

What kind of Christian? The man on the train: The man on the train

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [November 15, 2005](#) issue

As our train ambled through the outskirts of London, I thought I would kill some time by quizzing my children on a few items I'd tried to instill in their brains as a little bonus above and beyond their school curricula. I elicited only mild groans and chuckles when I asked, "How did the Gettysburg address begin?" and "Who constituted the Second Triumvirate?" and "Can you count to ten in Spanish?" But when I asked, "Can you name the books of the Bible?" a train rider across the aisle turned, and his eyes flew wide open. He watched expectantly as my son began, "Genesis, Exodus . . ." and when there was an extended hesitation just before "1 Chronicles," the man interrupted the recitation (to my children's relief) in a charming cockney accent.

I had noticed this man before; he seemed to want to chat, but I had averted my gaze, not eager to meet anybody on the last day of family vacation. I was soon to find out that his name was Caleb Jones and that he was a Gypsy.

"Are you a Christian, man?" Caleb asked excitedly. His question felt different from the familiar interruptions of the pious pamphlet peddlers I bump into in America, the ones who press on sanctimoniously with "Are you saved?" I replied in the affirmative, which led him to ask, "What *kind* of a Christian are you?"

A good question. How to answer? A "generously orthodox" kind of Christian? A cynical-on-Mondays Christian? Chalcedonian? I kept it simple: "Methodist."

"Methodist?" He shook his head, as if I had just told him I suffer from some chronic, lethal disease. "Where I come from, Methodists don't take their faith seriously. They just go through the motions. It has no real impact on their lives—it's just a social thing." I responded with "Oh, we don't have that problem where I come from," although my oldest daughter barely held back a moan.

Then he launched into a lengthy description of the Gypsy church—how even though other churches across Europe barely register a pulse, the Gypsy church is booming, growing, even if unnoticed. In Hungary, Spain, France, Italy and England, Gypsies are being converted and are joining thriving bodies of believers.

Caleb explained that it isn't easy for Gypsies to become disciples of Jesus. "Do you know what the most common and best-paid profession is for Gypsies?" I harbored a guess or two but didn't reply. "Fortune-teller. And when you become a Christian, you can't be a fortune-teller any more. So people have to give up their livelihood and support of their families. It's asking a lot."

I asked if the fortune-tellers couldn't just pretend to do their job, since fortune-telling isn't real. No, he insisted. Fortune-telling dabbles in the occult and claims for itself what is not true, so the new Christian who would be serious about his or her faith must immediately put an end to fortune-telling.

An extended pause in our conversation ensued, during which I wondered about the professions that American Christians should forsake, the careers of "fortune-making" about which the church ventures no opinion. The Gypsy church is "asking a lot," and it is booming. In America, we ask for next to nothing.

I noticed Caleb's young son had a book with the alphabet and some simplistic, basic reading sentences. Naively I thought the little boy was learning to read. But the book belonged to Caleb. "Gypsies don't go to school, and Gypsies don't read. But I am training to be a minister—like you!—and so I have to learn to read. It's hard . . . but I can't wait until I can read God's word—like you!" In my mind, I rifled through the books in my bag I'd brought along to read: novels, biographies, tour books . . .

The train screeched to a halt. Our families gathered up the bags and then lingered on the station platform to say goodbye. My Gypsy friend had one last question. "What are you doing tonight? We have a service at 7:30 with lots of Gypsies coming. We would love for you to come." I looked at my wife and remembered our family's grand plan to grab a bite and watch a movie.

In that moment I perceived all that was wrong with the church, and in myself, but simultaneously felt hope for the church in Caleb, a Gypsy who like the Son of Man had no place to lay his head, who like Joshua's friend scouted out enemy territory and believed God would deliver, who was luring us away from the movie house into a raucous service of humble prayer and holy praise with some ex-fortune-tellers. I

continue to wonder about the answer to the perfectly targeted question, “What kind of Christian are you?”