

Who is a Christian? Or -- What is a Christian?

Over the past year I've encounter a good number of people who aren't sure they want to be called a Christian anymore given the loud voices that seem to be defining Christianity these days.

Some churches even refuse to be called Christian because they don't want to be associated with those who:
seem to own the religious media,
are always the ones the regular media goes to,
and
who seem to be defining Christianity.

So who are these Christians that some folk don't want to be associated with?

Well, Phil Snider and Emily Bowen, give us an idea in their book,
Toward a Hopeful Future: Why the Emergent Church is Good News for Mainline Congregations,
where they help us identify them as
“**Those** that tend to water down Christianity to nothing more than making sure one is ready for the afterlife (no matter what happens to this world);

those that make sure Jesus' way of the cross is understood only as a transaction to be believed in rather than a pattern of life to be followed;

those that care much more about one's own personal relationship with Jesus than with one's own personal relationship with structures of oppression that Jesus critiqued;

those that like to keep Jesus crucified so that he isn't able to speak to the injustices so prevalent in our society today.”

[*Toward a Hopeful Future*, Snider & Bowen, p.146]

More plainly, what is upsetting is being associated with those who find it appropriate to hate and disenfranchise gays, dismantle science, use terror tactics to recruit children, applaud the killing of Muslims and other non-Christians in the name of God and those who manipulate systems so that their way of life, as defined by their faith, is the only one allowed.

It's like, if they are Christian and they are the ones defining Christianity in the 21st century, then what are we?

“Cause we ain't them.

And the facts are that a good many of them would refuse to acknowledge us as Christians. There are members of my own family who don't think I'm a Christian.

I know of clergy who have left Christianity because they feel that Christianity has moved so far from what Jesus would want that they can no longer count themselves among the Christians.

Followers of Jesus? – yes.
But Christian? --No.

It also seems that progressive Christianity, that a lot of us would align with, is much more theologically, socially, and eschatologically closer to reformed Jews, and progressive Muslims and even Buddhists than we are to the fundamentalists of our own religion.

So who's a Christian?

Is it them? Is it us?

We are so different from each other, how can we all be Christians?

But you know what?

This is nothing new.

From the very beginning of this faith there has been a wide diversity of people calling themselves Christians.

Let's start with Jesus' disciple who seemed to be running the Jerusalem Church – you know – Cephus, or as he is better known, Peter. You would think that Peter and this group of Christians would have had a monopoly on determining who was a Christian and what Christians believed.

But it seems that right from the start there were other groups of Christians and followers of Jesus that weren't associated with the Peter and the Jerusalem Church.

In Mark ^[9:38-40] we read:

*John said to Jesus,
"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."
But Jesus said,
"Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.
Whoever is not against us is for us.*

And the issue is further complicated since none of the Jerusalem group were very literate, and didn't write anything down so our only information about them comes from third parties a generation or two removed.

Now as I mentioned there were other groups of Christians who had ideas about being a Christian that were very different from the Jerusalem group.

Perhaps because he wrote things down the most prominent of these other leaders was this upstart freelancer who came to be known as the Apostle Paul.

While some sources say that Peter finally came around, other sources indicate that the Jerusalem church never bought into Paul's form of Christianity.

The Jerusalem church seemed to still insist that you had to become Jewish before you could become Christian.

You had to be circumcised.

You had to participate in Jewish ritual and the laws.

You couldn't eat certain foods or wear certain clothes remaining in accordance with the Levitical Holiness Code.

And you certainly did compromise your faith to Romans.

Paul on the other hand was all about including everybody.

He was accommodating to the Romans.

Didn't care what you ate or wore or about any of the other Holiness Code laws; including that circumcision stuff.

You could even eat meat that had been sacrificed to the Roman God's.
For God's sake, it's only meat.
That was Paul's position.

And the churches Paul started seemed to have developed some strange practices that adopted some of the religious practices of the Romans.

And in addition to Paul there were other evangelists who were out spreading the good news to the non-Jewish world – like Apollos and the female Apostle Junia, who Paul commends and says was into evangelizing well before he entered the scene.

We got a glimpse of the conflict that was taking place in the early church from our scripture this morning.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas,(Peter)" or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided?

Was Paul crucified for you?

Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

We aren't exactly sure what was happening, but there was definitely some serious dissension.

Then there is really the question of who was really in charge of the Jerusalem church.

Some sources say Peter.

The writers of Matthew and Luke/Acts really push for this, but Mark, just makes fun of Peter.

Some sources indicate it was one of Jesus brothers who took over and then there are Gospels like the Gospel of Mary that indicate that Mary actually should have been the leader.

Whoever it was, it is clear that there was some disagreement over the issue.

And it was over more than just who was the leader, but over some very important issues like; is Jesus was really human or just a god pretending to be human.

This was a major dispute between the Gnostic Church and the Coptic church, both of which have continuing churches today.

The Gnostics said Jesus was all divine, nothing human about him.

The Coptics went for the position that Jesus was all human, just inspired by the spirit.

And there were of course a good number of varieties of beliefs that covered the whole continuum between these two positions.

There was even dissension, much like today, around whether the goal of Christianity was building God's Realm and doing loving acts or believing the right things to ensure ones heavenly home.

From the Epistle of James we read:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?

Can faith save you?

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them,

"Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works."

Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

And these disagreements weren't always conducted in the most loving of ways.

John of Patmos, the author of the Apocalypse, a.k.a. Revelations, was pushing for the total destruction of any of those so called Christians who were accommodating to Rome.

In his revelation, it's not just the Romans who get wiped out, but most especially there was extreme vitriol intended for those who, like the Apostle Paul, argued for a more accommodating position.

These Christians were seen as even worse than non-believers, because they were deceiving people.

Finally, in the 4th century C.E., Emperor Constantine decided that he wanted just one belief and he called many of the parties to come together in a town called Nicaea to figure it out.

Well, after great debate the winning side produced the Nicene Creed which defined who is and who isn't a Christian.

Of course, even with the force of Constantine's sword behind it, the creeds didn't really stop folk from believing other things, but it did give a definition of who was and who wasn't a Christian.

And some believe that it still defines who is and who isn't.

Needless to say, most of us would fall under the umbrella of those who aren't – Christian.

But what I found interesting in my Sabbatical study from years back, where I interviewed people about what they believed, was that no one fits it all.

Even those who thought they were orthodox, that is “right believing Christians,” they too had beliefs that would have gotten them crispy grilled 1800 years ago.

So as I said, this has been going on for quite some time.

It's nothing new, and arguing over who is and who isn't a Christian seems to be one of the rare common features of all Christians.

I have many friends and colleagues who think Jesus would have nothing to do with those who are today defining Christianity; that Jesus would choose not to be a Christian.

And there are those I'm sure that would think that I and many of you are deceivers and emissaries of the Anti-Christ.

So who, or what, is a Christian?

Well, I'm afraid it's a pretty big category and I'm not sure that I want to be the one who defines it.

It's our tradition, a tradition of the UCC, to be rather tolerant, despite our burning witches in Salem -- not one of our better moments.

What's really hard is trying to figure out how to be tolerant of those who aren't tolerant.

I'm definitely prejudice against people who are prejudice.

Which of course then includes me in such a case.

So I find it hard to try to say, "who or what is a Christian."

There are some common threads.

We all see the Bible as sacred – though what that means is in dispute.

We all have a connection to Jesus, -- whoever or whatever he was and/or is.

We all look forward to a better world – but again how that is defined is up for grabs.

I suppose we all believe in God, but it's best if we leave that term as ambiguous as possible.

But maybe for us it is more important to focus on what we believe and one of the things that we believe is that a Christian is defined by their love.

We must love those we disagree with.

We need to try to understand those who believe differently.

And one very hard for me, we need to learn how to love those who we believe are acting in opposition to God's will.

We must pray for redemption – not destruction.

I believe that is what Jesus would want.
AMEN.