

What does it mean to be Christian?

I was speaking with a young person not long ago who'd left the church he'd grown up in to join his girlfriend's church. He was telling me about his new church, then said, "I'm so glad to finally be a Christian."

I was a bit confused by his remark and said, "I thought you'd always been a Christian. Weren't you baptized as an infant in your childhood church? I believe they consider themselves Christian."

"Yes," he said, "But that was a decision my parents made for me. This is a decision I've made for myself."

Well, okay, I can understand that. The religions we choose for ourselves do tend to be more personally meaningful and satisfying. Nevertheless, I was troubled by his inference that the denomination he'd grown up in wasn't Christian, especially since it was the same denomination I'd grown up in, and I told him he might not want to tell his parents he'd finally become a Christian. Parents get upset when they've gotten up early every Sunday morning to take their children to church, only to be told later they may as well have slept in.

“Maybe you should just tell your parents you’ve taken the next step in your Christian journey,” I told him. “Especially since they’re spending \$20,000 a year on your college education.”

I recall that conversation from time to time, thinking how people move from one church to another, in search of that elusive, perfect expression of Christianity. I did it when I was sixteen. Perhaps you’ve done it, too. For those people who like to wander, there is good news. According to the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary’s 2008 “Status of Global Mission” report, there are now 39,000 Christian denominations in the world from which you can choose. Catholicism is the largest, with 1.2 billion members. Whenever I meet someone and they say, “I grew up Catholic.” I always say, “Wow, that’s amazing! So did I!” Now that I know 1.2 billion of us grew up Catholic, it kind of takes the edge off.

But 39,000 Christian denominations...this means there are now at least 39,000 answers to the question, “What does it mean to be Christian?” And even within a single denomination, there isn’t one agreed-upon definition of Christianity, so there are more accurately millions of different understandings about what it means to be Christian. (Even though we know our understanding of Christianity is probably the most accurate.)

I was speaking at an event several years ago with a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim iman. The moderator introduced me by saying, “And now Phil Gulley will give *the* Christian perspective.” No, I told him, I will give *a* Christian perspective. There is no one person who can speak for the Christian faith, because there is no one Christian faith. There are millions of understandings about what it means to be Christian. Just because someone holds a high office in the church, or preaches on the television, or writes books, doesn’t mean they represent the entire Christian faith. No one person can give *the* Christian perspective.

Sometimes when someone does something I don’t agree with, I’ll say, “They’re not acting very Christian.” What I really mean to say is they’re not acting like I think Christians should act. But they might be acting in a manner consistent with their understanding of Christianity. I don’t get to define what Christianity should mean to them. We each get to do that for ourselves. That is at once a great joy, and a great responsibility. It is a joy because it means we are free to pursue our own faith. No one can say, “You must believe this or you must believe that.” We are free. And it is a great responsibility, because the beliefs we choose have a profound effect on our lives. They can make the difference between a rich, full life that is wide and expansive and welcoming, or a mean, narrow life that is closed off and harsh and judgmental.

So when someone starts describing what they think it means to be Christian, listen very carefully, because it will give you real insight into their lives, their values, and their priorities.

We each have different ideas about what it means to be Christian, and gravitate toward those churches which emphasize our priorities. I'm a Quaker because the values and priorities of Quakerism are consistent with my understanding of Christianity. I know a man who is a Pentecostal because he believes God wants him to speak in tongues. We're always moving toward our values, but those values differ, which is why there are 39,000 denominations.

I say all of this to introduce my next sermon series, based on a book I'm writing called "If the Church Were Christian." These are the values I believe the church should embrace. Those values are informed by my Quaker faith, but not limited to the Quakers. Were a Catholic or Pentecostal or Mennonite or even another Quaker to write such a book, it might be dramatically different, so I would urge them to write their own books.

Here are the distinctives I'll be focusing on for the next several months.

If the church were Christian, Jesus would be a model for living, rather than an object of worship.

If the church were Christian, affirming our potential would be more important than condemning our brokenness.

If the church were Christian, reconciliation would be valued over judgment.

If the church were Christian, gracious behavior would be more important than right belief.

If the church were Christian, inviting questions would be more important than supplying answers.

If the church were Christian, encouraging personal exploration would be more important than communal uniformity.

If the church were Christian, peace would be more important than power.

If the church were Christian, it would be less preoccupied with sexual sin, and more concerned about love. That one will be rated G, you can bring the kids.

Lastly, if the church were Christian, saving the earth would be more important than saving our souls.

I've spent much of the past year writing and thinking about these matters. Before I shared them with my readers, I wanted to share them with you, since you all, probably more than any other group of people I've ever known, have had a tremendous impact on my understanding of what it means to be Christian. Some of what I have to say won't be a surprise to you, but I hope much of what I have to say will be a help in your own unique Christian journey.