

Is There a Christian Way of Life?
First Presbyterian Church, Salem, IN
Byron C. Bangert

Isaiah 58:5-9b

Acts 2:42-47

We live in a day and time when there is an awful lot of contention in our political and religious life. People disagree about all kinds of things. But it's not just that they disagree, it's also that they adamantly insist on the rightness, or the superiority, or even the exclusiveness of their own particular version or brand of politics or religion.

So, in our political life, for example, we get all these public statements and arguments about what it means to be a *real* American. Or a *real* patriot. Or a *real* Republican. Or a *real* Democrat. By implication, people who have different convictions are not real Americans or whatever. In fact they are frequently called socialist, or communist, or fascist, or something else that really is not acceptable within the mainstream of our public life.

Of course, we can also see enormous amounts of posturing, dissembling, and hypocrisy in our political life. Many of the people who throw around these labels meant to attack others or inflate themselves are clearly seeking political gain without respect for the truth, and without respect for the humanity of those whom they oppose. Today they say one thing, tomorrow they may say something else. And when you examine the record, you can often find a video or audio recording where they have previously taken the very position they now denounce.

This is not to say that there are not people of integrity in our public life, nor is it to say that there are not honest differences in points of view, understandings of fact, interpretations of reality, and so on. But it is often extraordinarily difficult to get to the heart of the issue, or the crux of the matter, in public affairs because there is so much that is dishonest and mean and self-serving.

There is a similar problem when it comes to religion, especially these days when the issues that divide us politically are often also issues that divide us along certain religious lines. So we have people who claim to be *real* Christians denouncing the views or practices or persons of others who also consider themselves to be Christians. You know how it goes: If you're a *real* Christian, you've got to believe this. Or, you're not a *real* Christian if you believe that. Is the Bible literally true, or not? Do you have to subscribe to any of the creeds, or all, or none? Do you have to be born again, or are there other ways into the fold? Do you have to affirm that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, or might there be other paths? What is required to be a Christian? Even mild-mannered Presbyterians have been fighting a 30-40 year battle over the appropriate way to think about and relate to gay and lesbian persons in the life of the church. And although the latest attempt to remove some of the barriers to their full participation has proven successful, the battle is surely not entirely over.

The question of religious identity is one that, as Christians, we all know to be very challenging and complex. Even if you grew up in a tradition, as I did, where all you had to do was profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in order to be eligible for baptism and church membership,

it is never really that simple. There are always these other beliefs and behaviors that are expected if you're going to be a *real* Christian, or a good Christian, or whatever kind of Christian the person spelling it out thinks you ought to be.

Is it any consolation that Christians are not alone in having big arguments over what is required to be one of them? I remember the statement of a well-known Jewish scholar – I think it was Jacob Neusner, but I'm not sure – saying something to the effect that “to be a Jew is to argue about what it means to be Jewish.” There are several varieties of Judaism these days, and some rather diverse views about what it takes to be Jew.

It is noteworthy, however, that for Jews, who have no creed, these arguments seldom focus on doctrinal matters. The traditional view has been that you are Jewish if you have Jewish mother, or if you are a convert to Judaism. But what is required of the convert? And what if your mother is Jewish, but you adopt the views and practices of some other religious tradition? For the most part, answers to such questions are based on a person's identification with, and engagement in, the rituals and practices of Judaism. In fact, many Jews would say that belief in God is optional. What is required is keeping of the law, or observance of the traditions that mark the Jewish way of life. But of course, among the major branches of Judaism there are widely varying views of the degree to which the law and traditions must be kept.

There is also great diversity within Islam, in terms of both teachings and practices. In general, however, there is one thing only required to become a Muslim: A single honest recitation of the Shahadah in Arabic is all that is required: “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet.” This declaration, or statement of faith, is also called the Kalima, literally "word". Recitation of the Shahadah, is the first and most important of the Five Pillars of Islam. Non-Muslims wishing to convert to Islam do so by a public recitation of this creed.

When one considers Islam in general, however, it is clear that this religion is defined as much or more by practices as it is by its creed. The other four pillars of Islam all identify actions that are integral to the Muslim religion: daily prayers (including the Friday afternoon prayers at the mosque), fasting, alms-giving, and the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca are expected of all devout Muslims. According to some minority sects of Islam, there is a sixth pillar, known as jihad. And for many in these minority sects, jihad may entail physical struggle, including violence. For most Muslims, however, jihad refers primarily to the spiritual struggle that is involved in the fulfillment of the five pillars, and is not a separate additional pillar of the religion.

I comment on these other religions mainly to provide a context for thinking about what it means to be Christian. Quite unlike Judaism, and to a lesser extent unlike Islam, Christianity has often been defined in terms of belief rather than practice. So it is often assumed that if you hold the right beliefs, then you are a Christian. You may be a scoundrel, and you may have lots of sins to cover, but if you sincerely confess the faith, even at the last moment before death, then all can be forgiven!

And what are those right beliefs? There are different versions, including the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Christian fundamentalists have their list of five fundamentals, and typically think that anyone who rejects these fundamentals cannot be a real Christian. Presbyterians, who tend not to insist that you have to agree with them in order to be a Christian, used to have the Westminster Confession of Faith as their singular standard. Now, in addition to our Book of Confessions, reference is often made to "the essential tenets of the Reformed faith." I suspect you could get all Presbyterians to agree that the sovereignty of God is an essential tenet of the faith, and you might get them all to agree that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior, but I'm not sure you could get universal consent on anything else.

So here's the rub: Even when there is agreement on what we are to believe – and that agreement is hard enough to come by – there is often wide divergence of viewpoint on how we are to live.

Although this may not be an orthodox Christian point of view, I would submit that it matters a whole lot more how we live than what we say we believe. According to Jesus, the first and greatest commandment is to love God, and the second is to love our neighbor. That's what really matters.

Some years ago I was teaching a Commissioning Class – what you probably call a Confirmation Class – and I wanted to get the young people to think about what it means to be a Christian. So one evening I put this question to them: "If it were illegal to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" In some ways it is a silly question, because the answer would depend on how the law was written, and what was considered to be the evidence for Christianity. Most of the young people really did not know how to answer the question, though I know of at least one on whom it left a real impression. I'm not sure I know how to answer the question. But that's the point: We are not very clear in our own minds about what it means to be a Christian.

One way to answer the question would be to say that a Christian is someone who belongs to and worships in a Christian church. But you know what the great Evangelist, Billy Sunday, said? "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile." That's probably putting it too crudely, but there is this problem of trying to identify the substance, not just the form, or the meat and potatoes, not just the trimmings, that identify a person as a Christian. Going through the motions is not enough.

So here's my shot at trying to answer the question, "Is there a Christian way of life?"

First, to be a Christian is to regard the person of Jesus of Nazareth as someone who shows us the heart of God, and also shows us something of what it means to be human at our best. Traditional theology talks a lot about Jesus in doctrinal terms. It seems to me that what really matters, however, is the practical role that Jesus has had and can continue to have in our lives as someone who shows us the way – the way to God, and the way to our true humanity. And by the way, if you know the Book of Acts, you know that the first reported term given to the movement of the early followers of Jesus was the Way (Acts 9:2). Only somewhat later were they first called

Christians (Acts 11:26).

Second, to be a Christian is to show a special regard for those in our world who are most vulnerable, or beset by misfortune, disadvantage, or oppression. We should be able to see this clearly from Jesus' own teaching and ministry. Recall the Beatitudes, those sayings with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew: Jesus singles out particular sorts of persons for encouragement and blessing: the poor, those in mourning, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. Recall the inaugural sermon that Jesus delivers in the synagogue in the Gospel of Luke: Jesus proclaims good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. Recall the story of the final judgment, where a final division is made between the sheep and the goats: the acid test comes down to feeding the hungry, giving drink to those who thirst, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and welcoming the stranger. It is what is done for the "least of these," says Jesus, that really matters (Matthew 25:31-46).

This morning's Old Testament text from Isaiah proclaims a similar message. The "fast" that God chooses is not a ceremonial event, it does not consist of sackcloth and ashes, it is not empty ritual. Rather, it involves a loosening of the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, sharing bread with the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless poor, clothing the naked, and not hiding yourself from your own kin. In short, it means looking after, and being available to help, those in our midst in greatest need or direst circumstance.

Third, being a Christian has something to do with being transformed. I think most of us realize that our natural inclinations are to look after ourselves, and those like us. We seek security, we seek peace of mind, we seek freedom to pursue our own agendas, we seek to be unhindered and undisturbed by those about us whom we cannot enlist to serve our own ends. To be transformed, however, is to live beyond all this, to live beyond our ordinary selves.

I don't pretend to be able to do this very often, and I surely do not find myself able to do so by sheer force of will. I have to believe that this is a gift of the Spirit, a power that comes from beyond ourselves, that enables us to transcend our own self-interests and achieve a higher standard of living.

For the very first community of Jesus' followers, that higher standard of living is described in these terms: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). I submit that there is not a soul here who could achieve this higher standard of living on your own! But what if we were fully open to the transforming power of the Spirit? Who knows what might be possible?

Christianity is diametrically opposed to a dog-eat-dog, everyone for themselves, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps world. I'm not prepared to say that being a Christian requires this or that particular form of sharing of this world's goods. But I do believe it requires an openness to the

divine possibilities of transformation. If becoming and being a Christian has never had any transformative effect upon your life, never empowered you to be more gracious, or more generous, or more trusting, or more self-giving, than you would otherwise be, then either Christianity is just a bunch of hot air, or there is something missing in your life. Acts says of the first disciples that “they ate their food” – the food that they were sharing with one another – “with glad and generous hearts.” Their lives were being transformed.

There are a number of other things that might be said about being a Christian. There are three distinct Christian virtues that, along with the ancient Greek notions of virtue, have become central to our culture and its ways of thinking and acting in the world. These are faith, hope, and love. There is that familiar list of the fruits of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul related in his letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22-23). One should be able to find evidences of these in every Christian life. Of course, one can also find evidences of these in other lives not Christian. God’s Spirit is not bound by our definitions, or even our professions of faith or lack thereof.

What I hope I have offered here this morning is not a way to discriminate between those who are Christian and those who are not, or a way to separate the sheep from the goats, or a way to point the finger at someone or anyone who does not seem to measure up. I know I don’t measure up! Rather, I hope that there is something here, in Jesus’ teaching and example, in the words of scripture, in the story of the first followers of Jesus and his Way, and in the claims of those like Paul who have witnessed to their faith, that each of us can take to heart – for ourselves, not for somebody else! How can you, how can I, be more true and loyal and loving? More faithful to that which we profess? More responsive to the claims of God’s love upon us? More compassionate toward our hurting world?

There is plenty in this world that divides us, and will continue to divide us. But what about our common humanity, as children of God? As kin in God’s kin-dom? Can we not find ways to help those who are most in need, to lift up those who are falling and failing, to liberate those who are burdened and oppressed, to give justice to those who are short-changed and exploited and abused?

You are a congregation that has recently said goodbye to your pastor of a good many years. The days ahead will provide new challenges and opportunities. My prayer for all of you is that, as you work together in this interim period and for whatever future lies ahead, you will enjoy each other and have great times together, and that your life together will flourish. For that to happen in its fullness, I pray that together you will be further transformed in your lives as Christians, and that you will continue to become a transforming presence in this place – because you are followers of Jesus who have heard and understood his message and because you seek to be open to the work of the Spirit of God, which is in Christ Jesus, the one who shows us the Way. AMEN.

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