

Community Church of Issaquah
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The Character of a Real Christian
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Modern day technology is something I cannot seem to master. Computers, cell phones, tablets, Apple watches. . . I could go on and on, but you must know what I'm talking about. I stood in line behind a young woman not long ago at a retail store. She was buying items for a dorm room in preparation for the new school term. When the cashier had scanned all her items and totaled them, she told the young woman the amount and asked how she wanted to pay. "Google pay," she said and then leaned her watch to the credit card scanner and boom, she got a receipt. She paid with her watch! What ever happened to writing a check or paying with cash? Has everything changed that much?

Then as I began to think about the message I am delivering today, "What Does It Mean to Be a Christian," I found myself smiling. Do you remember years ago when we would be asked for a definition or meaning of something and we would go immediately to the Webster's Dictionary or to the Encyclopedia Britannica for an answer? Back in those days, every student had their own copy of the dictionary and every family had a set of encyclopedias in their home. I don't want to make you sad, but those don't exist anymore except in libraries.

Today, we “Google it” or go online to Wikipedia and type in what we’re searching for, and up pops an answer on screen.

When I looked up the definition of ‘who is a ‘Christian,’ on Wikipedia, this is what came to my computer screen:

Christians are people who follow or adhere to Christianity, a monotheistic Abrahamic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Boy, that sounds technical to me.

And then if you Google it, this is the answer:

A Christian is someone who believes in Jesus Christ and follows his teachings.

That makes it sound so simple, doesn’t it? Do you remember that verse from Acts 16 verse 31 that says,

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household."

For most of my life as a Christian I have understood that the true meaning of being labeled a “Christian” is that we simply believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God who came to earth to die for our sins and rose again to give us new life and the promise of life eternal. That concept has become so much more complicated for me in my later years. In the past few years, the word “Christian” has gained such a negative image in our society and often times I have felt like I needed to apologize for being one.

When I saw church going people who claimed to be Christian taking children away from refugee and immigrant parents and then caging them simply because they were trying desperately to find a safe home country, I was

astounded. When I saw men who claimed to be doing the work of God attack mosques and burn the homes of Muslim families, I shook my head in disbelief. When I see or hear politicians who claim to be Christians but forbid schools to teach about the history of slavery because it makes Whites look bad, I wonder who told them that? And when I heard of a pastor in Boise who told his congregation that the government should shoot and kill every gay person because that's what Jesus wants, I was shocked and disappointed. The Christian Nationalist movement seeks to forbid any other faith tradition to be practiced in America. In our world today, the meaning of 'Christian' has been so damaged by peoples' actions and difficult for us to understand.

Christians who say they believe in Christ as Savior are certainly plentiful. We are divided by denominations and sects that focus not on belief in Christ but how we are to implement that belief into everyday life. When you hear that there are more than 147 varieties of Baptist alone, do you begin to wonder what are the founding principles of these churches. Looking back at my own beginnings with the Southern Baptist Church, it was painful to learn that this branch of Christianity had been founded to support slavery and oppose abolition of it. Yet, I was sure that those in my church all believed in Jesus as Lord and were Christians. I continued to ask myself, "Is it enough just to believe? Is that all there is to being a Christian?"

Today we ask the question, "What is the character of a real Christian?" How do we know if a person claiming to be a Christian really is a follower of the teachings of Jesus? My

hope is that each of us will spend a few moments in reflection about our own choice of becoming a Christian and what that has done for our own lives. The Bible tells us that if we believe in Christ, seek his forgiveness, and follow his teachings, we can call ourselves 'Christian.' The very meaning of that word – Christian – means 'little Christ.' We who believe and accept Christ become not just his followers, but we become little versions of him. That's the first step we take in our spiritual life with Christ – we believe. Believe and you will be saved – you and your household.

Let me suggest that we "Look and C." That's the letter C and not the verb see. I'd like to share six things I think would help us understand what the real character of a real Christian is. It is not my intention to pass judgement on anyone. I often quote the verse from Matthew 7: 1 which says, "Judge not lest ye be judged, for wherein you judge, so share you be judged. I am not able to judge others who in turn could certainly judge me. That said, here are six C's to think about.

First, Christians are **converts**. We choose to give up our life without Christ as our Savior to become a convert. This is an individual's decision. Believing is just the first step. When we believe in Christ and become a follower or Christian, we are responsible for our actions. Don't we sing that hymn, "And they'll know we are Christian by our love"? It recognized that our conversion to Christianity should be recognizable by our love for God, others and ourselves. This is our choice, to do or not to do.

The second 'C' I would suggest is our **Connection**. When we have chosen to follow Christ, there is the need to have a deep connection to Jesus and his teachings. Being connected is something we are all aware of on many levels. If we aren't connected to the internet, we all feel lost. I must connect my cell phone to charge when its battery is low. The same is true for Christians. We must be connected to Christ to keep our lives charged. It seems easy to spot individuals who say they are Christians but seem to need a stronger connection with God's Spirit in order to show others what faith in Christ is all about.

The third 'C' and fourth 'C' are very closely related, so let me blend them for you. The third C for me would represent the reality and visibility of concern. Even watching individuals without judgement, we can see who is concerned for others in a way that Jesus taught us, such as the Beatitudes. It seems easy to see who is really concerned for their neighbors in the way those in need are treated. To simply recognize that someone is in need to care is evident of a Christian's concern for others. Linked closely with that concept of concern is the element of compassion. When I hear of churches who have thousands of members, whose pastor has multiple houses and cars, and who spend millions of dollars being on tv, it saddens me when that churches was asked to open a building for victims of a disaster but refuse to do it.

Compassion is at times difficult. I understand that. I have had more than one conversation with medical providers who do their jobs well but seem to lack a sense of compassion for patients. Perhaps an attending physician

will come into a patient's room and rather than ask what is going on in the life of the patient, they simply say something like, "Well, your vital signs look better today. We'll keep you one more day." There is no concern for that person's need for support in their health crisis. Sadly, often churches and Christians do the same. If we truly have concerns and if we really care, it must be linked to compassion if we are to be real Christians.

My fifth 'C' would focus on the idea of being church centered. As I sat in church a few years back, it dawned on me that so many of those attending the service had come with the same unconscious intent – to be on our best behavior. We had taken time to dress "appropriately" and to behave "correctly" so that those we encounter will hopefully find some visible evidence of our deep spirituality. We want to be easily recognized as a real Christian. We must remember that at the center of every faith is its foundation in which its family find a home. I often have to resist shaking my head when I hear someone say, "I grew up in the church but I don't go anymore. It's just not the same." Could it be that it isn't the same because some believers are not there to be the building blocks for a church to grow in any way? I think so.

The sixth 'C' is the lifeline of everyone who claims to be a real Christian. It centers on this question, "Are you Christ centered?" We often don't focus enough on being adherent followers of the very Christ whose name we stole to become a Christian. It's easy to believe that there was indeed a man named Jesus who was and is God's Son. Even people

from other world religions acknowledge that. But believing isn't enough.

I had dressed the part of a well-respected minister with my clerical collar, robe and the correct colored stoles faithful to the church liturgical calendar. I had relished the name given to me as "Pastor Vincent" as though that name plate carried with it the recognition of my near sainthood. I read Scripture from a variety of translations to signify I was truly a scholar and a seminary star pupil. I was clear to make known the fact that I did not drink or smoke, though these had no connection to my life as clergy but were hold-overs from being the son of a smoking alcoholic and my painful memories of growing up in that homelife I wanted to hide. I made sure I flinched when anyone used even a hint of a curse word because proper clergy should always do that and Proverbs says, "A word fitly spoken. . ." I was, in truth, a cosmetic Christian.

I realized that I did not want to be a cosmetic Christian and do right simply to please others. I wanted to live as a real Christian, but this was an awakening I had never expected. Now let me move away from my story and back to the concept of behaving as a Christian -- of being Christ centered. The Bible says, "by their fruits you will know them." If we are committed followers of Christ, we are called to behave as He did, to love others, to be active in making the world a better place, to witness to others, and to do what is right. Not for any other reason than it is what being a Christian means -- behaving like Christ. Being Christ centered.

So how do we know if someone is a Christian? How do we recognize a person as a follower of Jesus? Can we look at a person and automatically say, “Oh yeah, for sure. She’s a believer.” Or “I’m pretty sure that guy is a Christian. He’s always so nice.” It’s not possible to put a label on someone simply by looking at them. Too many people today call themselves Christians only in name.

So, we’ve come full circle here. We’re back to the question, “What Does It Mean to Be a Real Christian?” In truth, there is no one answer to that question. The more important question for each of us is this, “What does it mean for **me** to be a Real Christian?” For me, I simply want to strive to be an authentic Christian who believes in Christ and who works my fingers to the bone to do what Jesus taught us to do. I want to strive as a believer to behave and do the right thing always. That’s what it means to me to be a Real Christian. But each of us needs to answer that question for ourselves. Let us be determined to boldly say, “I’m a Real Christian and I want to live it and show it. That’s what it means to me.”

The six “C’s” give us much to pause and consider when we look for the character in anyone who claims to have chosen Christ as their Savior. Converted, connected, concerned, compassionate, church centers and most importantly, Christ centered. There is no judgement, just food for thought.