

“BEING CHRISTIAN ON PURPOSE”

Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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When a new year rolls around, you and I always have to get acclimated and make adjustments. We have to think of our world and ourselves as a year older. We have to discard our old calendars and start using new ones. And, of course, some of us are still trying to remember to date our checks 2019 instead of 2018!

We've also begun a new year on the Church calendar, so let's take a moment this morning to get oriented to this other way of keeping time. The Christian Year always begins around December 1 and moves quickly from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany. And then, the first Sunday after the Epiphany is set aside to commemorate the “Baptism of the Lord.” On this day the Church is reminded that Jesus himself submitted to the waters of baptism as an act of obedience to God. But this day is also an occasion to remember our own baptisms and to renew our baptismal covenant. Today, you and I are invited to reaffirm who and whose we are, to declare anew that we are followers of Jesus Christ – Christians – and that we are Christians in more than name only, that we are Christians on purpose.

Now, you and I might assume that the meaning of the term Christian is perfectly obvious. But in fact it's as slippery and elusive as a wet bar of soap. Would you believe, the term Christian appears only three times in the entire New Testament. Believers in the early Church apparently referred to themselves in other ways. The apostle Paul, for instance, never called himself a Christian; he only spoke of himself as a man “in Christ.”

The term Christian was probably coined by outsiders, and it was a label of abuse rather than a title of honor. Christian was not so much an official name as it was a sarcastic nickname.

I suspect many of us were anointed with nicknames that we would just as soon have done without. My college fraternity brothers began to call me “Thumper,” the name of a fictional rabbit in Walt Disney's “Bambi.” Why? Because two of my front teeth protrude lower than the rest of the bridge! Honestly, I would have preferred to go through life without being called “Thumper,” but I got tagged, and that was that! The only consolation was that my nickname was given to me completely in jest.

By contrast, in its original usage the name Christian was not nearly so playful. Some of you are old enough to remember the Cold War era when patriotic Americans occasionally referred to Communists as “pinkos.” Well, in the same contemptuous way, 1st Century Romans called the early disciples Christians. They thought, “The very idea of a bunch of people worshipping a crucified Jewish prophet rather than our mighty emperor. It they will be so foolish, let them go on deluding themselves. Let them bow before their pathetic god. Let them even be called Christians.” Given that kind of background, it's no wonder that the early believers did not routinely refer to themselves as Christians until sometime in the 2nd Century.

Now, I make this historical point merely to note a striking contrast. If the word Christian was surprisingly scarce in biblical times, this is hardly the case today, is it? Here in the 21st

Century, Christian is a household word. So much – if anything, too much – is labeled Christian! We not only have Christian churches, but Christian schools, Christian political parties, Christian publishing houses, Christian books and bookstores, and Christian television networks. To top it off, some years ago a group of entrepreneurs gave us a “Christian Yellow Pages.” You guessed it: only professing Christians were invited to advertise therein. Presumably, the Christian Yellow Pages were published for the benefit of Christian consumers. When you let your fingers do the walking, you could be assured of walking the “straight and narrow road”!

All of this simply illustrates how fast and loose we have become with the word Christian. One observer notes that “inflation of the concept of Christian leads – like all inflation – to devaluation.” Nowadays, just about anything and anybody can pass for being Christian. The term has suffered from overexposure, and we’ve suffered a great deal of confusion because of it.

Even the dictionary demonstrates how imprecisely the word has been applied. Webster lists three main definitions for Christian: (1) a person who professes belief in Jesus as the Christ – or in the religion based on the teachings of Jesus; (2) a decent, respectable person; and (3) in a general sense, anyone born of Christian parents.

How easily we drop from number one to number three – and what a price we pay for doing so! As the word Christian covers more and more territory, it means less and less, and we have fallen further and further from the power we were meant to have.

Let’s take a closer look at these three definitions, this time taking them in reverse order. First, a Christian is “anyone born of Christian parents.” I wonder how many people today are banking on that assumption. The idea is certainly tempting: the apostle Paul spoke of himself as a “Hebrew born of the Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5); so why can’t I call myself a “Christian born of the Christians,” and let it rest with that? I cannot for the simple reason that the New Testament contradicts that notion from beginning to end. The Gospel of John reminds us that Christians are “born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13).

I love the story of the Sunday School teacher who suddenly stopped reading a passage in the Bible and asked the youngsters in her class, “Why do you believe in God?” She got a variety of answers, some full of simple faith, others obviously insincere. The one that stunned her came from the son of a preacher. “Why do you believe in God?” The boy answered apologetically, “I guess it just runs in the family.”

Indeed, a lot of people believe that they become Christians by birthright, that it’s just something they’ve inherited from their family. Nothing could be further from the truth. The good news is that you don’t have to have Christian parents to be a Christian. You can choose this identity for yourself, regardless of your religious background or lack of it. But the flip side is that you have to choose – you have to choose your Christian identity for yourself. In other words, you and I are not born Christians; we are made Christians. We are made Christians by the grace of God and by our own free decision, which is what the Bible means when it speaks of being “born again,” and what Methodists mean when we talk about being “confirmed” in our faith. So much, then, for the claim that anyone born of Christian parents is automatically a Christian.

This brings us to Webster's second stab at the word Christian: "a decent, respectable person." Now we are really getting generous in our application of the term! But let's be honest: doesn't this definition reflect our common usage? You and I may casually refer to any person with genuine convictions, upright morals, and good manners as Christian. After all, no one can fail to see that the virtues of Jesus himself exist outside the Christian community. You probably know people who are not religious in the traditional sense of the word, but are more Christ-like in their behavior than a lot of professing Christians.

And yet, if any decent, respectable person can be called Christian, the truly distinctive element in being Christian is lost. I may be a terrifically nice guy; I may practice love in all my relationships; I may work with all my soul and body to make the world a better place; but I am not a Christian until Jesus Christ becomes ultimately decisive in my life. The distinguishing mark of the Christian is his or her allegiance to Jesus Christ.

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, it's worth noting that devout Hindus bathe in the Ganges River as an act of purification, very similar to our sacrament of baptism. But a ceremonial washing is Christian baptism if and only if we submit ourselves in obedience to Jesus Christ. In the same way, Muslims share a sacred meal very similar to our Holy Communion. Such a feast may have great meaning and validity for followers of Mohammed, but a ceremonial meal can be a Christian Communion if and only if it celebrates the sacrificial death and resurrected life of Jesus Christ.

This brings us logically to Webster's primary definition. A Christian is "a person who professes belief in Jesus as the Christ – or in the religion based on the teachings of Jesus." Notice, the boundaries are tighter, but we appear at last to be on firmer ground. This is a good definition for us to go by, provided we do not trip over the word "belief." You see, being a Christian is not merely assenting to certain ideas or principles or even the words of the Bible itself. One is not a Christian because one subscribes to Christianity as a system of thought or a code for living. One is not a Christian because one believes in the Church as a viable institution in human society. One is a Christian because one has a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. What stands at the center of this definition is not a type of behavior or a system of belief or even a particular religion. At the heart of being a Christian is the person of Jesus Christ.

But we need to be even more specific: the Christ of the Christian is both Savior and Lord. Both terms are crucial to a genuine experience of Christ. Passively a person accepts Jesus as his Savior. He did for us what we could never do for ourselves. Actively, a person rises up to follow Jesus as Lord. Thus, as Christians we move between an awareness of what Christ has done for us and what we may do for Christ. It's easy to stress the Saviorhood of Jesus to the neglect of his Lordship; but when this happens, the good news is distorted and the Christian life becomes an exercise in self-indulgence. The Christian is never free merely to celebrate "what Christ has done for me." We are summoned to obey as Lord the one whom we have gratefully received as Savior.

The noted evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, once conducted a preaching campaign in England. One night after a meeting, Moody returned to the home of his host, who asked him how the service had gone. "How many were converted tonight?" the man inquired. "Two and a half," replied Moody. "What do you mean?" asked his friend. "Was it two adults and a child?"

“No,” answered Moody, “it was two children and an adult. The children have given their lives to Christ in their youth, while the adult has come with half of his life.”

Of course, what Moody meant was that the adult had only half a life remaining in which to be a Christian. But his observation was true in a profounder sense as well. It is possible for a person of any age to come to Christ with only half a life! I may readily accept him as my Savior, but follow him as Lord only in token ways. I can offer him my prayers, but not my pocketbook; I can pay lip service to him without becoming his servant with my hands and feet; I can say to Jesus, “You’re Number One,” while keeping my fingers crossed. In fear and trembling, I must confess this morning that I am a Christian, but there is plenty of room for me to become more of a Christian.

Now, I cannot help but wonder how these notions of what it means to be a Christian are reflected in your own life. By which definition do you call yourself Christian? Are you merely a product of Christian parents? Do you just count yourself as a decent, respectable person? Do you only believe in a set of doctrines or a religion about Jesus? Or, can you claim to be one for whom the person of Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord?

Stop and think about it: so much of what you are – your skin color and gender and nationality – is an accident of birth. You were not born into a Buddhist family on a rice farm in Cambodia. That being the case, are you a Christian merely by accident, because you happened to be born in a country that is predominantly Christian? Or, is your being a Christian a matter of intention, choice, commitment, and priority? Are you a Christian on purpose? On this day when you and I remember our baptisms, may God help each of us to answer truthfully and faithfully.