

## What is a Christian

I don't know when you did, but I've claimed Christianity since I was about ten, not that you could tell by the way I sometimes behaved over the past 60 years. But that's OK, that misbehavior; after all, I *claimed* Christianity—and a lot of folks say it's the faith is all about belief, not behavior—so I was OK. Even as a kid, I knew it wasn't that simple: a person has a hell of a time *being* a Christian if that person didn't try to **behave** like one. Maybe I've gained a little on that target, depending on whom you ask. I pray so.

In my adulthood, I've sometimes found it hard to stand up and declare that I am a follower of Christ because of the *company that put me in*: the Jimmy Fallwells and Oral Roberts of the world, the fundies that deny the most basic of scientific truths and the most self-evident of human rights, the conservative, America-First patriots who somehow conflate narrow-minded nationalism with the biblical teachings. I don't get it.

There are also religious masochists who equate the strength of their faith with the amount of discomfort it brings them. For some folks on this planet, these zealots represent Christianity. We'll talk more about those folks: they make a good story, but not a good invitation to Christianity.

Most importantly, we're going to talk about what Christian identity can *be* like, and what it can *look* like. I recently came across an ideal—a devoted, inclusive, *thoughtful* spiritual identity. It appeals greatly to me; I'm hoping that might it appeal to you.

What does this have to do with the word *nauseous*? Once upon a time, if you told me you were *nauseous*, I'd reply, tongue in cheek, "I certainly hope not." Time was, the idea of being *nauseated* meant that you had **experienced** something *nauseous*. As a result of a *nauseous* **subject**, you, the **object**, became *nauseated*. Maybe you got sick to your stomach from eating a bad piece of meat. The meat was **nauseous**; you were **nauseated**. Got it? Well, not anymore. **Nauseous** can mean the *reaction* to something sickening **OR** the *thing itself*. Check any contemporary dictionary. That's the way folks are using the language, and the English language is democratic, especially American English. A word grows to mean what we use it to mean. Ain't that right, *guys*?

By the same token, the term *Christianity* is used very differently than the early Christians would have thought. Today, “Christian” carries heavy associations of social conservatism and nationalism. Ask the average American to guess the political party of a “professing” Christian, and Jane or John Average will tell you that the Christian is a Republican. Ask Joe or Jane to identify the “Christian’s” political issues and they will identify abortion, same-sex relationships, and immigration, and all these things “Christians” oppose vigorously.

My very own children were raised in the Methodist church where their mom and I contributed to their religious education. (More their mom than me so you can blame her.) Do they identify as Christian? Not on your life! A Christian to them is a wall-building, gay-hating, life-begins-at-conception zealot. Their dad, me, this guy who sermonizes and such—I’m just a confusing exception to them. The idea of identifying as Christian makes them **nauseous**.

The lectionary we read today: the conflict therein would be proof to my kids and their peers that Christianity was begotten by a backward, frightened group of Hebrews who equated nationalism with faith. Of course, so would many Christian nationalists—with *great admiration!*

There’s another conception of the “Christian”; that’s the self-sacrificing saint. If you were to ask Americans, probably ask anyone in the world, to identify a modern-day saint, “Mother Teresa” would be the first name that comes to mind. However, I was recently reading about the *Missionaries of Charity*, the order that Mother Teresa initiated and led to serve poor throughout the world. The behavior of its nuns goes far beyond what strikes me as sane, or, at the least, healthy. According to *Salon Magazine* and the podcast *The Turning: The Sisters Who Left*, in the “last 71 years, thousands upon thousands of women took vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and ‘wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor’” when they joined the Missionaries of Charity. Many of these nuns and ex-nuns decry the masochism that was expected of them. Entering the *first rungs* of the order, women’s heads were shaved and they were made to breathe in the smell of their and their sisters’ hair as it burns.

Is this a cleansing ceremony or a macabre ritual? Sisters in this order are sometimes denied medical care or rest, ostensibly so that their service more perfectly reflects the suffering of Christ.

Indeed, It is the topic of suffering that Mother Teresa seemed to speak about **most** to followers in the order, not the charitable acts that gives them their name. According to *Salon*, “Mother Teresa **could have** centered on Jesus’ interactions with the poor, sick and hungry, but she was . . . most moved by how “His pain catalyzed his holiness.”

According to the women who have left the order and even some who have stayed, this masochistic self-sacrifice was *nothing* they *needed* to make their faith have purpose. They simply wanted to serve. But some of the recommended practices went as far as self-flagellation, literally: one woman reported becoming so used to it, she felt she still “needed it” after she left the order to calm herself in times of stress.

The Missionaries of Charity, even in the maturity of their years, were forbidden to have unstructured companionship with each other. This was a policy born more out of Mother Teresa’s fear that they would *violate their vows of celibacy* rather than a means to increase their holiness.

So why do I talk about the Missionaries of Charity? For lots of layfolk, stories about zealots’ unhealthy devotion to Christian vows color folks’ perception of Christians in general. We’re either bigots, or fanatics, or both. One label, in this case, *Christian*, may mean many things to different people. But for a lot of the world, little congregations like ours are assumed to be cut from the same cloth as the Christian conservatives or unhealthy zealots.

The very name of our denomination—the United Church of Christ—was a turn-off to me initially. Too many other churches with the word “Christ” in their name had a reputation for being conservative. I’d still prefer if we called ourselves *Congregationalists* or even better *Anabaptists* (“Anabaptist” just sounds so mysterious.) While I’m babbling about church history I know too little of, we’re also descended from the German *Pietists*.

I’m not sure how attractive **Pietism** would sound to 21<sup>st</sup> century folks looking for a church, but it’s certainly an interesting label.

So let’s get back to the point. What *can* it mean to be a Christian? Months ago, when I first thought I would give this sermon but then came down with Covid, I had these thoughts on that question. The idea of *channeling* Christ was one idea I was batting about. (Or we could call it *imitating* Christ if you think the idea of “channeling” is too New Age-y). It might sound “summer-campy” to you, but the hymn “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love” still speaks loudly to me. Another idea I would have talked about: that of *awe*, of just being slackjaw amazed at the work of God, from the variety of carbon atoms to the number of suns we’ve discovered thus far. While we’re on the theme of *amazing*, this blue ball we call Earth added its *eight billionth* living human being last week.

There’s plenty to be in awe about, and it all points to some sort of an Almighty, whether strictly Christian or not.

Then last week I stumbled upon this book while listening to public radio: *Confessions of a Recovering Evangelical* by Daniel Henderson, a midwestern boy about my age and an educator like me. His background, his life story, and his struggle with the Christianity he grew up with clicked with me. I felt a resonance of belief like I've never quite felt before. So I'm going to talk about the five guiding ideas I found in his book. He uses the term "faith,"; I'm going to substitute the term "belief," referring to *Christian* beliefs.

First, Henderson says . . .

Belief "is an experience that is *expansive*, not *exclusive*." I take this to mean that our belief in a Christian God allows us a richer and richer experience with the world. We might not *understand everything*, but we are *comfortable with trying*; we do not look through a dogmatic lens that limits our vision.

Second . . .

Belief creates *wholeness*, not *fragmentation*. The *Sunday-morning Us* is the same person as the *nine-to-five weekday Us* or the *curled up on the couch watching TV us*. Similarly, our perspective toward other people should be the same regardless of time or place; and our behavior toward them should be the same. Our celebration of the hours, days and weeks we're blessed with should remain constant, knowing that every succeeding minute, tick-by-tock, is the greatest gift life is giving us.

Third . . .

Belief promotes healing over brokenness. To use the old maxim: that which does not kill me makes me stronger. Take romance or friendship. Most of us have experienced relationships that did not last. We learned something even if the relationship faded, and those lessons instruct us in our relationships today.

Fourth . . .

Belief connects us to other people; it is **not** a *divider* of folks. This is perhaps the most self-evident of these points when we look to the New Testament. It might also be the most difficult one to act upon judging from the way Christians in this country treat the stranger and the poor.

Five . . .

Belief connects us to God . . . God is not a separate thing or entity. We are each a part of God. Humankind is an extension of the Almighty; all of everything is of one cloth. Unity, not distinction, defines the cosmos. (Forgive me if I sound like I watched too much *Star Trek* or read too much Robert Heinlein when I was young and impressionable.)

And if we're each a part of God, we're necessarily a part of each other. If only we could get Christians across this nation to take this idea of inclusiveness to heart.

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So it looks like we've got our work cut out for us.

The mainstream media exaggerates the dominance of a bigoted, nationalistic, narrowly-moralistic perspective of Christians.

A sensationalistic slice of the press plays up a small subset of Christians who seem attracted to extremes of sacrifice flavored heavily with masochism.

Last, there are an awful lot of Christian folks getting very little notice. They—we!—are striving to be something like Daniel Henderson's Christians: our belief leads us to be expansive, embracing wonder; we are inclusive, seeking wholeness in ourselves and with others; we are made whole by our belief, generous of heart; we are in community with both believers and unbelievers; we are connected, to God to be sure, but, moreover, we are intertwined with all things and peoples.

*Hey, that's a pretty attractive way of being!*

It's up to folks like us to get the word out, and, more importantly, to use love as our lamp, if we want our light to shine on a dark and longing world.

## BENEDICTION

Let us go light into this world. It's time for churches like Crossroads to eclipse the madness. We are the light of the world. We've made that promise to God. Time to give it a glow.