

“Am I Still a Christian?”

It depends on how you define ‘Christian’.

Matthew 25:31-46
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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At any point in your journey of faith, perhaps now at this moment in time, did you ever wonder and ask yourself, “**Am I still a Christian?**” If you have questioned your understanding of Christianity, as I certainly have in the past, and feel as if others have judged you based on *their* beliefs, you are not alone. I discerned this would be a good topic to explore on what is called the Reign of Christ, or Christ the King Sunday on the liturgical church calendar. It marks the last Sunday in the church year, with next week's First Sunday of Advent as the beginning of a new year.

Let's start with this. **Most theologically progressive Christians struggle with this concept of Christ as King, or even as Lord of all. In particular, we are not comfortable with this archaic and clearly patriarchal ‘king’ and ‘kingdom’ language.** Yet, one of the things I appreciate most about this community of faith is your willingness to explore – and then reclaim, perhaps even rescue – traditional church language and doctrine from its usual dogmatic interpretation. Professor and process theologian **Bruce Epperly** offers a progressive perspective on this. He writes:

Celebrating Christ the King Sunday seems anachronistic [outdated] in a pluralistic age, in which many Christians no longer subscribe to imperialistic, supercessionist, and exclusive theologies which deny truth and salvation to persons of other faiths.

He goes on to ask if there are not alternatives to a strict understanding of universal truths, imperialism and limited salvation. So, in an admittedly critical vein he states:

Certain Christians have seen their faith as the sole source of truth and salvation. These are typically the ones who shout the loudest and assume any other Christian position is a betrayal of the one true faith, delivered to the saints. In so doing, they succumb to authoritarianism, imperialism, coercion, and violence to peoples of other paths. This imperialism reflects the practices of ruthless sovereigns rather than the radical hospitable healer from Nazareth.

While I certainly agree with Epperly's approach and analysis, I want to add my usual word of caution that we, in turn, don't become authoritarian, imperialistic, coercive, judgmental, or spiritually violent toward those Christians who hold fast to the historical traditional orthodox beliefs of Christianity. Yet from an actual historical perspective, **to proclaim Jesus as Lord was more of a subversive political statement than a theological one.** It meant that Caesar, who also held the title “Lord”, and the Roman Empire was *not* the king and kingdom to which they held their ultimate

allegiance. Therefore, **to profess Christ is King or Lord means that all other people or things in life are *not!***

In God's kingdom, we are called to witness to the power of love in the face of hate, peace in the face of conflict, and justice in the face of oppression. That's why we use the relational word 'kin-dom' of God here at College Hill instead of the imperialistic term 'kingdom' of God.

Let's get back, now, to those who wonder if their current theological beliefs, or rejection of traditional beliefs, disqualify them from self-identifying as a "Christian". **There seems to be two primary approaches to Christianity, even though they overlap.** One is thought to more accurately portray the Christian movement in Jesus' actual day, before the New Testament scriptures were written, and the other after the church became an organized institution and doctrines were not to be questioned on threat of heresy and expulsion. **The first focuses on being guided in life by following the ways and teachings of the radical Jewish itinerant spiritual leader and healer named Jesus. The other focuses on giving intellectual assent to all the theological attributes attached to the Church's historical understanding of *Christ*, which was still developing and hotly debated hundreds of years after Jesus' death.**

Those of us who find ourselves on the progressive end of the theological spectrum, even though what we *believe* about the nature and character of God is very important, **in the final analysis what matters most is what we do with what we believe – how we put our faith and ethics into action on a daily basis.**

What about those of us, however, who have deconstructed our traditional faith? For example, no longer believing in a theistic theology of "the man upstairs." What about questioning the divinity of Jesus, including a virgin birth, the miracle stories, or a physical bodily resurrection? What about believing the original narratives of Jesus evolved over time, leading to stories *about* his divinity, a common occurrence in the ancient world for revered figures? This means taking the Bible seriously but not necessarily literally, approaching stories primarily from a metaphorical point of view as a way to point to God, rather than as literal history.

"Am I still a Christian?" boils down, then, to how you define *Christian*. Martin Thielen, on his Doubter's Parish blog answers that question this way.

If you define [Christian] historically (affirming belief in ancient creeds and orthodox doctrines), the answer is likely *no*.

However, if you define Christian as "one who follows Jesus" (which seems to be the earliest definition of a Christian), the answer is probably *yes*.

The late **Rev. Dr. Harold Hill**, former religion professor at the University of Tulsa (and Marilyn Hill's father), once told me that he considered himself a "Jesusite" rather than a traditional "Christian". Harold saw himself as a *follower* of Jesus rather than someone who consented to what institutionalized organized religion said a person must *believe* in order to call oneself a Christian.

Agreed, this stretches the definition of historic Christianity. Yet, like Harold, **I am among those that believe ours is a viable expression of authentic Christian faith.** And to those who judge that **faith defined more by behavior than belief**, thus *not* an authentic Christianity in their view, I say this. While you certainly have a right to your own beliefs, your understanding of the nature and character of God, according to my beliefs, is too

limited and exclusive. Going as far as **rejecting the concepts of eternal divine condemnation and banishment to a place called hell**, I and so many other Christians in this day and age, perhaps yourself, **opt instead for radically inclusive and loving God, who simply by unearned grace alone has revealed an eternity of universal salvation.**

Bishop Carlton Pearson, who passed away just this week at the age of 70, called this the Gospel of Inclusion. Once a protegee of Oral Roberts himself here in Tulsa, and Carlton started his own church called Higher Dimensions which grew to over 5000 members. But **he had a revelation – there is no hell**. And this transformation in his theology cost him the pastorate of that evangelical megachurch, to which he and a few remaining followers joined the ministry of All Souls Unitarian Church here in Tulsa. **Many of us have gone through a similar transformation in theological thought.**

It's important to note that Jesus' core teachings had basically very little to do with religious beliefs and everything to do with living a life of integrity, gratitude, forgiveness, compassion, justice, and love. **I no longer have the desire or need to try to argue with those who think this is not authentic Christianity.** Saying that, I am more than willing, however, to have a meaningful, non-dogmatic dialogue. The bottom line: **traditionalists don't get to define who is a Christian and who isn't based on their orthodox beliefs.** After all, one of the foundational historical principles of Presbyterianism is, "**God alone is Lord of the conscience.**" Though our beliefs about the nature and character of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, the Bible and the role of the church may differ, **we may indeed answer the question, "Am I still a Christian?" with an emphatic, YES! Those differences don't require us to leave the Christian faith, as unfortunately so many people have, thinking they were no longer welcome. For those of us remaining, Jesus is still the primary, though not necessarily the only, revelation of our understanding of the nature and character of God.**

Another way of justifying a **primarily behavioral approach to Christianity** comes through an exploration of our Gospel Reading from **Matthew 25**. The author shares a parable, attributed to Jesus, about a **king who separates the righteous from the unrighteous. By what criteria? It is based on how they treat other people, not on their beliefs.** Or rather than according to how our society separates based on politics, religion, ethnic background, race, education, socio-economic status, the language people speak, even their physical appearance. Our method of sorting and separating is currently tearing faith communities apart, tearing our democracy apart, even tearing families apart. In a perfect world this should not be so.

Thank goodness God sorts by a different set of criteria. **We learn that what we do matters to God, especially in how we treat "the least of these"** as we care for and minister to those who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, without clothes, sick, or in prison. At the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (USA), held in Portland, where I was a commissioner from Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, we adopted an overture entitled, "**On Choosing to Be a Church Committed to the Gospel of Matthew 25.**" Overall, it calls the church to a **renewed commitment with the least, the last, and the lost.** In reference to today's parable, often referred to as the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, it states, "We hear with sober conviction Jesus declaring that **a church which fails to serve with and for the poor does not know Him.**" Since then, Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery has designated itself as a Matthew 25 presbytery as a way to guide its mission and ministry. And in a like fashion a few years ago, **College Hill was designated as a Matthew 25 congregation.** The stated goals of this nationwide ministry focus are to:

- Increase the spiritual energy of our congregations
- Increased impact of the church in the world, and
- Increase in new disciples, and participation in ministry and worship.

This Matthew 25 initiative directs its focus to three major areas of ministry. I'll just mention them briefly.

1. **Building Congregational Vitality** – challenge our congregation to deepen our faith and get actively and joyfully engaged with our community and the world.

One way to measure this is to ask: Who would miss our congregation, besides the people who are now a part of it, if we were to stop our ministry?

2. **Dismantle Structural Racism** – advocate and break down the systems, practices, and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, and prejudice.
3. **Eradicate Systemic Poverty** – work to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor.

In addition to our own Mission Statement, being a Matthew 25 congregation helps to direct and keep our focus on the “least of these” as Jesus directed.

If you would like to have a further discussion about what it can mean to call oneself a Christian, my door is always open and I'd love to have that conversation with you. Know that you are included in God's love, forgiveness, and grace, and that you are called to follow Jesus, regardless of what others think about your beliefs.

Blessings and amen.

Martin Thielen, “Do You Think I Am Still a Christian?”, *Doubter's Parish* blog, doubtersparish.com, November 1, 2023.