

"WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
July 26, 1987

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INTRODUCTION

If I were to ask you for a definition of a Christian, what would your answer be? 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 the running of a Church that I sometimes need to remind myself what it's all about and what it's all adding up to - financial drives, church fairs, building concerns, new member recruitment, charge conferences, and such.. This may happen to you, too. We're so much a part of it that it's difficult for us to have an objective view of it. We lose sight of the forest for the trees.

What is a Christian? You might begin by saying something like this. "Well, a Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ". Yes, but is that sufficient. Do we say that and let it go. Is there more that should be said? Should we go a bit deeper?

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.

Now that's a mouthful. Basically it suggests that being a Christian involves three things: believing, behaving and belonging. Let me touch 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 in a warm and wonderful way...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 Gandhi, 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 and through 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...." That's the way Paul put it..."reconciling..."

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 falling to pieces around you, you believe in that love and are willing to commit yourself to it without fear! Believing. That's first.

BEHAVING Behaving comes second. Now there are three "sub-points" under this second point that I wish to say regarding behavior. Call them "small a, small b, and small c". I have them on a list there in front of me which is perhaps not the most artistic way to do it, but I want to be precise.

One "sub-point" (small 'a') 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.

And 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. At first you copy Him. He prayed, so you pray. He emphasized the "inwardness" of religion. You do the same. He reached out to people - all kinds. 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.

And the third "sub-point" (little 'c', that is) 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 Believing. Behaving. And now belonging - the third and final thing involved in this hot July Sunday morning definition of what it means to be 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.

And 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 what 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...to talk about Him. This 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 very same weaknesses and failures that bother you. 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.

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CONCLUSION Believing. Behaving. Belonging. All three are involved in trying to be an effective Christian in today's world, and here in this city. Rate yourself. How do you measure up?

One of the person 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 as well as an authority on Bach. One of his famous books was "The Quest for the Historical Jesus", and in it he wrote a paragraph about call and response that seem to me to be a fine word with which to close this sermon. Let me share it with you.

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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 Your will, enabled to surpass themselves and to share and show that love which belongs only to You - the love of the Father for all His children.

In the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

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Weather: hot, humid, hazy. Uncomfortable in Church.

Attendance: 80 to 85

1986: 82	1980: 85	1974: 55
1985: 81	1979: 52	1973: no record
1984: 90	1978: 98	1972: no record
1983: 95	1977: 60	1971: 49
1982: 90	1976: 52	1970: 52
1981: 99	1975: 54	1969: 47

1. IT Ms. Worthy McCartney: 200 East 72nd Street, Apt. 30 L
New York, New York 10021
Telephone: 628 -3317

Pink card. Letter. Moved here in January and looking for a Church. Home Church: United Methodist Church, Satellite Beach, Florida. 24 - 29 age group. Introduced herself as "Worthy". "I'm one who can stand before the Lord and say 'I'm Worthy!'"

2. IT Mr. and Mrs. Jack Carr (Phyllis): 525 East 80th Street
New York, New York 10021
Telephone: 744 -4638

Pink card. Letter. Here with 2 year old son, Andrew. Phyllis is from Ireland. Jack is from Alabama. United Methodists. Looking for Church. Child slept through service. Here on Easter.

BACK AGAIN

1. Mrs. Otto - may be her last Sunday with us.
2. Glenn Conn - 4th Sunday in row.
3. Tom and Tara O'Driscoll - 3rd visit.
4. Orpha Bessey
5. Melanie Moses
6. Hazel Reed
7. Mary George
8. Franz Senn - from Switzerland
9. Mary George Stephenson
10. Missy Darwin - sister of Leslie. With Leslie
11. Carl Condra - about his 6th Sunday
12. Vera Minott - 3rd Sunday in row
13. Martha Belisle - 3rd Sunday in row
14. Jennifer Miller and friend, Herve Lecomte - 4th Sunday.
15. Alexander Harris: here 2 months ago.

NOTES: Victoria Sackey to Ghana - for 6 months. David D'Orlando with us.

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