

A Christian pastor referring to the Christian faith at large recently wrote on his blog:

“I can no longer be tethered to this thing that is so toxic and so painful to so many. I can’t wade through any more bad theology and predatory behavior from pulpit-pounding pastors who seem solely burdened to exclude and to wound and to do harm. I can’t sift through all this malice and bitterness masquerading as Christianity to try to find what of it is left worth keeping.”

Wow! How can this be? How can the greatest of commandments to Love God with all of your heart and strength and soul and to love your neighbor as yourself possibly lead to such errant behavior that this pastor wonders if there is any value left in the faith that espouses this as its core belief? Perhaps those whom he condemns believe that they are stressing the most important aspect of their faith: to love God with all their heart, soul and strength and have a selective Scriptural interpretation that mainly supports their views and actions.

I mentor a young pastor. He is seriously considering leaving his congregation for two primary reasons. The first is that there is a trio of individuals who through direct confrontation or by whisper campaigns undermine his ability to lead the congregation. The second is that they believe that church is all about unconditionally loving your neighbor, even if that strays from some of the Biblical precepts. Perhaps almost to the exclusion of loving God. At least in the opinion of my young friend they place far greater importance upon their love of neighbor, in spite of their own unloving behavior toward him, than loving and following the Living Word of God, Jesus.

Regardless of the significant differences in chronological ages, perhaps those individuals and the pastor have both failed to reach a significant level of maturity in their Christian faith. I remember as a young Army Lieutenant being convinced that part of my purpose was to bring a sense of ethics and Christian morality to the post Viet Nam army. Long before I retired I realized that ethics are not as simple as I once thought. I met soldiers and leaders whose faith as they lived it day by day dwarfed my own. With maturity I started to realize that many of life's hardest decisions are not simple either / or flips of an ethical coin but far more nuanced than I had ever imagined. In part, I could no longer view the world in terms of simplistic right vs wrong, for I had come to realize that I was a little bit of both.

Yes, I strived to remain focused in word and action on what I believed was right. But the harshness of my criticism of others mellowed. My willingness to label others faded as I started to appreciate the depth of their thoughts even if I disagreed.

Perhaps both my young pastor friend and the blog writer need to mellow their criticism of those others whose faith does not exactly match their own.

Today's modern North American church is far different from the church that Martin Luther

faced 502 years ago when he nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther could not accept what he considered to be the errors of doctrine and practice evidenced by church leaders. Clearly, in his mind the Roman Catholic Church had gone astray and needed to be reformed. What he intended as the beginning of a discussion led to the Reformation, furthered and in many ways defined by John Calvin, which formed the beginning of what we label the Protestant Church and from which Congregationalists derive their theological heritage.

But is today's modern North American Church so different from the established church that Luther faced? Regardless of where you might place your emphasis, today's church is a divided church with an array of labels, many of which have become either a rallying cry or an epithet. And far too many adherents of one or the other find little to be praised, or even accepted, in the other. At an extreme, today some will claim that the others are no longer even to be considered as Christians and as such there is little value to unifying discussions that attempt to bring either moderation or acceptance in divergence.

Paul had spent his life either persecuting the young church or both establishing new churches and defining and explaining what following Jesus meant. Paul was now approaching the end of his life, most likely a very unpleasant and premature end of his life because of his faith.

Paul had seen, had participated, in some epic church battles. Could a Gentile become a Christian without first becoming a Jew? What about all of the dietary laws? What about the cleanliness laws? Is God truly accepting of Greek and Jew, male and female, free and slave? Are we truly all one in the body of Christ? Yet as Paul wrote to young Timothy, he showed no signs of turning away from Jesus. Paul did not throw up his hands in despair at the state of the faith nor regret his own actions. In his reflections, he described his life as having fought the good fight, having finished the race, having kept the faith. Even as he warned Timothy that there will be times when people turn away from the truth, Paul paid less attention to their actions than he did to encourage Timothy to endure suffering and fulfill his ministry.

Like Paul, Martin Luther did not throw up his hands, bemoaning that the Christian faith had nothing of value left to offer humanity. Rather, he persevered in his effort to focus upon reforming the church rather than dismissing it as being without value.

Today, Christians are splintered into many divisions and factions. Not only are we divided into numerous denominational camps, we're divided by various and sundry political and cultural boundaries. For many, these boundaries are far more important than the denominational and doctrinal ones. Whatever position we take on immigration policy, a border wall, same-sex marriage, presidential

politics, Supreme Court nominations, abortion, welfare or legalization of marijuana, some Christians will immediately call into question our relationship with Jesus Christ. Please notice the 'whatever' at the beginning of that sentence. I am not taking a position but merely stating the obvious fact that whatever position we might take, there will be fellow Christians who disagree, who often strongly disagree.

I am absolutely confident that there are people of strong faith supporting each side of these issues. Just as there were people of strong faith supporting the Roman Catholic Church against Luther's attacks. Just as there are people of faith on both sides of the conservative and liberal branches of the church today.

What is the answer? Do the words of the disheartened pastor represent the only alternative: attempt, perhaps in vain, to find anything to salvage?

I would suggest that there is a far different approach. Now, I must admit, my English is less than perfect. My overly abundant use of commas and other grammatical quirks would secure low grades in any writing course. But my simplistic view is that we need to take a cue from Paul's self-description using verbs, we need to change Christian from a noun to a verb. The statement: "I'll Christian today" does not exactly roll off the tongue nor sound right to the ears, but it just might be the answer to many of our challenges.

The truth is that while there are many, perhaps even millions, of Christians who don't want to be associated with other Christians of questionable views, politics and practices, those same millions are out there nonetheless "Christianing" day after day, serving God faithfully in our troubled world.

- They are building hospitals and schools.
- They are developing programs to lift the poor and help the needy.
- They are helping out at their local church.
- They are working with refugees, helping them to get housing and to learn English.
- They are counselling low-functioning adults.
- They are tutoring teens who need help with academics.
- They are delivering meals to the elderly.
- They are leading Bible studies at nursing homes.

As I look around, I see other examples of how this congregation is Christianing.

We can also take a clue from something the resurrected Jesus said during a breakfast conversation with Peter on the shores of Galilee. It is the last recorded interaction we have between Jesus and Peter. After Jesus renewed his call to Peter to serve him, Peter looked at another disciple and asked Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus replied, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what

is that to you? Follow me!” (John 21:22). In other words, “What is that to you that some don’t interpret Christianity as you do? I’m talking to you, not to them. *You* follow me!”

As we follow Jesus, as we are Christianing, we do not need to focus on how others fervently debate the definition of the faith. We focus on Jesus, we follow Him by our defining actions.

Which correctly describes what the church should be like? The narrowly defined, Scripture first, all about the individual commitment to Christ, conservative church. Or is it all about the more liberal church dedicated to social justice and other causes in the name of Christ? When I was young I could have given a confident answer. When more mature, I might have reversed my answer. Now, I think that the answer is less an either / or question than a yes / both reality. But perhaps the best response to the divided and divisive church is to answer the question with "I think I'll Christian today."

Such a strange answer removes us from the theological debates, the labelling and judging of others, and puts our faith into action, just like Paul defined his faith by verbs of doing.

Let us Christian today.