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Youth Ministry: A Letter to a New Christian

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Youth Ministry

A Letter to a New Christian

January 9, 2011

Dear Amanda,

It was such an honor and a pleasure to welcome you into the kingdom of heaven yesterday, along with the rest of your brothers and sisters. I am certain that this group of people sitting around you, and the larger group all around the world, is very pleased with the decision you have made. You have always had a lot of people in your life who love you, and even some who love you unconditionally. But now, you have a whole group of people around the world who have adopted you as their new sister. Just remember, you have adopted them as well.

The beauty of your decision is hardly that you have pleased your brothers and sisters around the globe, most of whom you will never meet. While there are obligations and benefits that certainly come with those new, sincere relationships, the decision you made would have been wonderful if you were the only one to have ever done so. No, the beauty of what you have done has to do with what it means to God. I don't like to assume much about God's nature, and I certainly don't speak for him today, but I feel pretty confident that the decision you have made pleased him to no end. As a new Christian, I am sure you understand exactly how important it is to please him, too. Well done.

You've been with us all of your life, Amanda. I remember you as a newborn, and I have known your parents and your brother and sister even longer. I remember you running around the halls of the church building, and from times when I would visit with your brother and your sister at your house. You were a sweet child, complete with big curly hair and as much personality as you possess today. It was wonderful to get to know you then, but I assure you, it is better to know the person that you have grown into. You went from being the daughter of my brother and my sister in Christ, to being my sister. That is an important distinction, and one that I can't thank you enough for making.

Over the years I did not get to know you very well, due to my time in the army. But about three years ago that changed when I came back to Reno to stay. As always, this church family welcomed me with open arms, and so did your own family, which has always been so wonderful to me. But the best part about coming home was that I got to take part in the leadership of the teen group—leading discussions, activities and programs that I hoped would help contribute to people making the decision that you have made. It was during this period that I really got to know you, and for that, I am forever grateful.

As a group we have shared many wonderful times, and you have always been near the center of most of those times. Whether you are reminding me that my comments on any given subject are “irrelevant”—one of your favorite words—or engaging in a heartfelt conversation about how difficult it must be to be a Christian in the modern world, I have long been impressed with who you are and who you have grown up to be. I have also long been impressed with your work ethic. Your willingness to pitch in and go above and beyond with our many group activities is admirable. This sense of obligation and service will serve you well in your Christian walk.

Although we have had many talks about becoming a Christian over the years, the first time I really started to see it click with you was when we were preparing our speeches for Leadership Training for Christ last year. You had been working on your speech for several months, and it had been honed quite a bit through the help of others by the time I finally got a chance to see it. When I did, I was blown away. Remember? That is my first clear memory that you were starting to get that you had some major decisions to make with respect to your faith and your life as a Christian.

I was glad to get a glimpse of your maturity then, and am thrilled that so many people took an interest in helping you make this decision. I would like you to think about that for a minute. Think about all of the people who invested their time and energy in fostering your spiritual growth. Of course, your parents and your grandparents served a primary role. If it weren't for them, the example might not have been set from an early age, and perhaps you might not have been able to get to know God through attending church over the years. There is also your sister, who loves you very much and has had a major impact on your life. Whether you like to admit it or not, I can't help but think that her children, your niece and nephew, played a role as well. You've always been sort of a big sister to them—you must recognize the importance of your example.

Then there are members of the teen group and others from this body who have taken a personal interest in helping you refine your decision to follow Jesus. This list is by no means exhaustive, but is rather intended to express a very significant point: although you made the decision to be baptized on your own, there are a lot of people who have been hoping for this for a very long time. Beyond hoping, they have been working to encourage you and help you in every way that they could. Isn't this a wonderful thing? As you grow into your new life, I truly hope you reflect on how important you are to this body of people.

I also hope you take a moment, or even a lifetime, to reflect upon how truly important yesterday's decision is. You have made countless decisions in your life to date—some big, some small; some important, some not as significant. In the future, as you grow older and gain more responsibilities, you will face bigger decisions and challenges. Some of those will be crucial decisions—like what to do for a career, where to live, whom and if to marry and whether or not to have a family. However, there is no bigger decision than the one you made yesterday.

Regarding that decision, congratulations! You have passed the biggest test you have encountered in this life. The good news is that your future decisions have been made even easier. Your career and where you live don't really matter, so long as they support godly pursuits. The decision to marry will be assisted by the structures and principles laid out in the Bible, and your decision on whether you will raise children will be assisted by spiritual knowledge as well. That is, you will not only be able to sincerely pray to God for support and guidance in these decisions, but you will also have your Christian family to rely on for advice, love and support. Although it may not always seem like it, your life just got easier, Amanda.

Your baptism symbolizes a lot about your heart, and where and with whom you will decide to spend your life. In many ways it is a symbol, one sometimes likened to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The difference, of course, is that we are dying to sin, and his death absolves us if we choose to follow him. The act of baptism is also commonly compared to being born again. This was a critical understanding for me, and I hope I can impart it here with this simple fact: no matter what your sin has been in your life in the past, it has been cleansed by Jesus' blood. So long as you strive, honestly and sincerely, to follow him and his example for the rest of your life, you cannot lose this salvation.

Beyond the symbolic, the Bible tells us a lot about baptism. While there are different views and practices regarding the tradition of baptism, it is crucial for us to be baptized. Matthew 3.16 records, "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him." You just took your first step in striving to be like Jesus. Acts 2.38 pronounces upon the issue as well: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Acts 19.4–7 reads: "Then said Paul, 'John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.' When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spoke with tongues, and prophesied." Ephesians 4.5 tells us that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Based on your decision yesterday, you agree with the significance of this act in fully committing yourself to a life of Christ. You are wise beyond your years.

Look around at the people with whom you have chosen to associate. While we may not always be the

prettiest or the best dressed, and while we will certainly say things that will embarrass you from time to time, you have to love us. There is no choice, and there is plenty of good in that fact. Think of all of the good that comes out of having to love people that sometimes drive you crazy. Think about the spiritual growth that you will achieve if you embrace this imperfect body with all of its flaws. And there are greater advantages: *this body has to love you too, no matter what*. We are obligated just like you. This group has to embrace you, with all of your flaws, and to love, support and encourage you. This group is obligated to do everything it can to help you in your walk, and to do everything we can to see that you pursue a godly life.

This is a huge thing. When you are struggling with certain aspects of your life, this body is here to help you through. When you are joyous and celebrating victories in your life, this body is here to carry you on its shoulders. The Christian life demands that we be willing to serve one another for as long as we can, receiving our rest only when we die and move on to the next life. I can assure you, Amanda, this is a challenge that every person in this room welcomes.

Consider the word “disciple” for a moment. In a secular sense, a disciple is a follower and student of a mentor, teacher, or other wise figure. To us, and now to you, that mentor, teacher, or wise figure also happens to be the Son of God. There are other great mentors, teachers and wise figures out there, but the Son of God is on a different playing field altogether. You chose the correct mentor in choosing to be a disciple of Christ. But choosing to follow Jesus comes with responsibilities, challenges and sacrifices. It will undoubtedly make your life easier in some respects, and more fulfilling, but being a disciple will also force you to make major choices about whom you choose to associate with, how you choose to act and how you choose to serve. All of these things are enormously important now, because you are an example and an ambassador of God’s kingdom wherever you go.

When people find out that you are a Christian, they will hold you to a higher standard. This is wonderful when it is your Christian brother or sister holding you accountable out of love, but you will often encounter others, mostly non-Christians, who will hold you to a higher standard in the hopes that you will fail. This is an unfortunate aspect of human nature, but it is one that every Christian in this room has faced. While this is unfortunate, it also serves to highlight what I believe is a fundamental fact about your new life as a Christian: the way you are judged and the way you are perceived by the outside world is not always going to be fair. It is probably best that you start to learn how to deal with this now.

The good news is, there is so much more out there that matters more. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to give our lives to the cause of the kingdom. In some instances, this means that we are called to give our lives to service, no matter how tired we may be. This may mean huge professional or personal sacrifices that non-Christians would never dream of enduring. We are called to give our lives to evangelism. Some Christians have even been called to literally give their lives for the righteous cause as well: Christians have been killed because of their faith. We are to take this commitment that seriously.

Although this probably sounds daunting to you so early in your Christian life, let me offer up the alternative: living a worldly life will also cost you your life, but it offers you no reward, no fulfillment and very little in the way of meaning. In fact, Paul tells us this very clearly in Romans 6.23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” I love this passage for many reasons, but mainly because its truth is so concise and pure. I know this from my own experiences.

Let me tell you a story about my own baptism, but let me warn you: this is a cautionary tale. I was baptized in December of 2002, in this same church. At that time I was a newly-minted army officer and our nation was about to engage in a war. I was baptized because I was scared. I was scared that I was going to die without being saved. You might be surprised at how common this is for someone in my position.

You see, I was raised in the church. Like yours, my parents are sincere Christians and they raised us within the bounds of Christian principles. They gave my brothers and me plenty of freedom to pursue the truth on our own, but they always ensured that we understood the importance of the Christian commitment. I

was good at the Christian talk, but I was not good at the Christian walk. While I certainly was not the worst kid, I made being cool a bigger priority than being righteous. This translated into major issues in my life. I would tell people that I was a Christian, but in my heart I knew that I was not.

This was true when I was baptized, too. I knew that it was the right thing to do, and I believed in the principles that came with baptism. Knowing that I was probably going off to war was just a catalyst to accept the commitment. Unfortunately, I was not prepared to accept it at the time, although I will admit that I desperately wanted to be. Looking back, the problem is clear to me: I had not taken my faith seriously enough to make it my own. When I grew up in the church, I had relied on the faith of my parents, and the faith of the members of this body. Although I had plenty of opportunities to challenge myself, and many of my peers accepted the very same challenges, I had never accepted the challenge. As you might have guessed, this problem did not go away with my baptism eight years ago, even though I truly wanted it to. This is hard to explain, so let me try to go a little deeper: I wanted to be a Christian. I believed (and believe today) in the death, burial and resurrection, and Christ's sacrifice for my salvation when I was baptized in 2002. But I was not mature enough to truly act on those principles, even though I had taken a huge step in committing to them.

Over the years, my failure to truly live up to my commitment was the single most costly failure of my life. After living through two deployments to combat zones, my commitment to God became even more difficult, and I became even more desperate for his salvation. This led to a terrible cycle of shame and guilt, depression and anxiety. Worst of all, I was trying to deal with these negative cycles with alcohol, leading to all sorts of other terrible things in my life. The only positive thing to come out of this period, the darkest I have ever been through, was that it finally gave me the courage to stand up and accept the challenge that Jesus laid out for us with his life.

It certainly was not easy, but I had all of the tools that I needed. I had a wonderful church family here that was supportive, that held me accountable, and that was encouraging. I had a group of teens here that expected me to be their example. But most importantly, I had the will to follow God. I prayed to him, I read his word and I begged him to pull me out of my life of sin. I won't say that I have been perfect since, but I will say that I am extraordinarily grateful to our God for granting me the maturity it took to get through those times. This is what you have chosen, and it speaks very well of your own maturity at this young age.

Maturity, I have learned, comes at great cost. On the one hand, a young person can look around and choose to forgo certain opportunities because of the accompanying problems. That costs you the opportunity of experience. Or, you can do what I did and decide just not to deal with challenges at all. The cost for that approach is much higher. If there is anything I can impart to you, please let it be this: now that you are a Christian, please take it seriously. Jesus died for you. People have died for their faith in the past. You are expected to give your life to Christ. Work a little bit every day to make this faith your own. We promise that we will be there to help you along the way.

Take this decision seriously. If you use God's principles to help make other life decisions, you will be much better off. If you approach important friendships and relationships with God's love, you will be better off. And if you do your best every day to live up to Jesus' standard, you will be more successful than we can measure in human terms. That's not to say that becoming a Christian always makes things easier, but it is saying that living a Christian life always makes things better. You have an opportunity to avoid the egregious mistakes that many of us who have come to follow God have made. You have the opportunity to see the human landscape for what it really is, and to use Jesus' example to help you navigate. This does not mean that you won't make your own mistakes; it just means that you might be able to avoid the painful mistakes brought on by unchecked sin.

You have great opportunities to grow and mature as a Christian. You will be going to Ghana with other members of our teen group later this year, and serving people who have had less than we have had on our poorest days. You will continue to have opportunities to grow by your service in this church. As you well

know, this group of people will be there to support you, but it will also lean on you. That is the way the relationship is supposed to work, and believe me, it does. You will meet challenges in your life that we simply cannot imagine as of right now, but I have no doubt in my mind that you will prevail victorious. Now that you are a member of his flock, God will see to it that you do.

Amanda, I am so very proud of you for the person you have become. You have grown into a wonderful and inspiring young lady. The decision you made yesterday was the best possible decision you could have ever made, and in doing so, you set yourself up for a much, much better life. This group of people loves you like a sister, and we will serve you for the rest of our lives. Never hesitate to call on us and seek our support. Never hesitate to seek the advice of those who have been before you in this body and elsewhere. And never cease in sharing the beauty and joy of what you have accepted into your life with others who can also profit from God's glory, grace and salvation.

Amanda, welcome and congratulations! This simply could not mean more to us.

Your brother in Christ,

Caleb S. Cage

CALEB S. CAGE IS A WRITER IN RENO, NEVADA, WHERE HE AND HIS WIFE LEAD THE HIGH SCHOOL GROUP AT THE FOOTHILLS CHURCH OF CHRIST.