

I'm Not That Kind of Christian: My Way or the Highway

The story is told of a rather self-important man who made it his mission to visit the Sunday school classes in his church each week. Often teachers were a little intimidated by him sitting there in silent judgment. One young woman nervously asked him if he would like to speak a few words to the class. Of course he would like to! So he stood in front of the little ones, and he said, "Why do you suppose people call me a Christian?"

No one answered. Nobody moved.

So he asked again: "Why do you think people call me a Christian?"

Silence! Blank stares.

"Come on!" he said. "Somebody can give me an answer! Why do people call me a Christian?"

And finally one small hand worked its way hesitantly above a young head. He pointed expectantly toward the girl.

"Why do you suppose people call me a Christian?" he asked her.

"Maybe," she said with a tremor in her voice, "because they don't really know you?"

Have you ever been listening to the news and found yourself cringing as the reporter throws around the word “Christian”?

Christian leader Jerry Falwell declares that Hurricane Katrina is God’s judgment for America’s tolerance of homosexuality and women’s liberation!

A Christian pastor in Florida is planning to burn a copy of the Koran to demonstrate God’s condemnation of the Islamic faith!

Evangelical Christians decry President Obama’s United Church of Christ pastor as unchristian and anti-American---even a likely terrorist!

Man who kills Wichita abortion doctor claims he was doing the work of Jesus Christ.

Westboro Baptist Church and leader Fred Phelps protest outside military funerals with signs saying “God Hates Fags.”

Children of fundamentalist Christian couple starved, beaten and caged by their parents because “the devil had taken hold of them.”

I hear these stories about so-called “Christians” and I want to scream out for everyone to hear: *“I’M NOT THAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN!”*

Judgmental—Intolerant—Fear-focused—Abusive—Violent—Self-Righteous—Angry—Anti-Science—non-reality-based—

I REALLY, REALLY AM NOT THAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN...and neither, I suspect, are you. Negative stories and negative stereotypes of

Christians have become so prevalent that most days I don’t even want to call myself a Christian. I strongly prefer “Follower of Jesus,” because it changes the context and the content of the conversation, and hopefully frees me of some of the disturbing connotations that the label “Christian” has developed.

In a recent Barna poll of non-church-related young adults ages 16-29, the top three impressions of Christians: Anti-homosexual, judgmental and hypocritical. In fact, out of the top 12 impressions of Christianity only 3 were favorable—9 unfavorable. Being a “Christian” clearly poses a lot of issues for the majority of young Americans—and so the majority of young Americans now call themselves “Unaffiliated” or “Spiritual but not Religious.” (more of those now than there are Protestant Christians in the U.S.) So I have a sneaking suspicion that there are times when you feel as I do, and prefer not to be associated with the negative impressions of Christianity.

The word “Christian” wasn’t actually used until sometime in the third century. The earliest followers of Jesus were known as Followers of The Way. “Christian” literally means “Christ-one” or “person of Christ.” C.S. Lewis suggested that “Christian” means “little Christ” in that we are all supposed to be striving to become more and more Christ-like in our lives. The Roman Empire called Jesus’ earliest followers “Christianos”—which means “Slaves of Christ.”

I think the central problem with the image of Christians today is that too many folks put the emphasis on themselves and use their Christianity as a tool or weapon against others—pretty much the exact opposite of what I believe followers of Jesus are supposed to be doing. Surely being a “person of Christ” or a “slave of Christ” shouldn’t equate with intolerance, ignorance and hatred!

So for now, I’m calling myself a follower of Jesus—because I really, really don’t want to be THAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN!

Our scripture readings this morning offer us a description of what the early Christian churches were like, and teach us something about what churches—then and now—are supposed to be.

Acts: Very first group of believers in Jesus following his Resurrection.

1. “the believers devoted themselves to the community of believers, to shared meals, prayers and the apostles’ teaching
2. “united and shared everything”
3. Sold property and possessions and gave proceeds to anyone in need
4. Went to the temple—worshiped together
5. Shared food with gladness and simplicity

BY DOING THESE THINGS, THEY “DEMONSTRATED GOD’S GOODNESS TO EVERYONE.”

Historians who have done research into early Christian church values (from primary source documents), we can discover the things that were important to the early Christians: *honesty, generosity to all including enemies, forgiveness of all including enemies, unconditional love for all including enemies, prayer for all including enemies, financial and other support for the church, humility, inclusiveness and equality, justice, mercy, modesty, peace-making, overcoming evil with good, healing, correction of others—supportively, compassion, humaneness, almsgiving (giving to the poor)*. All of these are values that build us up as a community of faith—caring for one another—responsible to one another—honoring each other. These values are NOT conducive to power-plays or coercion or manipulation or one-person-control-and-decision-making.

Even Apostle Paul (who was known for telling other people how to live and thinking of himself as “the leader”) wrote what we heard from Romans:

1. Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to
2. You are just one part of the whole
3. God has given “a portion of faith” to each of us
4. We are many parts of one body
5. We don't all have the same function, but we're all needed for the body to fully function
6. “Gifts” of prophecy, faith, service, teaching, encouragement, generosity, leadership, care-giving
7. Many people—many gifts—one body—“individually we belong to each other.”

We are interconnected, interwoven, interdependent—and no one gets to claim to be most important or indispensable. We are all in this together! This teaching fits really well with our United Methodist tradition—and with my personal belief. Each person is an equal participant in faith in this congregation. Our founder John Wesley set it up this way. We are mutually accountable, one to another, through group study, and fellowship, and worship, and supporting each other in following Jesus. We are intended to be in this together.

UM Polity (policy) says that every member of the church gets a voice and a vote in church decisions—every member! You know who doesn't get to vote? The Pastor! Ordained folks don't get to vote on decisions in the local church—the church members do. We get voice (sometimes more than you all want to hear), but not ultimate vote on issues of importance to the church.

Surprised? There is a reason we have all of those committees. They give the power to the people—to the members of the church—rather than just to one person.

When our system is working properly, you all are in charge of all the different aspects of church life: missions, finances, property, activities, personnel, worship. Some pastors and some lay leader-types want to be “in charge.” It’s “my way or the highway” and “I know what’s best so just shut up and do what I say.” Sometimes it might even seem easier to just let one or two people take charge of everything—but it works against the goal of genuine Christian communities.

I’ve had fun in these past 8 months expressing this belief here at Christ UMC. I hope you’re beginning to trust that I mean what I say when I tell you I’m open to your ideas and hopes and dreams for the church. I want you to feel that you can talk to me about how things are going, what needs to be tweaked/changed, what you’re really enjoying about the church. My job as pastor is to move the church forward—but it takes all of us to discern which way the Spirit wants us to go!

Part of moving forward means trying new things, especially new/innovative ways of reaching out to our neighbors, new ways of providing opportunities for all types of people to worship, learn, and give and receive spiritual support. Believe it or not—not everyone finds meaning and spiritual connection in the same way!

So we’re going to try things—new things—in a genuine effort to reach more and more varied types of people. You have told me clearly that you want our church to grow—and it’s going to take experimenting with some new approaches to faith in order to make that happen. **BUT I AM NOT THE SOLE CONTROLLER OF WHAT WE TRY, OR WHAT ADJUSTMENTS WE MAKE.** It’s not MY church, it’s OUR church working together to honor God.

So we're going to try new things, and when they work, we're going to celebrate! And when they don't, we're going to do something different. Here's an example: I feel strongly that we need to offer a variety of worship experiences in order to connect spiritually with a wider variety of people. We have 3 worship times, and doing the same thing in all of them really doesn't make sense in today's world. So we're trying something a little different: 8am will continue to be our short and casual worship time in the chapel; 9am will be essentially the same as it has been—a variety of music and presentations, plus using the screen for songs and readings, etc; 10:30am has taken a turn to the more traditional, with psalm-reading, sometimes a creed, the traditional doxology, and “good old hymns”—and not using the screen.

I wanted to try having the choir only have to sing at one service. I hoped that would make it easier to recruit new choir members, and give our choir folks more of a chance to attend SS or teach. I was told in no uncertain terms that the choir couldn't sing only at 10:30 because they couldn't possibly warm up during coffee time! And we could have changed the 9am service to be the more traditional—but there were folks who can only attend at 10:30 for whom the traditional was very important. So we tried something different and had the choir sing at only 9am. It took you all a couple weeks to get rolling, but I was really excited when you started coming to me and telling me how much you missed the choir at 10:30. Some of you expressed yourselves calmly, others more heatedly—but you told me what you think—and I hope you feel that I listened—and I can tell you that the choir hasn't felt this appreciated in years!

We try new things. If they work, we celebrate. If they don't, we do something different. But the only way we can discern God's direction for us as a church is to do it together. So express yourselves to me and to each other. Show appreciation for the parts of church life that you love, and offer constructive ideas to improve on challenging areas.

I'm going to be pushing (mostly gently) for growth—both spiritual and numerical. And I hope you'll be pushing with me (mostly gently). Honestly, if there aren't a few uncomfortable places, then we're not trying anything new, and we're not growing. If we're not trying new ways to share the good news of God's love, then we're not being faithful to Jesus' call:

To care for ALL people

To welcome ALL people

To open the way for ALL kinds of folks to become followers of Jesus

I'm not the kind of Christian who says, "I'm in charge here, and this is how we're going to do it, and if you don't like it, you can leave. My way or the highway!"

In the UMC—in Christ UMC—None of us get to be that kind of Christian, and we can thank God for that.

Jesus tells us to love each other, care for each other, and to reach out to everyone—there's nothing in there about lording over each other.

Paul tells us that we are all important, integral parts of the body—of this community of faith—nobody gets to be more important than anybody else.

And if we can do this—then we are truly living as followers of Jesus—like the earliest churches—Devoting ourselves to learning the Way of Jesus, devoted to each other, devoted to our shared meals (that one's easy), and devoted to our prayers.

My way or the highway? No way! We're just not that kind of Christians. Amen.

On the table beside my chair is that book called “Unchristian,” which I keep delving into when I have a minute to spare. It’s fascinating, and it’s teaching me so much about what the younger generation thinks of Christianity. I reported briefly on the chapter about hypocrisy in one of my recent posts, but since then I’ve read the chapters called “Get Saved!” “Antihomosexual,” and “Sheltered.” I’m sure you can imagine what those are about. Young people these days think that Christians are not so much interested in them as human beings, but only as “targets” for conversion. Ninety percent of them think that Christians are “antihomosexual,” and this in a peer group that is enormously accepting of diversity. Most of them think that Christians are boring, unintelligent, old-fashioned, and out of touch with reality, so why would anyone want to be Christian?

Now, you and I know those things are not true, but how do we convince young people that they are not true? In each chapter of the book David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons begin with the existing perception of Christians, but then follow it with a “new” perception—what they would like for young people to think about us. Here they are:

HYPOCRITICAL

Perception: Christians say one thing, but live something entirely different.

New Perception: Christians are transparent about their flaws and act first, talk second.

GET SAVED!

Perception: Christians are insincere and concerned only with converting others.

New Perception: Christians cultivate relationships and environments where others can be deeply transformed by God.

ANTIHOMOSEXUAL

Perception: Christians show contempt for gays and lesbians.

New Perception: Christians show compassion and love to all people, regardless of their lifestyle.

SHELTERED

Perception: Christians are boring, unintelligent, old-fashioned, and out of touch with reality.

New Perception: Christians are engaged, informed, and offer sophisticated responses to the issues people face.

TOO POLITICAL

Perception: Christians are primarily motivated by a political agenda and promote right-wing politics.

New Perception: Christians are characterized by respecting people, thinking biblically, and finding solutions to complex issues.

JUDGMENTAL

Perception: Christians are prideful and quick to find fault with others.

New Perception: Christians show grace by finding the good in others and seeing their potential to be Christ followers.