WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

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Acts 11:25-36: So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church, and taught a large company of people; and in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians.

Very often the name by which a group of people are known is not their own invention. It is a tag attached by outsiders. Frequently the tag carries the taint of derision. Such was the case with the names attached to many movements in the history of Christianity. "Methodist", for example, was a derisive label applied by students at Oxford to several of their colleagues who met to dialogue about how they could practice Christian living in a regular or methodical way. Years later, when some of these students became leaders of a religious movement, the name revived. Ultimately the members of the movement accepted the name "Methodist" as their own.

The name "Christian" seems to have taken hold in much the same way. It may not have begun as a term of derision, though one suspects that like most labels applied to other people, there was some of that element in it. But the name does seem to have originated with outsiders. At the start it did not occur to the followers of Jesus to think up a name for themselves. In the first place, they did not think of themselves as forming a new religion. In the second place, the focus of their thoughts was not a title for themselves, but rather a dynamic enterprise of which they saw themselves a part. Thus the name they themselves gave to their movement was "The Way."

But outsiders wanted a label to put on these people, One can imagine one person saying to another, "Who are those people?" The other might answer, "They go around preaching about someone they call Christos...or maybe it's Chrestus, something like that."

"Christos" was not part of Jesus' name. It was Greek for "Messiah." But Christians used this word as a title for Jesus and in time it shifted into the form of a proper name. There is also some evidence that outsiders mistook the title for the familiar name, "Chrestus." In any case, it was only a matter of time before pagans developed a name for the people of "The Way" that was based on that of their leader. These were "The Christians." It was not until a couple of generations later that the people on whom that label was pinned began to use it much among themselves.

But what does the name mean today? People seem to use the name "Christian" in several ways.

First there is a moralistic way. To be a Christian is to be especially virtuous. It is to achieve a high ideal in personal behavior. Most people who understand the word in that sense are loath to apply it to themselves. To do so would seem presumptuous.

"Are you a Christian?"

"No, I don't claim to be that."

Here we see one of the weaknesses in this moralistic use of the label. Everyone wants to run away from it.

Another use of the label is doctrinaire. It refers to certain beliefs and experiences that are held to mark Christians off from others. A Christian is one who believes Jesus paid for his sins and who knows he has been "saved." More particularly these days a Christian is seen as someone who in addition to such a belief has received the "gift" of speaking in tongues.

More and more we hear the word "Christian" used in this sense, especially by preachers over the radio. We hear certain people referred to as Christians. There is an implication that certain other people are not Christians even though they think they are.

It is not uncommon today for people to speak of their business as Christian. There are Christian moving companies and Christian roofing firms. Perhaps you have received a letter suggesting that you "buy Christian," or at least implying that it is good to do business with a Christian outfit.

This way of using, or abusing the label "Christian" grates on a lot of us. I suppose this grating feeling led to my preaching this sermon. I hear those radio preachers speaking about Christians on my car radio and I am troubled by the implications. Yet there is some kernel of validity in this doctrinaire approach, just as there is in the moralistic approach. If the word Christian means anything at all it must have to do with belief and spiritual experience and moral commitment.

No doubt it also has to do with the Church. An easy way to define a Christian is as a member of a Christian Church. But then we must ask what makes a church Christian? Some would identify a Christian as a baptized person. Churches of the Catholic tradition tend to start from there. But other people who call themselves Christians - Quakers, for example - do not practice baptism.

Finally, in some places Christian may have an ethnic meaning. In Turkey to be a Christian is to be an Armenian. Many Turks do not hold Armenians in very high regard. Therefore, if you are a Christian in Turkey, but not an Armenian, you may wish to go under some other label.

What is a Christian? I am going to suggest a four-pillared approach. None of the pillars taken by itself can hold up the Christian house. All of them together may tell us what a Christian is.

First, I would say that a Christian is committed to being a follower of Jesus. He is one who finds the meaning and purpose of his life disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth.

This does not mean that a Christian may not find such meaning disclosed in other persons. It does not mean that he must be a devotee of what I have called "Jesusism," a religious outlook centered so exclusively on Jesus that everything else is pushed aside and Jesus himself ceases to be human. But a Christian is one who gives his allegiance to a movement of faith that draws inspiration from Jesus. For him Jesus is the Christ, not in the original messianic sense perhaps, but in the sense that he opens the way to the kingdom of God.

Second, a Christian belongs to that community of discipleship that arose around Jesus and which continues to this day.

Does this mean that a Christian must be a church member? I would not define this pillar that narrowly. The bases of membership vary from church

to church. Some people join churches and then show no interest in the church at all. Others may not be members in a formal sense, yet they are very much involved. Still others may not participate in the life of any congregation, yet in their own minds they identify with the Christian community and would feel at a loss if they were told that the church had ceased to exist. Our Reformed forebears distinguished between the visible and invisible church. Only God knows who belongs to the invisible church. These forebears believed, however, that a person's identification with the Christian community was much more definite when he or she openly entered into a covenant of membership with the church visible.

Third, a Christian accepts and shares the good news that God's love is given freely to all persons. This is the gospel of grace: "By grace you are saved through faith, not by works, lest anyone should boast." This is the very heart of the Christian message. Though everything else be swept away by the changing seas of belief, this assurance remains. There is that which accepts, affirms and redeems us in spite of anything and everything wrong with us, - that is the indispensable core of Christian teaching. Where this gospel is lacking there is no church; there is no Christianity.

Frequently this message gets obscured. Much of the actual teaching of the church loses sight of this core conviction about a love that comes without strings. The personal religion of individual Christians often has more in common with the Pharisees than with Jesus. Again and again in their personal lives people discover that what seems like the most attractive of all things to believe is the very hardest to accept and to experience with regard to oneself. It was hard for Paul; it was hard for Luther; it is hard for us. The people whom the pastor meets in his study are nearly always people who rate either their own sin or their own virtue more highly than God's holy love. The indispensable thing is the hardest thing.

I said that a Christian is one who accepts and shares the good news. These words are chosen carefully. They are in keeping with the emphasis of the New Testament. Every Christian is in some way an evangelist. There is no line that we can draw between receiving the grace of God's forgiving love by faith and living out that grace in word and deed.

Fourth, a Christian is one who considers himself bound to live a life of moral responsibility. "Faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience" wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I would prefer to say, "in the act of faithfulness." Biblical religion is grounded in the idea that people, both as individuals and as communities, are bound together freely in covenants of mutual faithfulness. God is our God and we are his people, therefore we must live in relation to him and to everyone else in a responsible way.

Modern paganism tells us, "You only need to be true to yourself. Fulfilling yourself is all that matters. What's right for you is what's right, period." We hear this message everywhere. Often it passes under the label of self-affirmation, or self-fulfillment. Self-indulgence is more like it!

This pagan message is the antithesis of Christianity. Christianity teaches "you are not your own; you were bought with a price." To believe in the love of God for you binds you forever to a life of responsible relationships. If you are a Christian then what is right for you must be right for your family, your community, your church, and ultimately, your God. There is no other way by which a Christian can live.

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We hear many statements about what it means to be a Christian. Some are too narrow. Others are so broad as to be meaningless. I think this four-pillared approach provides at least a rough outline of what a Christian is. If we wanted to use more theological language we could say that one pillar is Christological. It recognizes that a Christian is one who traces his view-point on life to that inspiration that comes through Jesus Christ.

The second pillar is ecclesiastical. It reminds us that a Christian is one who shares in the heritage and present-day life of a community of faith.

The third pillar is evangelical. It centers in the gospel of grace found in Jesus' parables and in the preaching of his first followers.

The fourth pillar is moral. It tells us that to be a Christian is to be a follower of "The Way" and that The Way is a life of responsible faithfulness to God and all human relationships.