

Episode 12. "John's Story."

Tuesday, May 11, 2021. 33 Minutes Long.

An interview of John Shields, co-founder of the "Saving Christianity" podcast, by Shannon Wolfe, the podcast's producer. Shannon questions John in a direct way about growing up on a Virginia tobacco farm – how becoming a Christian changed his life – how he became a pastor – and why he co-founded this podcast.

Shannon Wolfe (00:00):

Shannon Wolfe opens the episode by saying:

Shannon (00:14):

Well, hello there, friends! This is Episode 12 in our bi-weekly series of "Saving Christianity," coming to you every-other-Tuesday from Christian Family Online. I'm Shannon Wolf, the producer of this podcast. And I'm your host again for this episode. The title of this episode is "John's Story." Again, that's "John's Story." And in this episode, I'm going to interview Pastor John, the co-founder of this podcast. And I think we'd all like a little bit of insight into what God has done in his life, and what God is still doing in his life today. We'd like to know why he's a pastor, and why he's co-founder of this unusual podcast. So let's welcome Pastor John Shields to the show.

John (00:49):

Well, thank you, Shannon. I'll look forward to talking about the "story" ... although I'm not excited about talking about myself. Any anticipation I have comes from what *God* has done in my life over the years. And it's been incredible, really, for the last 36-37 years. And so, when I listen to people, I like to know a little bit about their background. And so I think our listeners want to know where I'm coming from, and am I "buying the product" – quotes – that I'm selling? And so, yeah, so let's go for it.

Shannon (01:33):

I think that's a good idea. And I agree, you know, we do ... even though it is kind of hard to talk about ourselves ... it is good to know, for other people to know, where this is coming from and the sincerity of it. So that's good. And so I understand – and I've known you for quite a while now. You've been our pastor for over 15 years and I had you in college. And we'll talk about that in a little bit, once we get further on into your story. But I understand that you're from a place called Tight Squeeze (Virginia). Is that correct?

John (02:03):

Yeah Shannon (chuckles), believe it or not, it is. I'm a country boy, you would say. I grew up in a rural Southern Virginia. We lived out in the county, and we farmed on the side. My dad worked another full-time job with the Postal Service. But yeah, I grew up there and we raised tobacco. And we worked very hard on the farm. That's what our summers consisted of. But here's the interesting thing. My early days, growing up, we did live in this little community called Tight Squeeze. And there are various stories as to how that came about. I'll leave (those) for another day. But we moved from Tight Squeeze. We actually then moved to the farm which was on a road called Snake Path. And Snake Path was a suburb of the community of Dry Fork. So you can see there were some interesting names and tales to this little community that I came from. But it was a beloved community. It was a fun growing up in the country like that. And even though we worked hard, I have some great, great memories, and I still (do). I moved away from there in 1987, and that seems like forever. I've never lived back (there). Of course visits, but have never lived back – quote – "home." But I have great, great memories of growing up there.

Shannon (03:42):

That's great. So in other words, living in a tight community like that, you probably knew everyone's "shoe size," I guess!

John (03:48):

Yeah! Just about, yeah. (Chuckles.)

Shannon (03:51):

Well, let's talk a little bit more about your relationship with Christ. And so give us a description of what life has been like – how you came to know Christ.

John (04:01):

Yeah, Shannon. I really feel like I was – as a minister that actually led me to Christ used to use a little phrase – that he felt like that "God had really kind of favored him and privileged him." And I feel the same way. And what I mean by that is that I was very fortunate. I grew up in a home where my parents were practicing Christians. It wasn't just something they talked about. It was something that was very much a part of our family life. Church attendance, being dedicated and committed to the local church, was something that was just a part of the lifestyle of our family. Now my father, particularly, he was a leader in the church and well-respected. And so I grew up there. But when we became – and I say "we" – my older sister who is now in heaven, at that time she was married and had moved away. And I was the youngest. And I had two brothers, twins, older than me by just three years.

John (05:07):

And so we were close together in age, as well as in our relationship, as brothers. And when we – each one – when we came to that age of 17-18, our father no longer required us ... even though we lived at home ... he said to us, "Now you're young men and you need to be making

some of your own decisions. And this (attending church) is one of them. And so you decide whether or not you want this to be part of your life."

John (05:35):

And all three of us, unfortunately, walked away. We literally quit going. And we lived in the community and drove past our local church that we'd gone to our whole life. But all three of us walked away from it. And that was symbolic of the lifestyle that we began to live. Each one of us, turning, moving, further and further away from God. And so yeah, that was my childhood – and at least my roots of the Christian faith.

Shannon (06:13):

Gotcha, okay. And so with that – going away from Christ – when did you actually come back to Christ? And your faith was no longer your father's, or your family's, or your pastor's? When did Christ become your relationship?

John (06:29):

Yeah, well that's a great question and a good story I like to tell. Actually, when I left attending (church), I wasn't ... I never became a Christian. And I never asked Christ to forgive me of my sins. I had heard all of the stories of the Bible. And actually – I actually believed them. That's, I guess, the ironic thing. But I had never ... Christ was never real to me until I was almost 22 years old. So it was almost a five-year span there, that church was nothing more than a holiday experience for me, to please my mother or my father during that time. But there was a significant catalyst that brought me to faith. And just very shortly – I could spend an hour talking about that – but just very shortly there was a kind of a perfect storm, if you will, going on in my life. The first one was ... and they happened, they were going along really simultaneously.

John (07:39):

They kind of reached a crescendo. And the first one was ... like I said, I was almost 22 years old ... and I was working. I still lived at home. I was the only child at home. I had a good job, my own automobile, I was dating girls, and just doing the bar thing on the weekend. And what I was finding now ... four to five years into that ... although I was having – what I would say – a lot of fun with my friends. But as I look back, it was a lot of foolish things that I was a part of. But I began to feel like that – really asking myself the question – "Well, goodness, I'm almost 22 years old! Is this kind of the flow? Is this how life is going to be for me?"

John (08:33):

And it just doesn't ... it wasn't gratifying anymore. And so I began to feel this sense of "Well, there's got to be more to life than this!" Simultaneously – all during that particular period maybe is a better way to say it – my older brother, who was just like myself and my other brother, he was far from God and living a very godless life as well. And yet in the midst of that, there was a miraculous ... and I say that very (laughs) with caution. But, it was a miraculous event that happened literally overnight. And (inaudible) I was involved in that to some degree – watching it

happen. But literally overnight ... my brother ... God supernaturally came to him in a drunken state. God came to him and *saved* him.

John (09:38):

He rescued him and, sobering him up, and literally *saved* him. Saved his life, saved his soul, and transformed him in a 24-hour period. And I'm sure that had happened before. But I didn't have eyes to see it. It was so up close and personal that I saw my brother change. I saw his life transformed. And that was like the proverbial straw (chuckles) that broke the camel's back. And I saw that then, and I was like, "Oh, wow!" So, what my father had demonstrated to me all of those years, and going to our local church there in the country. I thought, "Wow, faith *is* real. God *is* real. He *does* change your life!" And so, out of that experience, I came to Christ. I asked him to come into my life and to forgive my sin. And I didn't understand it all then. And don't now. But nevertheless, I knew then He *did*. And that was all 37 years ago, I guess. And so yeah, my life with Christ began then.

Shannon (10:56):

Gotcha. That's great. And I myself, just am forever grateful for that. Just because you've been our pastor for our family for quite a while now. And so – and I know others listening to this podcast, or those in our church, would feel the same way. So we're glad of that. And so, let's talk a little bit about your calling as a pastor. When did you feel that call? And how long have you been a pastor now?

John (11:23):

Uh, almost 30 years ... yeah, 30 years. Yeah that was interesting, Shannon. It was a couple of different dynamics going on. After I came to Christ, I reignited the flame there and I went ... started going back to my local church. And so I was excited to go. I wanted to go. I got my Bible that I – my parents got me a Bible – and I started reading it, and going to Sunday school, and to prayer meetings on Wednesday night. And it would just, you know, consume my life. And I was just hungering and yearning to know more, to learn more, and what it meant to be ... to follow Christ ... to be a Christian. In the midst of all of that, my brother that I keep mentioning – you can tell he had a lot of influence in my life – he felt that God had called him to serve Him vocationally: to be a *minister* himself.

John (12:19):

And so in the midst of that, I watched him answer that call. And I watched he and his wife (chuckles) load up their meager belongings and move off to a town in Kentucky to start college and seminary. And he had a long track ahead of him. And so I watched that. So in the next year or so, I was working and all of that and I started just ... it's just ... you really can't explain it. But just this sense of "calling" on my life: That God was *calling* me to serve Him vocationally as well, and in that same path. But I resisted it.

John (13:19):

And my resistance came because I said, "Wait a minute." I said, "Lord, this must ... you must be mistaken. This ... my brother did that. And surely, the *two* of us, you're not going to call us back-to-back to do the same thing?" And I thought, "Well, you know, is it *real*? Am I just following him (my brother)? What will people think?" And so I ... you know ... I wrestled at that for a year or more, I guess. And just finally one evening, I remember, I just changed. You know, I just said: "You know, I don't understand all of this. But I really believe that's what God is calling me to do." So I made that decision. And I began to tell my family. And I said, "This is what I think I'm going to do. I believe this is what God has called me to do." And so – much like my brother – I loaded up my what meager belongings (chuckles) that I had at that time.

John (14:14):

And I was married, and no kids, and started. Moved to High Point, North Carolina, and started. It was just a little small Bible College there. And at the time, it was called John Wesley (College). And it was ... it just fit me like a glove. It was small, it was personal, and I loved it and enjoyed it. And I was just like a sponge (chuckles) for four years. And so I did that. And I joined a local congregation, and began to – they allowed me to teach and preach and be a part of that congregation my whole time in college. And then I left there and spent the next four years in seminary – continuing, furthering my training and education. And so that's how I made the transition.

Shannon (15:09):

Okay, got you. And so I know that there was at some point there ... you were working at a grocery store, and you were in line to kind of take that over. And God just went elsewhere.

John (15:20):

Yeah. That was during that year, that year-and-a-half or so of *decision-making*. Right. I was involved in that, invested in that. And I thought, "Well you know, I'm just going to (chuckles) leave all of this." And people even – you know – people thought "Wow, this is kind of foolish to do that," you know. But as I said, you can't really explain it. But I just knew deep in my heart that that's what God was *calling* me to do. And so I did it. By His grace (chuckles).

Shannon (15:52):

That's amazing! Where God takes our lives! I know you say a lot, you know: "We make plans, but God brings to fruition what His will is." So all right. So let's talk a little bit about now – in changing gears – your relationship with Dr. Owen. And how you guys connected and ... (inaudible).

John (16:17):

Yeah. Yeah, well that's an interesting story (chuckles), as well. I was, you know, a very young man in my twenties. And Owen was ... we're a different generation. He was older than ... he's older than I am. And I met him when I – while I was in college. I was invited to go to this church that I just mentioned a few minutes ago. And I never went anywhere else. I went there,

and stayed there, my whole time in college. And those were very, very good years. It happened that Owen's wife was – Jody – was the pianist there. And so they were very, very active. And I just ... I didn't at that time, in 1987 was when that was, I didn't ... I knew we were a part of the same church.

John (17:18):

Uh, like I said, Owen was older than I am. And he and I, you know, we knew each other. And we talked and were friends and that sort of thing. But ... and I was intrigued, because I knew that Owen – I knew that he had his own consulting company, management company. I knew that he had done a lot of neat things. I knew that he had traveled all over the world and was continuing to do that. So I was always intrigued by that. But it wasn't until I finished seminary that our relationship really ... we really connected and got on the same page that eventually (chuckles) led us to this podcast.

Shannon (18:08):

Got you. Well, I'm very thankful for that relationship. And I know over the past several years we only knew him as your mentor. And now, thankfully, that has been revealed to us. And, but even in that time of Dr. Owen's travels and businesses – and as we've learned in the last podcast (Episode 11) a lot about his story – where do you guys come together with the book (*Saving Christianity*) which is again, the basis of this podcast "Saving Christianity"? Where ... what was your role in that process?

John (18:42):

Yeah. Well as I mentioned, when I came out of seminary, Owen was very instrumental in fact in me coming – I actually was able to go back to the church that I had been in (during) college. The minister there was a great man and he had retired. And it just worked out in the Providence of God that I went back to that church where I essentially knew everybody (chuckles) there on a first name basis. And (that was) my first full-time pastorate right out of seminary. And you talk about a rookie, that's an understatement! And ... but anyway, it was there and Owen and Jody were a part of that. And Owen was one of the elders in that congregation, and so I quickly as a rookie attached (chuckles) myself to him. I knew that I needed someone older than me, that had more life experience, to guide me.

John (19:49):

And so he fortunately was willing to do that. So I became, as it were, his student. And have been ever since, actually. And that was about 1994. So we started there in that congregation. We began because we wanted to see people ... of course we wanted to see people coming to Christ. We wanted to see people growing. All of those things. And so we began to ask some really, really hard questions during that time. And I'm not exaggerating to say that we just spent, I guess, hundreds of hours talking about all of this that eventually became the book and now the podcast. And we spent hundreds of hours talking about it. We – both of us – are avid readers and so we read, and studied, and talked, and prayed; and read, and studied (chuckles), and talked, and prayed.

John (20:59):

And that just went on and on for years – for about seven years, actually. And then I moved to ... not far away ... but to another congregation in another town. And we were not able to see each other as much. My responsibilities there, and my time schedule, *et cetera*, and their lives, and they were busy. And then we – I'm not exactly sure what year it was – but we reengaged, if you will. And we picked right up where we left off. And with all of our discussions, our concerns about the body of Christ, about Christianity. And as we've talked about some in the podcast, we began to look at all of the research. And the polls. And just our own experiences. And just to see that churches (buildings) were closing, and Christians were becoming dissatisfied, and disillusioned, and walking away. And so we were just on a mission, if you will (chuckles), to figure out *why* that is. And I say "is," because it's *continuing* to happen. And so that was the impetus, I guess you would say, of how the book finally came to be.

Shannon (22:32):

Got you, okay. So in the last, you know, 15-plus years that I've known you, that I've worked with you – you know, been under you as our pastor of our family and our church family. I know that a lot of times you speak out of life experiences. You teach, you preach, however you want to word it, out of life experiences. So with all of that leading up to this conversation, and even to this question: What are some goals that you have? I know that God has laid a lot on your heart. And but, even with the book, with our congregation, with where you feel like God is leading us, you know, as a congregation. Your family, and all of that. What are some goals that you have in – just even up unto now – with the podcast, with the book, with all of that?

John (23:29):

Yeah. Well Shannon, actually while I was at that first church out of school that I mentioned, when Owen and my relationship began to deepen – to that point we had only had ideas, and thoughts, and notes, *et cetera*. But we had never began to ... just to practically put it out there for people to see, and to learn, and understand. And so we began, I would like to say, our "experiment" there in that first church. And so Owen had developed a series of teaching that made its way into the book, eventually. But it was kind of our "test run," if you will. We used it there in the congregation to see how people would receive it or not. And so we started there – and so in that "experiment." And so it went well.

John (24:33):

And we liked the "feedback" that we got and that sort of thing. We felt like we had really found that "niche" to what God was leading us toward. And so from that, when I went to another congregation some years later, we took that teaching and brought it into that congregation and did it again there – a revised version of everything – and a lot more thought and insight and preparation had gone into it by that point. And so we presented that again. And it was well, well received. And we just really felt that we were on to something, if that makes sense. That God was leading us. And again, as I referenced, we're seeing the demise of Christianity. And we had

– both of us had *had* – experiences in our lives of the realness of God and how God had changed us and changed other people.

John (25:43):

And we had *had* those experiences. And we weren't seeing those *anymore*. We weren't experiencing them ourselves. And we realized ... we knew there had to be an answer to that. And so, again through much study, prayer, research, and many, many cups of coffee and discussion of all of this, Owen developed this entire teaching. So we just eventually – you know – I just said to him, "Look, we've got to go to the next step. You're going to have to put this in a book. We've got to get it out there." And so he took to the task. He did all the work. And he rewrote the entire manuscript, and went through all of the struggle of getting that published, and all of that. And the book was birthed: *Saving Christianity*. And so yeah, that's how that kind of all developed.

Shannon (26:48):

Gotcha, and that's great. Because I think God loves our *hindsight* as we look back to see where He's led and what He's done. And you know, as a pastor you have the vision. And you know the difficult part is casting that vision to the people that you shepherd. And so I think that all of that says – and all of that put together – has been done well. And especially you know, not that we get it right at our church now. But just trying. Striving to be that Acts 2 church (referring to the Spirituality of the Early Christians in chapter 2 of Acts in the Bible). That getting back to the way – not the way that it "used to be." Because that just – you know that's the way we've always done it. We certainly don't want to be "traditional." That's actually the opposite of what we want to do, is "tradition." But getting back to the way that God created it. And relationships with people, with finances, with whether we have a building or not, and all of that. And getting back to the true Small Group feeling of the Early (Christians), and just as the book, you know, very well outlines.

Shannon (27:56):

And so I think that's great. So thank you for letting us have that little bit of background.

John (28:03):

Sure, yeah.

John (28:05):

Well, let's talk a little bit about your family now. You know we learned a little bit about your relationship with Jesus ... with being a pastor ... with Dr. Owen. And so, what about your *family* now? Let's know a little bit about your family.

John (28:17):

Yeah. My family is ... I'm happily married to a lovely wife. Her name is Kit. And she says this all the time – I hear her answer the phone. She says, "My name is Kit." And then I hear her

say, "K-I-T, you know, like a First Aid kit." And so to help people understand her name. And we have four children together. And they are all grown and gone now. And two of our children are married, no grandchildren. And two of them are still single. And we hope that *that's* in the future for them, as well. Our children when they grew up – we're grateful. But sad as well. They all ... their occupations or who they married, different things, took them to different parts of the U.S. And so none of our children live close to us. We are very close to our kids, but we have one in Texas. One in Wisconsin. One in Florida. And our closest one is in North Carolina, up in Boone (NC). But none of them are right here. You know, living in the neighborhood that we get to see on a regular basis. And so, yeah.

Shannon (29:44):

Well, what about your newest "addition" to the family? Let us know a little bit about her.

John (29:50):

Oh, yeah! Well, I have to tell you about "Beasley" is our golden doodle! (A type of dog.) And since Kit and I became "empty nesters" and we felt it was – now was the time. We had four girls and raised them, and so we got another girl, except this one has four legs and doesn't talk back!

Shannon (30:15):

All right, that's great. And that just in itself was another whole story about ... with animals and dogs in the house and all that. And so it's just neat to see a lot of the "fun-ness" of that. So that's great. Well, Pastor John, this has been a great episode. And thank you so much for taking the time to tell us about your story. And what God has done, and what He continues to do. We've really enjoyed that. And we hope that our friends have enjoyed it as well.

John (30:42):

Yeah, and I hope so. And there's a – obviously – there's a lot of other twists and turns and things that have happened. And the way God has directed my paths. And specifically over the years, and how he brought me and Owen together. How our friendship developed, and our like-mindedness, and our desire to see Christianity be like it was in the First Century: Or to the degree that it *can* be, in the 21st Century. And so our energy and our time that now that has led us beyond the book to this podcast and any other means that God opens up for us. We're just trying to see people come to Christ. We're trying to see people that, once they come to Christ, that they *grow* in their faith and live it, and walk it out, and *experience* God in their "day in and day out" life. And so that's what this podcast is about, ultimately. And so, hopefully, you're getting that (as our listeners), that you're understanding that a little more and more each week. And that's certainly our hope and our desire.

Shannon (32:10):

Well Pastor John, as Dr. Owen always says, "The big clock on the wall" is reminding us that it is time to wrap up this episode. And we want to remind everyone that this is Episode 12 in our

series of episodes. And again we have a *new* episode that comes out every-other-Tuesday. And with that they all have transcripts with those recordings. And so you can follow those along. Some people will print those out, and read and make notes as they listen. Others will do it afterwards. So whatever fits well for your time schedule. But they're all on the website. And to access those transcripts and recordings, remember you can go to: G-O-S-C-P-O-D.com. That's goSCpod.com. And that way you can get all of your information there.

Shannon (33:03):

But for now, this is Shannon Wolfe ...

John (33:06):

... and this is John Shields saying: "May the God of our Fathers bless you, and keep you, and guide you, and protect, you until we meet again."

Shannon and John (33:15):

Shannon and John end the episode.