

Spiritual Identity, Church's and Our Own, In A Changing World.
Acts 19:9, 23. Acts 24:14. Acts 11 : 25-6.

John 14: 5-6a

How would you describe your spiritual identity? To yourself, or, at the point of a gun, to someone else? How might our church describe its spiritual identity? That's the discussion I want to start today. A woman in a former church at a poetry reading said to me in response to something said earlier, "I'm not sure I want to be completely Christian." The modifier didn't completely fit her, not now in her life. Does Baptist fit you? Baptist Christian? Seeker?

Is it easy or hard to identify yourself as a Christian? Being Christian can mean so many different things in our world. When Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia described the invasion of Ukraine as "the active manifestation of evangelical love for neighbors", and Putin as "fighter against the anti-Christ" and "chief exorcist". Such is why the early Anabaptist movement began with its belief in the absolute separation of church and state.

There is a Christian Supremacy movement in our nation today that feels called by God to take over government, law, the press, education and

culture. And it is led by evangelical Christians and Baptists-In-Name-Only. It is a threat to our pluralistic democracy and undermines the intentions of our nation's founders and our Constitution.

Perhaps such things are the reasons my friend said she was not sure she wanted to be completely Christian.

Feminist theologians say that every person needs a good and sturdy container for the self. Is this true for our spiritual selves?

What about too singular an identity? Arab novelist, Amin Maloof, a Malachite Christian living in Paris, wrote a book predictive of 9/11. The title, "In the Name of Identity: Violence And The Need To Belong". In it he wrote that when a person or group reduces itself to one single affiliation the world becomes a more dangerous place. Single identities can become in his words "murderous identities."¹ He was speaking not only of Al Qaeda, but other "global tribes."

So as you dig down through all the multitudes of your identity, mother, father, teacher, American, all the way down to your core self, what is your spiritual identity? I think Jesus would begin his own: beloved child of God, called to God's mission in the world. That's not a bad place to start.

So how might we begin to think about our identity as Christians?

Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold's brother, set me thinking more deeply about my own spiritual identity in these words from his 1963 book, "The Responsible Self":

"I call myself a Christian though there are those who challenge my right to that name, either because they require a Christian to maintain some one of the various sets of beliefs that I do not hold or because they require him to live up to one of several sets of moral standards ...to which I do not conform.

I call myself a Christian simply because I also am a follower of Jesus Christ, though I travel at a great distance from him not only in time but in the spirit of my traveling; because I believe that my way of thinking about life, my human companions and our destiny has been so modified by his presence in our history that I cannot get away from his influence; and also because I do not want to get away from it....

In one sense I call myself a Christian in the same way I call myself a twentieth-century man. To be a Christian is simply part of my fate, as it is the fate of another to be a Muslim or Jew.... But I call myself a Christian more because I have both accepted this fateful act and because I identify with what I understand to be the cause of Jesus

Christ. That cause I designate simply as the reconciliation of man to God....of bringing God to men and men to God, and also of reconciling men to each other...; because I have been challenged to make this cause my own—therefore I call myself a Christian.”²

To make Christ’s cause your own: that’s a pretty good description of a Christian.

So if you were asked about your spiritual identity, say in a word or two what would you say? Or in two sentences? The Quaker spiritual writer, Parker Palmer when asked describe his mission in life in an “elevator speech,” something you could say between floors on an elevator, says, “I take the stairs!” Meaning, that may give us enough time to begin!

The first guidance is that any self-definition of your religious identity must avoid a definition that make you “separate and superior”, to use Richard Rohr’s phrase—as the term “born again Christian” was used at one time to say “I am a Real Christian.” “Any modifier of the word Christian should be for elucidation, not a point of pride.

I might start for myself by saying, I am a Baptist Christian who wants above all to follow the way of Jesus who endlessly enthralls and challenges me.

Wendell Berry was being interviewed by Bill Moyers, and at some point in the interview Moyers asked, Do you still consider yourself a Christian? Berry answered:

“I still consider myself a person who takes the gospels very seriously. And I read in them and am sometimes shamed by them and sometimes utterly baffled by them. But there’s a good bit of the gospel I do get, I think. I believe I understand it accurately. And I’m sticking to that. And I’m hanging on for the parts that I don’t understand. And, you know, willing to endure the shame of falling short as a price of admission.”³

One of the true saints of our time was Dorothy Day who founded Friendship Houses for the poor in NY City and started the Catholic Worker magazine. Late in her life, she described her Christian faith:

“I just sat there and thought of our Lord, and his visit to us all those centuries ago, and I said to myself that my great luck was to have had him on my mind for so long a time in my life.”

Maybe being Christian is having a lifelong conversation with Jesus.

The founder of the Baptist movement in America was Roger Williams. Cast out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for his irregular theology—it seems Baptists are always getting thrown out of religious groups,

sometimes even their own — he traveled to Providence, Rhode Island where he established Rhode Island as the first American colony of religious tolerance and then established the First Baptist Church in America. But soon after he quit being a Baptist and became in his words a “Seeker.” Would the name Seeker fit you?

II

Now let’s look at our Congregational spiritual identity. One good way to begin would be to look again at the church’s “fingerprint” created after a summer of conversation which captured our core values and mission. Quite an amazing piece of work.

But for today I want to begin with our name, Grace Baptist Church. Let’s begin with the last word, Church. It suggests this to me: that Jesus is our center; it is his way we seek to follow. In our texts for today from Acts we see that the first way we described ourselves was this: “The Way.” Followers of the Way of Jesus. Then we learn that it was in Antioch that we were first called Christians. Following Jesus’ words in John 14, I’d say a Christian is one on the path of Jesus, his way, truth and life.

Then there’s the word Baptist. We are Baptist Christians. James McClendon noted Baptist theologian of our day, says that we should spell “baptist” with a small “b” to better express our tradition and history as a

non-conforming, anti- authoritarian, dissenting, minority, sometimes persecuted community of believers. It is a more modest way of saying who we are, important these days as some Baptists seem bent on ruling the world.

I think core Baptist convictions are worth holding onto in our world today. Here are ones I love:

- 1) Soul competence and soul liberty. These 17th century words mean: The individual person is competent to open the Bible and, led by the Spirit of God, interpret it for his or her life, and if competent, must be free. The Protestant word for this is “the Priesthood of Believers.”
- 2) Local church autonomy. It follows the first. This means that every congregation is competent to open the Bible, and led by the Spirit of God, interpret it for their life together, and if competent, must be free. Another way is saying it is, “every tub sits on its own bottom.” No higher ecclesial body, association, denomination, bishop or Pope determines the life of the local congregation.
- 3) Religious Freedom and the Separation of Church and State. This is our greatest gift to the body politic; the earliest documents of our Republic have Baptist finger prints on them. Today these principles are under great threat, and Southern Baptist leaders are in the forefront of this movement. In

contrast, the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Freedom leads the way in the protection of these Baptist and Constitutional rights and freedoms. We should find a way to support them.

Now what about the word Grace we chose to make our name in our beginnings? For me this means that as we seek to worship God and follow Jesus, the foundational character of God is that God is Love. God is *grace* and God is *good*, let us thank Him for our church!

Another word I love to use to describe you is “ecumenical”. The word comes from the NT Greek word “*ecumene*” which means “the whole inhabited world as household of God.” It wouldn’t make a very good T-shirt! Every person, mineral, animal, plant is part of the household of God. We belong to one another! All of us. Everything. Ecumenical means care for the earth too!

The worldwide Ecumenical Movement began in Scotland over 100 years ago. It sought to overcome the scandal of a badly divided Church. Jesus is still praying as he did in John that we might be *one*. (John 17:11) Yet there is a deeper ecumenism we ought to strive for today, one that embraces the other religions of the world. Ecumenical means for me *the unity of all Christians and spiritual friendship with all religions*. Catholic theologian Hans Kung said in the 1990’s words even more urgent than

then: “The prerequisite of peace among the nations is peace among religions.”

We welcome here people of different religious traditions and beliefs, we welcome those for whom a particular religious belief is not part of their lives, and we honor the integrity of such person’s lives. We welcome all who wish to join their lives with ours. It seems Jesus welcomed everyone except those who despised the ones he welcomed.

One way of being Christian is to say Christ is the center but not the circumference of our life and faith. The meaning of Christ keeps expanding and expanding, beyond words like Christian and church.

So our spiritual identity as a church: What words make you smile? Which ones fit, do not fit? I think Baptist fits us, but we have to work to let people know what this means for us. How about an ad that says: We’re Baptist But Not Bossy! Or, We Don’t Let Baptist Get In The Way Of Being Christian. Or, Spiritual Freedom Lives Here!

Of course, the best way to identify ourselves to the world is by how we live, whom we love and whom we defend. It might startle people into asking, who are these people?! What kind of church ARE they?!

Perhaps we might say no more than this: We are God’s. We belong to Christ. We are not our own, God has made us God’s own, “for” as our

reading in I Peter today says, “once [we] were not a people but now [we] are God’s people. Once [we] had not received mercy, but now [we] have received mercy.” (I Peter 2:10)

1. Amin Maloof, *In the Name of Identity* (N.Y., Penguin Books, 2000).
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (N.Y. Harper Row, 1963), 43-4.
3. Moyers and Company, Interview with Wendell Berry, October 4, 2013.