

"ON BEING A CHRISTIAN"

INTRODUCTION

What is a Christian?

From time to time, I like to think through this question and put down on paper what I think a Christian is for the simple reason that I am so deeply involved in running a Church that I sometimes I need to remind myself what it's adding up all about. This may happen to you, too. We're so much a part of it that it is difficult to have an objective view of it. We lose sight of the forest for the trees.

What is a Christian? You say, "well....a Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ". Yes, but is that sufficient. Do we say that and let it go. Can't we say a bit more, go a bit deeper... we can and should.

This morning I'd like to think of it in this way. A Christian is a person who is drawn to Jesus Christ. This comes first. He is a person who is drawn to Jesus Christ, and being drawn to Him, he comes to believe in Him, and believing in Him, he begins to behave like Him. And in turn he associates with the faithful company of those who like himself have been drawn to Him and believe in Him.

Being a Christian then involves these three things: believing, behaving, and belonging and I would like to elaborate briefly on each of these three things.

BELIEVING

First of all: believing.

Having been drawn to Jesus, either because you have seen someone in whom His spirit is active, or because you have caught a glimpse of Him on the pages of the New Testament, or because you have gone into a Church and felt His presence... having been drawn to Him, you come to the point where you believe that He is the Lord, the Lord of all life.

This is the way the New Testament speaks of it. This is the simplest way, I think, to say it. Now mind you, this is simply not believing that Jesus is a good man - like Socrates, or Lincoln or Schweitzer. This is not what you believe. The world has seen many good men. You believe that in Jesus something was happening, and what was happening was crucial. And if you are articulate enough, if you read enough and think about it enough, you will go further and say that you believe that in Him God was doing something to repair the damaged lives of people, that He was, so to speak, redeeming the lives of human beings.

If you don't like to have it expressed in religious terminology, perhaps you will say that in Jesus something was coming through, breaking through - something basic, elemental, something apart from and yet a part of this world of time and space. You believe that in Jesus something of supreme importance for all time took place.

You go on to believe that He is "the way, the truth, the life", that in Him "God was reconciling the world...". When you say that you believe this, it means you are putting your confidence in it, willing to trust your life to it. It means that you believe in love, in forgiveness. It means that you believe that the only way you will ever find yourself is to forget yourself. It means that you believe in Jesus as the love of God and when you say that you mean you are willing to trust your life to that love. When everything seems to be crashing underneath you and feeling to pieces around you, you believe in that love and are willing to commit yourself to it without fear!

BEHAVING Second - behaving. Now there are three sub points under this second point that I want to say regarding behavior. I have them on a list here in front of me which is perhaps not the most artistic way to do it, but I want to be precise.

One "sub-point" is this: the person whose behavior does not in some way reflect his belief is no Christian. This you can put down in black and white. A person who claims to be a Christian and who behaves in no way to reflect his association with Christ is no Christian - no matter how many church services he may attend, no matter how faithful he is to the rules of the Church. Unless his day to day behavior in some way reflects his belief, he's on the wrong track. There are religions in which religious belief and behavior are two entirely different things, but Christianity is not one of them.

A second "sub-point" here is this: a Christian's behavior is the natural consequence of his association with Christ. You begin by copying Him. Ultimately, however, it comes naturally as the association with Him deepens. You copy Him at first. He prayed, so you pray. He emphasized the "inwardness" of religion. You do the same. He reached out to people - all kinds, all colors. You do the same. He forgave people. You try to do the same. You copy His style, but gradually His spirit begins to dwell in you. It becomes a part of you. And eventually you find yourself animated by a spirit you have caught from Him.

The third "sub-point" about behavior is this. Your behavior will never quite come up to your own expectations. You'll never quite meet the demands you set for yourself, not if you ever have a really close relationship or association with Christ.

The closer you get to Him the more you are aware of your own shortcomings, and imperfections. But you will never lose heart and never give up. You will begin again and again, always remembering that the way to improve your behavior is not to try harder, but to get closer to Him.

BELONGING We come now to the final thing that's involved in this definition of a Christian. Belonging. When one person is drawn to another person, he is inevitably drawn into the circle of other people who are also drawn to that person. This happens in all of our human associations. You meet a young lady. You're attracted to her. She's attracted to you. She can't wait to introduce you to her circle of friends, to her family, and vice-versa. You're drawn into the circle. You become a part of it.

And so a person who is drawn to Christ is very quickly drawn into the group of people who are also drawn to Him.

In the group several things happen, especially when things work out well. One thing is that the spirit of Christ is always present in the group in a way in which it is not apt to be present apart from the group. This is hard to put into words, but when I mean is - something happens when a group of people who love the Lord meet together to thank Him and to praise Him and simply to think about Him. The coming together of the group seems to bring Him closer.

I've felt this sort of thing happen on occasion in this Church. It doesn't happen every Sunday. But there are those Sundays when we do feel something

lifting us, moving us.

You find in that group the strength you need to live your life. You find, as you become involved, that there are others with the same problems you have, people with the same weaknesses and failures. You also find many people who are more than ready with a real desire to reach out to you and to be of help.

You also find, as a member of the group, that you are able to make an impact upon the world around you which you could never make as a single Christian standing all alone.

There are those who ask, "Can't I be a Christian without joining a Christian Church or fellowship". Yes, you can be, but you are a much more effective one when you become tied in and actively associate with a group of Christians. The tie of membership represents a deeper commitment. There is strength in unity. You could stand out on the corner here of 86th Street and Park Avenue all day and all night and perhaps not mean a single thing to anybody. But this Church standing here, the gathered fruits of the labors of love of many over 140 years....why this building alone speaks in its silence to thousands who pass by it in a week in a way that you, by yourself, could never speak.

CONCLUSION Believing. Behaving. Belonging. This, I feel, is involved in trying to be an effective Christian in today's world, in this city.

One of the persons who, in our time, gave away his life to God with great unselfishness was Albert Schweitzer. He was not only a doctor in Africa, but a major New Testament scholar. One of his famous books was "The Quest for the Historical Jesus", and in it he writes a paragraph about call and response that seems to me to be the finest word with which to close this sermon:

"He comes to us as one Unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside he came to those men who knew him not....He speaks to us the same word, 'Follow thou me' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they are wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings they shall pass through in his fellowship.

And, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is".

PRAYER O Spirit of the Living God, who hast filled this place in times past, fill it now again that the people who come here may be strengthened and renewed to do Thy will, enabled to surpass themselves and to share and show that love which belongs only to thee, the love of the Father for all thy children. In the name and spirit of Jesus. Amen