

On Being Christian

Is something Christian because it goes by the name of Christian, or because it possesses certain qualities that are Christian, or is there some other basis for judgment?

Traditionally, Christian theologians have tended to identify Christianity in terms of certain beliefs. Thus, Christians are said to be persons who adhere to certain doctrines or creeds, especially with reference to the person of Jesus Christ. But this way of identifying what is Christian excludes many who would claim to be Christian. Indeed, most Christian churches of my acquaintance ask of their members only that they profess acceptance of “Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.” What all that means is beyond the scope of this brief essay. But it must be observed that this is not a very elaborate creed.

In my view Christians are best identified as those who 1) regard Jesus of Nazareth as the most definitive, complete (and some would say, perfect) manifestation within human history of God’s will and purpose for humankind, and 2) are resolved to follow the teaching, life, and example of Jesus as a way of being faithful before God. This doesn’t rule out other ways of being faithful before God, but it clearly makes a preferential claim on behalf of Jesus and his way. It’s hard for me to imagine a more inclusive way of defining Christianity without turning religious conviction into a mere matter of personal preference, as in “One way is as good as another, this just happens to be my way.”

Moreover, if “one way is as good as another,” then one version of Christianity is presumably as good as another also – so long as it goes by the name of Christian. Ugh! The tragedy of our times, from my Christian perspective, is that those who are most insistent about the truth of their Christian convictions are often the least Christian.. That is to say, their lives exhibit little evidence that they are resolved to follow Jesus. They do not eschew violence, are not loving toward enemies, practice self-righteousness, condone bigotry, and show little compassion for the poor, the suffering, the weak, and all the “sinners” whom Jesus embraced. They insist that America is a Christian nation, then do everything they can to oppose policies that might actually embody the values and virtues of a Christian life. When it comes to being Christian, the “religious right” could hardly be more wrong.

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