

We Are the Disciples Sermon Series  
Christians Only, but Not the Only Christians  
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Today, we're continuing our sermon series on learning more about who we are as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This is a challenge, even for life-long Disciples. We often define ourselves by who we're not, rather than by affirming who we are. We're using some of our foundational statements to help name and claim our identity.

Today's phrase is "Christians only but not the only Christians." In linguistics this is known as an antithesis: a statement that sets two opposites against each other. For example, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" is an antithesis. So is, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." And so is the sentence, "A church committee is a body that keeps minutes and wastes hours." That one hit a little too close to home.

So, today's phrase, "Christians only but not the only Christians" holds in tension what it means to be a Christian and how we are to think of ourselves in relation to others. Although I couldn't find a true origin for this phrase, the conventional wisdom says it goes back to the early 1800s, as Disciples were trying to figure out what they believed and how that jived or didn't jive with what other Christians believed. In other words, how do we claim our distinct identity over and against other Christians around us, and yet not be over and against the other Christians around us?

That challenge hasn't gotten any easier in the last two hundred years, has it? In fact, it's gotten exponentially more difficult for two reasons: first, churches have continued to split, with each new group believing that they have it right and everyone else has it wrong. I don't know of any new denomination that began with the premise that they could be wrong. The whole reason they split off was because those other people were straying from the "true" faith. There are roughly 39,000 denominations in the world today. So, either 38,999 of those are wrong and one is right, or none of us have a monopoly on the truth. We may be Christians only, but we're not the only Christians only.

The other challenge to claiming our distinct identity is that we are so much more aware of other ways of believing. That's what has led to so many denominations, because different people interpret and live out their faith differently. The Baptists are linked to certain form of baptism, the Lutherans were founded by Martin Luther, the Presbyterians are governed by a presbytery, the Quakers use oatmeal for communion. I read that on Wikipedia, so it must be true.

But this diversity of beliefs doesn't stop with Christianity. Think about this: there used to be only two religious symbols available for the headstones of deceased soldiers: the Christian cross and the Jewish Star of David. Now, there are 39 different religious symbols offered. With so many other ways of having faith, what does it mean today to be Christians only, but not the only believers?

Let's start with the first part: "Christians only." What this means is that, first and foremost, we call ourselves followers of Christ. The sole object of our worship is God as shown to us through Jesus. One of our founders, Alexander Campbell, wrote, "Who is a Christian? Everyone that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the son of God, repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according the measure of knowledge of his will."

Well, dang. Based on that definition, I'm not a very good Christian. How about you? I'm guilty of doubting Jesus' identity, of not repenting of my sins, of disobeying Christ's teaching. I

wish this statement had said, “We are mediocre Christians only, but not the only mediocre Christians.” So, this part of the statement is a work in progress for me, and maybe for you, too.

What makes it even more challenging is that what it means to be a Christian in our world today has been seriously polluted since Campbell gave his definition. What makes a person a Christian today? Going to church? Giving an offering? Wearing a cross necklace? Saying “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays?” It’s hard to say. The label “Christian” has been co-opted by our culture and by some of the more boisterous mouthpieces who claim to speak for Christians. I’ve often found myself wanting to say, “I’m a Christian, but not one of THOSE kinds of Christians.” So maybe we can check some of the baggage in this statement by saying, “We are followers of Christ only.” Still doesn’t mean we’ll get it right, but at least it clarifies who we are called to be.

The second half of this statement is most fascinating: “not the only Christians,” which I am amending to “not the only believers.” This makes sense, since unity was one of the driving forces that led to the creation of our denomination in the first place. We recognize that, while we are followers of Christ, we don’t have all the answers, and there are others out there who believe differently than us, but that are just as faithful as we are. I appreciate the refreshing lack of certainty in this statement. As a writer once said, “Always entertain the possibility that you may be mistaken.”

There would be some of our Christian brothers and sisters who would balk at the inclusivity of this statement. Some churches feel confident that they’ve got it right, and everyone else needs to get on board with them. This was explained to me very well by one author, who said, “The tensions between our conflicted religions arise not from our differences, but from one thing we all hold in common: an oppositional religious identity.” In other words, I am who I am because I’m over and against who you are.

The beauty of “not the only believers” is the space it creates in our faith for the diversity of others. Think of this statement as a circle. “Followers of Christ only” is the center point of the circle, the anchor that holds us in place. “Not the only believers” is the perimeter of the circle, and the space in between is where we invite into our lives those who believe differently about God, or who believe differently about God’s presence beyond the person of Jesus Christ.

So...how big is your circle? Who’s inside? Who’s outside? That’s a tough question, right? We don’t want to let so many people into our circle that we lose sight of our center point. A lot of people have that fear. If we start saying that legitimate people of faith include Muslims and Hindus and...gasp!...Methodists, then we’re going to lose our anchor, because our faith will be threatened by these other ways of knowing God. If you don’t believe like me, you’re a threat to me. Is that a legitimate fear?

Well, let’s ask an expert, shall we? Several times in the Bible, Jesus lifted up people as examples of faith who were NOT the Jewish religious leaders of the day. In fact, they were even Jewish. In one example, Jesus praises a Roman centurion, who probably worshipped the Roman gods, saying, “In no one in Israel have I found such faith.” In another example, Jesus praises a Samaritan woman. In another, he speaks highly of a Roman publican and a Gentile. Jesus drew a pretty big circle, and yet his center point of God was never threatened. If Jesus recognized the legitimacy of the faith of these non-Jewish believers, we’d do well to extend the same grace to non-Christian believers.

Theologian Paul Knitter puts it this way: “The religious communities of the world can and must form a ‘community of communities’ – a community in which each tradition will preserve its identity and at the same time deepen and broaden that identity through learning from,

appealing to, and working with other communities.” That’s a move from oppositional religious identity, saying, “I am who I am because I’m not you” to a grace-filled religious identity, saying, “I am who I am because of you.”

The call of this statement is really two-fold. We are called to witness with confidence to our unique and peculiar understanding of the love and grace of God as we have experienced it in the person of Jesus Christ, and we are called to experience solidarity – with-ness – with people of other denominations and faiths, worshipping with each other, honoring each other’s beliefs, and working together toward a common good. Witness and with-ness.

Far from detracting for our faith, I think this actually honors the spirit of faith that God imbued in each of us in the first place. From the very start, having faith was an invitation to believe God was at work in the wider world, beyond the parameters of denominations and human-drawn lines of divisions between believers. After all, I bet every single one of us could name a non-Christian who, through the way they live and love and serve, are more Christ-like than a lot of Christians we know! I believe the best hope for our world today is to move away from a demand for correct dogma and right belief, what’s called orthodoxy, toward orthopraxy, a way of living out our faith that focuses on helping and serving each other, regardless of whether or not their beliefs align with ours.

This doesn’t mean we have to give up Jesus. Quite the contrary. To celebrate the other expressions of God in this world – through other denominations and other faiths – is honoring Jesus’ prayer that we all be one, not separated by our differences, but drawn together by the common belief that we are all children of our Creator God. This isn’t watered-down Christianity; it’s a way of belief that fits the diverse world in which we live.

For us, Christ is central to our understanding of who God is, and as followers of Christ, we are called to worship him – followers of Christ only – and then follow his example of hospitality, welcome, and love – not the only believers. It starts here, in this place. As one writer said, “Church is the place where you get to practice what it means to be human.” So, we come here to practice love, to practice grace, to practice generosity, to practice breaking bread together, so that we can go out there and live it out. We come here to witness so we can go out there to live out our “with-ness.”

We are followers of Christ only, called to worship only the one we call our Savior. That means not worshipping all the other things in our lives that demand our allegiance. And we are not the only believers, sharing this planet with so many others who live out their faith in distinctive, authentic ways. So many people these days want to emphasize differences, drawing lines of division and exclusion. How would our church, our denomination, our world be different if instead of drawing lines to keep people out, we drew expansive, generous circles that welcomed people in?