

Community Church of Issaquah

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What Is a 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 had lunch recently with someone who insisted on paying for our visit together. When the server had prepared the bill, my friend told the young woman the amount and allowed her 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 credit cards or paying with cash? Has everything changed that much?

Then as I began to think about the message I am delivering today, "What Is a Christian," I found myself smiling. Do you remember years ago when we were 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

shocked. 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? How can a follower of Christ be a White Supremacist? And when I heard of a pastor in Virginia 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. That same minister believes no woman should ever be in a leadership role, not in a church or in the government even if they were elected to do that job. I was equally disappointed that no other ministers spoke out against that. In our world today, the meaning of 'Christian' has been so damaged by peoples' actions, and it is difficult for us to understand. We must deal with this rise of Christian Nationalism more and more almost daily.

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 I heard that there are more than 147 varieties of Baptist alone, I began 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 the 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 Does It Mean to Be a Christian?” Or more accurately, “What Is a Christian?” 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.

Now before I move on to the next part of this message, let me clarify one thing about the passage I just quoted. Paul and Silas were in jail praying and singing with all the other prisoners, and then suddenly, an earthquake happened and every cell door in the prison flew open. When the jailer woke up and saw what had happened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul yelled, “Don’t do that! We’re all still here.” So the jailer brought Paul and Silas out and asked, “What do I need to do to be saved.” That’s when they said, “Believe in the Lord and you will be saved; you and your household.” Understand that was not a free pass for all the jailer’s family. It simply meant that when he believed and his family believed, they would all be saved. Believe. And you’ll be saved.

Believing is just the first step. When we read a passage from Acts 10, the beginning of that says, “I now realize how true it is

that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” This tells us that there is a second step – doing what is right. I like to think of it as the two B words – Believe and Behave. When we believe in Christ and become a follower or Christian, we are responsible for our actions. Did you ever sing that old chorus, “And they’ll know we are Christian by our love. By our love, by our love, and they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”? I certainly did. Can we know others are Christian by their love?

I wrote an article for a magazine a couple of years ago about the concept of being a “cosmetic Christian.” It was a deeply personal article for me because it was about me. I came to realize a few years ago that so much of how I had lived out my life as a Christian was more cosmetic rather than authentic. I had thought I was doing the right thing but found that sometimes I was doing what I thought others would like me to do and what would make me look good. That’s not what a Christian does. We imitate the work and teachings of Jesus Christ, not the wild haired idea of what others think we should do.

As I remembered sitting in church when I was a teen and had just joined a congregation, it dawned on me that so many of those attending the service with me 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 could be easily recognized as a Christian. We stood as we sing hymns whose story and meaning I had heard but never learned what they meant. We bowed our

heads in reverence as someone reads a well-written prayer displaying their gift for weaving theological words and thoughts into a spoken text worthy of inclusion in scripture.

But it went even deeper than that for me. I had dressed the part of a well-respected minister with my clerical collar, robe and the correct colored stole 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 remember, the Proverbs says, “A word fitly spoken. . .” I was, in truth, a Christian by name and needed to be a Christian by deed.

I realized that I did not want to be that kind of Christian and do right simply to please others. I wanted to live as a true 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. 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.

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 categorize Christians only as White Americans. There is nothing further from the message we heard in the Scripture today. “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

There are believers and followers of Christ all over the world. I worked with Kenyan Christians when I was a missionary in East Africa. Mary worked with wonderful Christians when she was in Haiti. My neighbors are Christians from Egypt. God doesn’t care where you are from or who you are. If you accept Christ as Savior and believe in him, you’ll be a Christian. Believe and be saved, and then commit to imitating Jesus Christ in your every deed. Be a “little Christ.”

So, we’ve come full circle here. We’re back to the question, “What Is a 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 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 Christian. But each of us needs to answer that question for ourselves. Let us be determined to boldly say, "I'm a Christian and I want to live it and show it. That's what it means to me."