayed. I claimed to be a Christian. But this wasn't a class where I could just claim something. I found out quickly I had to be able to justify what I said. I tried many different approaches to explaining my beliefs. Looking back, I realize they were all cop out answers and further proof that I didn't know what I believed.

Before I tell you how I made a fool out of myself trying to appear the put together Christian, I need to tell you about Max and Laura. Max and Laura were the two most outspoken, argumentative people in my grade. It seemed I had every class with them. They were both opinionated, and very good at arguing and persuading. This was a gift I did not have, which became very frustrating in a class that turned into one debate session after another. Matthew 5:11-12 told me I would be persecuted for my faith, but I had no idea what the extent of that would be until I reached high school.

The first time I had to explain my viewpoint, I tried going off the bias that everyone knew what Christianity was, and therefore they all knew what I believed. I'm pro-life, anti-gay marriage, vote Republican, support missionaries around the world. "That's a typical Christian," they said accusingly. "Do you even know why you believe those things? You're ignorant to what's going on around you, just going off blind faith." Max and Laura had reasoning and logic to defend everything they believed. They had countless philosophers and scholars to support their ideas. I felt unprepared and unintelligent. One thing I did not want to be was ignorant. I prided myself in seeming well informed and extremely intellectual.

Another way I tried to cover up my lack of spiritual understanding was with my rehearsed answers. That did not go over well. These types of answers may work in the church, but they aren't sufficient for people who didn't grow up hearing them. To these people, all the clichés meant was criticizing and judgmental Christians. After I'd spit out a well-rehearsed answer, they'd throw back a question I had no response for. I'd mentally flip through my book of Christian answers, only to find I didn't understand the clichés well enough to answer their question with another one. They were experts at questioning everything I said which made me insecure in my beliefs. It's not that they were trying to throw me off necessarily, but trying to prove their point. I was not well grounded enough in my own point to dodge this attack.

Frustrated, I tried the silent method. I just wouldn't say anything when a controversial issue came up. I'd sit back and let the more versed, opinionated people hash it out. This worked for a few days, until they noticed I wasn't answering anymore. Then they accused me of having a God who wasn't omniscient, who didn't have an

answer for everything. To Max and Laura, if there was a God, He was not black and white. There were lots of gray areas, where different things were okay for different people. Deep down, I knew that wasn't true, but I had no idea *why*.

By then I'd realized that I didn't have this Christian thing down as well as I thought I did. Up until this point in my life, I'd been content in my relationship with God, not needing anything more from Him, Him not needing anything more from me. All of a sudden, I needed more answers, and I felt like He was asking me to be his personal messenger. I felt a lot of pressure, and not much resolve. However, good things came out of this time in my life. I spent a lot more time looking things up in my Bible, begging God for wisdom and clarity, and talking to my parents about their faith. For the first time in my life, I knew where the things I said came from, and began to evaluate them for myself.

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Tenth grade was my year to figure out that I didn't know God as well as I thought I did. Eleventh grade was my year to figure out that even when I know where I stand with God and have a pretty good grasp on my beliefs, it's not that easy to explain them to others. For the first time in my life, I knew why I said and did the things I did. I knew why I didn't cuss like my friends, didn't laugh at the dirty jokes in the halls, didn't make out behind the building. It wasn't that that many of my beliefs changed, although a few did, but that they were now *my* beliefs, and I didn't have to go running to my parents or my Sunday School teacher for answers anymore. I could run to God. The thing I struggled with now was how to tell someone else about my convictions without sounding judgmental.

People in my classes loved to pull the "separation of church and state" line. They claimed I couldn't use my Bible as my base for arguing because that was bringing God into the schools. One of the biggest excuses I heard for someone not to believe in God was that Christians were closed minded and intolerant. Being a Christian in a very secular world, I felt like I was their one opportunity to know Jesus. If I used my standard, they called me on being exclusive and not broadening my viewpoint. Then they saw me as narrow-minded, and how would they ever come to know Christ if they couldn't get past my narrow-mindedness? At the same time, they also hated people who were wishy-washy in their standards, or who couldn't stand behind their claims. I had standards, but because they came from the Bible, they weren't okay. I felt like the entire kingdom of heaven was resting on my shoulders, and I just couldn't handle it.

I know what you're thinking. "Duh, you couldn't handle it. God's the only one who can save people." I'm just the message bearer. It was never easy for me to be a message bearer. I knew they were constantly watching my life for inconsistencies. I couldn't tell them something I wasn't willing or able to live. I was constantly

struggling with God over how to share my faith. By now, most of my classmates and peers knew I was a Christian because of what I claimed in the classroom, but could they see it in my life? This was a breaking point for me. I felt like I had to be perfect, but at the same time knew I couldn't be. God taught me a big lesson in humility that year.

I had to learn to admit that I wasn't perfect, even though I claimed to live by a higher standard. I had to be willing to concede that I didn't know all the answers when we were in a huge class debate. I had to take a step back and look at things from my peers' perspective. I mentioned earlier that I liked to appear smart and put together. That's how I thought a good Christian should appear. I was using my imperfection as an excuse not to share the hope that I had. How self-centered I was to think that I could even approach perfection, or to believe that God needed me to share His message. He chose me- gave me the opportunity- to be the message bearer, but I messed it up by trying to do things in my own power. Not that I shouldn't strive to be like Christ. After all, faith without works is dead. But I needed to realize that I couldn't achieve perfection every time. If there's anything I've learned though, it's that God is a God of second chances.

ANYBODY ELSE THERE?

Loneliness was one of the hardest parts of the public school system for me. Sure it was hard that my God was purposely left out of the curriculum, that the Pledge of Allegiance was debated because it had the phrase 'under God' in it, that I couldn't pray in school. That wasn't what bugged me most. I could study my Bible to supplement the curriculum, say the Pledge however I wanted, and pray outside of school. The hardest part was that there were very few people around me who understood me, who could relate to my faith. I was blessed in those I did have, but that didn't stop me from feeling outnumbered and overwhelmed.

My friends weren't bad people, but it was hard to find Christians who wanted a real relationship with God, not just a convenient belief system. The people I hung out with didn't drink or smoke, but they weren't as passionate about Jesus as I was, or as I was trying to be. They claimed to believe in Jesus, but put themselves in compromising situations. They claimed to have the same standards I did, but left me standing alone when attacked in class.

When I have feelings of loneliness, what do I do? Run to God? As a Christian, that would be what you'd expect me to do. Instead, I'd spent years trying to quench my loneliness in my friends. God had a funny way of teaching me to run to Him. Psalm 56:8 says, "You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in your book?" I don't know how many times God had to bring me back to Himself, to dry my tears and remind me that He was always there, no matter what the world had done to me. Friends wouldn't invite me to parties because they knew I wouldn't go. It wasn't that I wanted to go to the party, I'd rather not put myself in a

position of temptation, but that didn't stop me from feeling left out. I stopped counting the number of times I didn't go to the movies with my friends because what they were seeing wasn't appropriate. Even when we did hang out, it always seemed I was on the outside, like there was a connection that we just didn't have. Finally, I realized there was--God.

I still struggle at times with God being enough. When I struggle with feeling like I need more, I turn to Philippians 4. Verse 4 says to rejoice in the Lord always. Just when I feel like loving Him? No, always. If I can learn to turn to Him and *rejoice* in my feelings of loneliness, I will overcome them. Verses 8-9 talk about learning to think about the right things. Dwelling on my problems never solves them. Instead, I am learning to climb outside myself and meditate on God. Verse 11 exhorts me to be content in whatever state I'm in, and verse 13 encourages me that I can accomplish that through Christ. I've found strength in overcoming my feelings in the Word. The great thing about the Bible is that it's always there-I can turn back to it anytime.

IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

It's now appropriate to ask the question you've been wondering for the last several pages. "Why are you such a big advocate of public school if it was so hard for you?" God knows exactly what each one of us needs. He threw me in the ocean and threw me a life preserver-a relationship with Him. I either had to choose to take it or figure out how to swim on my own.

I'm one of those people who doesn't like change. I like to be in my comfort zone all the time. But thankfully, God doesn't operate based on what I like. Instead He put me in with people who weren't like me. They didn't believe the same way I did, they didn't grow up like I did, they didn't think like I did. Now, I can't imagine not knowing the diverse group of people I do. Each of them has challenged my faith and shaped my character in different ways. The Maxes and Lauras of the world taught me not to accept things at face value. Being surrounded by so many other cultures and faiths taught me to listen and appreciate different views. My friends taught me to love people without believing like them.

Through trial by fire, I learned to defend my views. There is no truer test of knowledge than to be put on the spot. Many times I was put on the spot and failed. But another lesson I learned through being in public school is that it's okay to mess up, as long as I work to fix my mistakes. So many times in the church I've felt like I had to be someone I wasn't. If I was struggling with something, it wasn't okay to share it. One thing about the people I knew at school was that they realized they weren't faultless. I've realized that non-Christians judge and criticize Christians because we often claim to be something we're not-perfect. Questions from my friends who truly didn't understand Christianity- who thought about things totally different than I did- enlightened me and

brought a whole new realm of understanding to my faith. Nothing is more challenging than an unbeliever's question, and nothing more rewarding than the answer.

When I had no other options, I had to turn to God. That has made it so much easier for me to get close to Him in the times when I feel content. For me, it was necessary for Him to strip everything away and see what I would do. I was surrounded by ungodliness, trying to live a godly lifestyle. John 17:16 says that we are not of this world, even as Jesus was not of this world. It wasn't easy to live apart from the world when I was surrounded by it. I was constantly reminded though that a friend of the world is an enemy of God (James 4:4). God was the only friend I had a lot of times, and I knew I couldn't lose Him. I had chosen the life preserver He offered me, and there was no turning back. By choosing the Way, when I'd seen and been offered other ways, I emerged with a stronger faith.

Granted, there are Christians who enter public schools and do not have the same results I did. I think a lot of my journey had to do with the fact that I had a great church and supportive parents. I was being fed spiritually by my church family and my own family, while growing my capacity to know God by experiencing Him in a very real way. Through my journey, I've learned what Anna Quindlen meant when she said that the birth of Christ was not dependent upon acknowledgement in a circular form from Office Max. Not everyone will acknowledge Christ as Lord. I've experienced that firsthand. That doesn't make it not true. God is God, whether we choose to believe it or not. There will not always be a publication telling us what's true, but we must learn to distinguish the truth God makes clear to us. As obvious as this may sound, God can't be bought at Office Max. Something bought in a store is pre-packaged, limited, and controllable. How boring would God be if He was like that? God is limitless and dynamic, far exceeding our imaginations. Many times I tried to take the easy way out by looking for Him in a book or in another person. But He doesn't work like that. To know God, we must experience Him for ourselves.

For me, the experience of truly knowing God came through public school. However you choose to know God, I encourage you to look beyond Office Max. He's waiting to show you who He really is when you stop placing your expectations on Him. Be comforted in His promise that He "knows the plans [He] has for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).