

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

What makes someone a Christian?

A *Connections* reader wrote me recently, “not all people who are in church are Christians.” That may well be true, but what does identify a person as a Christian, if it’s not merely being in the church?



For about the first forty years of my life, I assumed being a Christian mainly meant being in a church. Of course it also meant being “nice” and “sweet” and polite, I thought, and obeying all laws and authorities and following all rules. It essentially meant doing what most people I knew did.

In more recent years, however, my understanding has changed. I now see that at times being a Christian can actually require breaking rules and customs and disobeying institutional authorities. It can



mean not doing what friends and fellow church members are doing. It might even require not being in the institutional church.

Many opinions about what’s required

In some classes I led recently, I asked participants what they saw as the requirements for being a Christian. They came up with a wide assortment of opinions. Some views contradicted others. Yet the advocates of nearly every one cited scripture that they felt justified their views. Claiming scriptural justification, of course, sometimes required taking verses out of context and ignoring other equally numerous scriptures. It also required seeing some as direct quotes from Jesus when they actually expressed views developed long after his death.



As you read these class members’ varied opinions about what being a Christian requires, I hope you’ll think about what your own views are, and where they’ve come from.

Leaving noisily and staying noisily

“There may come a time when you have to leave the church to save your soul,” a famous theologian supposedly said. I haven’t been able to verify the source of that quote, but I think the statement is true. Some Christians may interpret “save your soul” to mean “go to heaven when you die.” I understand it, however, to mean something like “save your integrity,” and I see that as an important part of being a Christian.



What the theologian supposedly said next is equally important. “But if you leave, don’t leave quietly. And if you stay, don’t stay quietly.” If you stay in a church despite its faults, saying why you’re staying is important. It can help others see the need to stay. And by staying and speaking up, you and they may be able to help the church become more like what God calls it to be. If you feel you must leave instead, letting people know why is especially important. Until enough people who leave make their reasons widely known, the problems that prompted their leaving aren’t likely to get solved.

Which is more important?

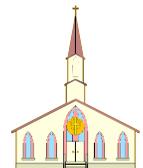
I’m seeing a pastor obeying an unjust command of her supervisors and, at their instruction, denying that she was given that command. Disobeying and making it known could cost her her job, they’ve told her. I wish she’d risk that. Her integrity and the church’s is at stake. Losing her job could mean less salary and a less desirable job for her, but which is more important, salary or integrity?



If she disobeyed and had to leave, she’d need to make widely known her reason for leaving. Otherwise no one would know of the need to stop her supervisor from mistreating people.

It’s time to make more noise

Both leaving quietly and staying quietly keep church problems from getting remedied. When we see a church opposing the way of Jesus, we need to be kind yet to make widely known what we’re seeing. Speaking out in the church can make us unpopular, but it’s often part of the integrity that being a Christian requires.



■ **Belief**

The reader who wrote me that some people in church aren't Christians claimed that in order to be a Christian one must believe in the resurrection of Jesus's physical body and must believe that Jesus is literally the Son of God, among other things. She is far from alone. Like her and many other Christians, several of my class members said such beliefs are requirements for being a Christian. To support this view, class members cited scriptures, including some I'm quoting here.

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
—John 3:18

Jesus said to him, " ... All things can be done for the one who believes."
—Mark 9:23

For these Christians, belief means accepting certain Bible verses or interpretations literally as facts. These Christians see literal belief in the Virgin Birth, the theory

of Substitutionary Atonement, and the Trinity as essential. Yet these ways of describing the meaning of Jesus arose long after he died. Besides, scholars tell us that in the culture in which such doctrines arose, they were not understood in the way they are understood by most Christians today.



The Christians who see certain beliefs as requirements for being Christian usually seem to feel also that publicly stating them in particular words is required. I've even known Christians who claim that physical ability to say the words "Jesus is Lord" is a test of whether one is a Christian. Someone influenced by demons, these Christians say, would be physically unable to

... No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.
—1 Corinthians 12:3

speak that particular phrase. I find that a gross misinterpretation of scripture.

For many Christians, as important as believing certain statements about Jesus is having a one-time "conversion experience," an experience of being "born again." It's experiencing God's presence in a dramatic, life-

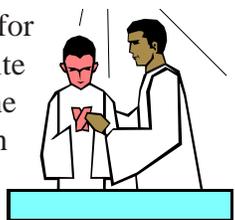


changing way. Yet other Christians see conversion as gradual spiritual growth.

■ **Baptism and the church**

In one class that listed what they saw as requirements for being a Christian, our list got quite long before anyone mentioned the one that is often seen as the main requirement—baptism. Baptism is typically accompanied by making an explicit public commitment of belief in Jesus and loyalty to him. Sometimes the commitment is followed by baptism later when the necessary physical facilities are available.

... No one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew. ...
—John 3:3-7



The one who believes and is baptized will be saved, but the one who does not believe will be condemned.
—Mark 16:16

When infants are baptized, parents make this commitment on their behalf. The baptized person is expected to confirm the commitment when he or she is older.

Most Christians who see baptism as what makes someone a Christian also see church participation as essential. It usually includes observing the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...
—Matthew 28:19



For some it also includes other religious rites that their churches officially consider sacraments, means of experiencing God's presence.

■ **Behavior**

In a fascinating book by Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, which I expect to write more about in *Connections* soon, she says that the main insights of the earliest major world religions are very similar. All arose during what philosophers call the Axial Age, from about 900 to 200 B.C.E.. For the originators of these religions, Armstrong finds, what mattered was not what you believed but how you behaved. Many Christians also consider



By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.
—John 13:35

that the main thing that matters. Some say it's the only thing.

The Axial sages put morality at the heart of the spiritual life, says

Armstrong, and to them, morality meant compassion. To them, religion meant respect for all beings. Behaving kindly and generously was the route to the divine and to saving the world.

Many Christians see this kind of morality at the heart of being a Christian. Many others strongly disagree, insisting that Christianity depends on other features, especially the death and resurrection

“ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”
—Matthew 22:37-39

of Jesus and his unique role in saving people from sin. Yet there seems to be plenty of evidence in the Bible that compassion is what counts.



What about people who practice compassion and promote social justice but aren't doing it because Jesus commanded it? Can we legitimately call them Christians? More important, if they act compassionately does it matter whether they're Christians or not?

If we look honestly at the full implications of those questions, others even more crucial arise. Does God care? Does it matter to God whether someone makes an explicit and exclusive commitment to Jesus, rather than simply treating all people with



justice and compassion in the way that Jesus modeled and taught?



Asking these questions, however, leads to asking what we believe God is like. Is God like a human being, with the kinds of feelings and opinions that humans have? Or is God our name for the order in the universe, the principles by which the universe operates? Is God a mystery that we can never fully know, that is totally unlike human beings? In attributing human qualities to God, have we merely made a god in our image? Do we assume that God has human characteristics merely because seeing God that way comforts us?

■ Claiming to be Christian



Sometimes when people call themselves Christians, members of my classes observed, they're merely putting themselves in one cultural category instead of another. In a poll or census, when they're asked what their religious preference is, they check Christian. Yet they may consider themselves Christian only because they grew up in a church, were baptized as babies, and have never joined any other religion. Maybe they celebrate Christmas and even go to a church on Easter. Maybe they more or less see the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule as having value. Yet they don't seem to deliberately try to follow anything else of what most Christians consider essential. Are they Christians?

By the end of my classes' discussions, several participants came to the conclusion that we simply can't say for sure whether someone's a Christian. We have to take their word for whether they are or aren't. We have to accept that whoever says he or

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

she is a Christian, is in fact a Christian, and leave the real decision to God.

If we pursue this line of thinking, however, we get back to the question of whether God cares, and to the deeper but also unanswerable question of what God is like.



Trying is what counts?

If consistently just and compassionate behavior is required for qualifying as a Christian, then no one qualifies. Maybe that's part of the attraction of thinking that making conventional belief statements is all

that's necessary. It's certainly the easiest thing to measure as well as to do. But I doubt that it's enough. In fact, it may not matter at all. More important, I suspect, is opposing the kind of behavior Jesus opposed and promoting the kind he demonstrated.



If that's what matters, then all any of us can do is merely try to be Christian. Maybe doing that is what's required for calling ourselves Christians. And maybe each of us is the only person who really knows whether we're doing it.

Barbara



Connections

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

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Willing to change to e-mail? Getting copies you don't want? Please let me know!

I sometimes add people to my *Connections* snail-mail list who haven't asked to be added. They're people who are in official church decision-making positions, whom I'd like to encourage to give more consideration to the views and information I present. However, I pay most of the cost of *Connections* myself and do all the labor of labeling the paper copies I mail, and that takes money and time. Thus I don't want to keep sending copies to anyone who doesn't want them. So if you don't want to keep getting *Connections*, or if it's coming to someone at your address who is no longer there, please let me know. Doing that is easy and quick. It doesn't even require a stamp, envelope, or phone call. Just write "refused" on the outside of the paper copy you receive, and put it back in your mailbox. It will come back to me and I'll remove you from my list immediately.



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