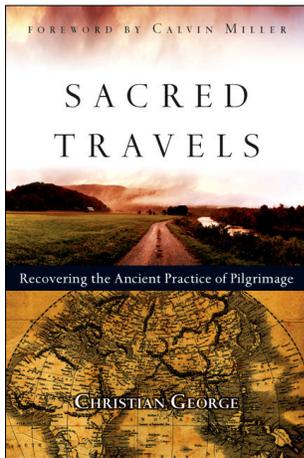




LIKEWISE.

Go and do.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN GEORGE



ABOUT THE BOOK

Christian George recovers the ancient spiritual practice of pilgrimage, of travel to sacred sites. In engaging narratives of his worldwide voyages, George follows in the footsteps of spiritual pilgrims from across the centuries, from Luther at Wartburg to Spurgeon in England. His travels to landmark places from Iona to Assisi provide a better understanding of the Christian heritage as well as God's inner work in pilgrims throughout history and today.

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Q: How did you discover the practice of pilgrimage?

Christian George: The practice of pilgrimage actually discovered me. My parents named me for a pilgrim—Christian, the main character in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. At a very young age my father and I traveled across the world and I came to understand that the Christian life is a journey to God. When we practice the discipline of pilgrimage we express that reality. Pilgrimage has been a motif in my life for as long as I can remember; it has defined and refined my understanding of the Christian experience, and the more I practice it the more I understand the God who makes straight the way of the pilgrim.

Q: Why is the practice of pilgrimage important in our contemporary culture?

Christian: In a society that struggles to discipline itself, pilgrimage reminds us that we are on an emotional, physical and spiritual journey that requires upward and inward conditioning. Against the backdrop of a postmodern era, pilgrimage reminds us that we were created for a purpose—to draw closer to God. Since Christians are not called to be static saints, pilgrimage keeps us on our toes. It urges us to travel lightly in this land, as though it were a hotel and not a home.

These days, technology allows us to trek across the world. Whether it's to a mossy castle or a musty cathedral, journeying to sacred sites increases our view of God. When we see his hand at work in other cultures and countries, our perspective of him changes. Our worship deepens, our prayers lengthen, and we discover that the God we serve is internationally involved and really does have the whole world in his hands. I suppose you could say pilgrimage is a discipline for the *sole* and the *soul*.

Q: What are some important steps for preparing for and fully experiencing a pilgrimage?

Christian: Pilgrimage is not limited to location. It's not about where we go, when we go or how we go. It's about *why* we go. Pilgrimage is an outward demonstration of an inward calling—to follow Christ, wherever the steps may lead. Not only does it expand the horizons of our faith, but it also gives us a greater understanding of our own spiritual journey.

A pilgrimage is not a vacation. Pilgrims are not tourists, casually meandering through a city. Nor are they nomads, aimlessly wandering through a wilderness. The pilgrim is a sojourner, a seeker of the city "whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10). To this end, a pilgrimage is a journey that requires spiritual preparation and reflection.

Bring a journal to record your thoughts and prayers. Pilgrimage is a time set apart from the daily routine when we physically and spiritually seek after God. It is a sacred season that tests us, shapes us and prepares us to take our calling as Christians seriously. A record of your progress (and regress) will benefit you down the road.

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INTERVIEW

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Christian George has traveled to more than twenty-four countries in North America, Eastern and Western Europe, Scandinavia, Russia and Asia for ministry and missionary work. He has participated in Baptist World Alliance conventions in South Korea, Sweden, Germany, Canada and England, and served at a Billy Graham crusade in Amsterdam, Holland. His experience includes being a preacher, youth counselor, jazz band musician and creative artist. He is currently enrolled in the M.Div. program at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University.

open to other traditions within the spectrum of Christianity. While other styles of worship might differ from ours, they can teach us much about our own spiritual condition and can give us insight into what God is doing in other parts of the world.

Q: Describe one of your most memorable pilgrimage experiences.

Christian: Off the western coast of Ireland is an island called Skellig Michael. Five hundred years after the birth of Christ, Christians built a monastery on its summit. In that time, Skellig Michael was the most distant island of the known world, the last bit of earth one could stand on before falling off its “flat edge.”

I set out for this island in a small boat with eleven other people. The waves were terrifying, tossing us around like an empty can in the hands of an angry ocean. For one sea-sickening hour, my fear wrestled my faith as we battled the churning sea. When we finally arrived, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Skellig Michael rose hundreds of feet out of the water with birds swarming on its cliffs. It looked like something time had long since forgotten. The boat ride was difficult enough, but the hike up the side of Skellig Michael proved even more challenging. Six hundred stone stairs took us to the summit of the mountain. They were cut into the rock a thousand years ago and were smoothed by brave pilgrims who had gone before. At times, the path was so narrow and the steps so slippery that I almost lost my footing.

When we finally reached the top, we were greeted by an abandoned monastic settlement. Six beehive huts, two chapels and an ancient, overgrown cemetery comprised the monastic camp. The rocky igloos that had sheltered the austere monks of long ago baffled me. There was even a small plot of land where they had harvested vegetables. Historians say that they brought cows and sheep to Skellig Michael, but one by one, they just kept falling off its slopes (not entirely surprising).

I walked into a roofless, rocky chapel. I was three thousand miles away from my home, standing on the top of a remote island, surrounded by flying birds, jagged rocks and the sound of water crashing against the stones. Yet within the crumbling walls of this monastic church, I felt at home. I shared a common heritage with the hermits who had worshiped in this room. My fears were their fears. My prayers were their prayers. My Christ was their Christ.

Even now, I’ll be going about my business—running an errand or taking an exam—and I’ll find myself drifting back toward that island in the treacherous Atlantic Ocean. I’ll again hike the cliffs, stone after stone, reminding me to keep growing in my understanding of God. I’ll pass through the narrow pathway, remembering all those who have fallen from its edge. And then I’ll enter that chapel and find encouragement in the words of the apostle Paul, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither *height* nor *depth*, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).