

THE DAVE SHERIDAN STORY

BY DAVE SHERIDAN

HOW GOD USED DAVE'S NINE-YEAR OLD DAUGHTER TO BRING THE SHERIDAN FAMILY TO CHRIST

I grew up Catholic in every respect. My family and friends were Catholics. My hometown, Pittsburgh, was over 75% Catholic, mostly Irish (like my family) or German. My education was Catholic: the Charity Nuns in grade school; the Brothers of Mary in high school; and priests from the Order of the Holy Ghost Fathers at Duquesne University. Religiously speaking, Catholicism was all I knew. I thought that all Protestants were going to hell. That's what I was taught, and I had no reason to doubt it.

This is not to say that I didn't see any problems with Catholicism. The Church had taught me that if I died after committing what it called a mortal sin, I would end up in hell. In those days committing a mortal sin was fairly easy (such as eating a hamburger on a Friday), so I often went to confession. I remember how after telling my sins to the priest I would kneel before an image of Christ on the cross, and ask Him, "If it's up to me to get to heaven, then why, Jesus, did you bother to come? Why did you suffer and die? What was the point?" I didn't realize it at the time, but this was my first step away from Roman Catholicism.

After college I received a commission with the Marines. I flew F-9's and F-5 Panther jets. I also flew search and rescue helicopters for the Corps. When I got out of the service I flew as a private pilot until I crashed a helicopter in downtown Pittsburgh.

A new career followed with the 3-M Company. There I met and fell in love with Barbara, a wonderful girl. We married and God gave us three children: Kathleen, Colleen, and David. Barbara and I devoted our lives to our children, and family life drew me back into Catholicism. I became the vice-chairman of the parish council, head of a study group, and a trainer, who prepared lay people to serve as Eucharist ministers and lectors. We also helped formulate the baptism and First Communion preparation programs for the parish.

I still didn't feel like I was doing enough to please God. I began attending Mass more frequently and soon found myself going every day, 365 days a year! I was determined to work my way to heaven the Roman Catholic way through devotion and hard work.

Nevertheless old questions resurfaced from a new source: my own children. They started asking Barbara and me the same questions about Roman Catholicism that I had grappled with as a youth: Why did Jesus die? Must I confess my sins to a priest? What's the purpose of limbo and purgatory? Why do we pray to Mary and the saints? Their questions planted new doubts in my mind.

About that time Barbara saw an advertisement in a local paper for a Vacation Bible School, a two-week club for children featuring Bible stories. Barbara had exhausted her summer list of activities for the children and the Vacation Bible School was free. She asked me if the kids could attend. I hesitated when I learned that it was being sponsored by a Baptist church. But then again, it would give the children an opportunity to be out and busy. Maybe they would learn some Bible stories, I thought. What harm could be done? The Vacation Bible School passed without incident until one evening when upon arriving home from work Barbara informed me that our oldest child, Kathleen, then nine years old, wanted to talk with me. Realizing that something important was up, I took Kathleen into my den and offered her a seat in front of my desk.

"Daddy," she started, "I know I'm going to heaven."

Kathleen made the announcement with such confidence that I was stunned. Even with all my learning, service, and devotion to the sacraments, I didn't know if I would make it to heaven. "She's just a kid," I thought to myself. "What does she know?" I decided to put her to the test, "How do you know you're going to heaven, Kathleen?"

"Today I prayed to receive Jesus Christ as my personal Savior," she answered without hesitation. "That's wonderful, Kathleen," I replied. I didn't really understand what she was talking about. Maybe she learned something in the Vacation Bible School that I didn't know. But then again, she was just a child.

A few days later, Barbara and the children attended the closing ceremony of the Vacation Bible School. There she met Bill Maupin, the pastor of Brecksville Chapel, the church sponsoring the school. He asked Barbara if Kathleen had told her about her decision to trust Christ. When Barbara told him that she had, the pastor asked if he could visit our family. Barbara agreed and they set up a time.

I was furious when I learned about the appointment. "Absolutely not!" I told Barbara. But she kept putting off calling the pastor to cancel. As the day of the visit approached, I began thinking about it more. *What am I afraid of? I'm a well-educated Catholic and certainly know more about religion than any Baptist pastor.*

"Tell Bill to come on over," I told Barbara. "I'll be happy to talk to him."

When Bill arrived we welcomed him warmly and settled down to what I thought would be a rousing discussion about religion, a topic on which I was well prepared. But he surprised me. All he wanted to talk about was Jesus Christ and what the Lord meant to him. I had been around religious people all of my life and I had never heard anyone talk about Jesus like this. When he left I told Barbara, "He talks as if he knows Jesus. He talks as if Jesus is still alive." My concept of Jesus was a dead man draped across the arms of Mary, as in Michelangelo's Pieta.

Bill began visiting our home weekly to help Kathleen complete a workbook titled "What Jesus Wants You To Do." Through those visits, our friendship with Bill and confidence in him grew. He sensed that we were spiritually unsatisfied ourselves, and so began encouraging us to visit his church. At that time my Sundays were filled with football and so we were going to Mass on Saturday evening. I told Barbara that she and the kids could visit his church Sunday mornings if she wished.

After several weeks of glowing reports from Barbara and the kids about their visits to Bill's church, I decided it was time to see for myself what was going on. I was surprised to learn that the Brecksville Chapel was nothing more than a meeting at the back of the Clippity Clop Saddle Shop on Route 82! I was accustomed to stained glass sanctuaries and Gothic cathedrals. I couldn't imagine anyone worshipping in a saddle shop!

To my surprise, I found the service interesting and informative. The men impressed me with their ability to pray aloud and their knowledge of the Scriptures. We soon became regular attendees and close friends with Bill and his family.

One Sunday after the service we invited Bill and his family over for dinner. During conversation after the meal, our middle child Colleen, who was seven at the time and preparing for her First Holy Communion, came over to us and said, "Daddy, I would like to pray to receive Jesus Christ as my personal Savior!"

"What's happening?" I thought to myself. "I've raised these children to be good Catholics. Now they're all defecting!"

"She's only seven years old," I said, apologizing to the pastor. "I don't think she knows what she's asking."

Bill, however, took Colleen's request seriously. He asked her several questions and carefully reviewed with her the way of salvation. Though I couldn't completely follow his explanation myself, it was clear to me from her answers that Colleen knew exactly what he was talking about. Finally Bill asked Barbara and me if we had any objections to Colleen praying to receive Jesus Christ as her personal Savior. How could we say no?

I'll never forget the scene. My little seven-year-old got down on her knees, Barbara and I following her. First Bill led in prayer. Then Colleen told God that she was a sinner and wanted to be saved. We had no sooner finished than Bill asked, "How about Mom and Dad?"

I didn't know what to think. I explained to Bill that all this was pretty new to us. We needed time to think it through and more information, a lot more information. He suggested that we start reading the Bible. "What I say about salvation doesn't really matter," Bill explained. "What does the Bible say? That's the important question."

The next day Barbara purchased Bibles for each of us. When I came home from work, I took mine into the den and started looking for the place where Bill had told us to begin, the Gospel of John. Barbara took her Bible to the upstairs bedroom and also began reading. When I finally found John's Gospel, my eyes fell on John 8:31-32, "If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." I silently offered a prayer to God. "That's what I want, Lord. I want to know the truth."

I turned to the beginning of John's Gospel and read until I came to John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." The profound simplicity of this verse grabbed me. I stopped, picked up my Bible, and went upstairs to show Barbara. To my surprise, when I entered the room she too was stopped at John 3:16. "Do you realize that if this verse is true, it contradicts everything we know and believe as Catholics?" I asked her.

The weeks that followed were difficult. Our problem was that what we were reading in the Bible seemed too wonderful. We were accustomed to the idea that we had to earn our way into heaven. Catholicism had taught us that the Church and its sacraments were also necessary for salvation. Each day we studied the Bible looking for answers. The Gospel of John and Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans were especially helpful. Wherever we looked the Bible always had the same message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

We were finally ready to surrender and accept God's way to get us to heaven. Jesus did it all (John 19:30). On the cross He took our place and suffered for our sins (Mark 10:45). All that we could do was to trust Him to save us, accepting His free gift of eternal life (Ephesians 2:8-9). This, of course, raised other hard questions. What were we to do about our Catholicism? Should we remain in the Catholic Church so that we could help others find the truth? Should we keep our children in Catholic school, if we no longer trusted what the Church taught? What would our parents and family say if we left the Church?

God through His Scriptures answered these questions as well. "Come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord (2 Corinthians 6:17). We knew what we needed to do. One evening, Barbara and I got down on our knees on either side of our bed. Speaking to God in prayer, we each placed our trust in Christ to save us. We renounced our dependence upon the Catholic Church, the sacraments, and our own good works to get us into heaven.

The next day we took our children out of the Catholic school. We left the Catholic Church and dedicated ourselves to God for service. God blessed us and a year later, our youngest

child, David, also trusted Christ. Since then God has used us to help many Catholics find salvation in Jesus Christ.

Epilogue

In 1992 Dave was diagnosed with lung cancer. Knowing that his time was short, he and Barbara concentrated on telling others about Christ. The years that followed were the most productive of their lives. They saw many Catholics saved and come out of Roman Catholicism. Christians caught their vision for evangelism and some have now gone overseas as missionaries. The Lord called for Dave on January 26, 1996, Dave went to be with Christ.