

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Christian: Noun or Adjective?”

A sermon by Charles Kimball

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 25, 2016

Exodus 20:16; Luke 10:25-28; Romans 12:9-18

If someone were to come up to me and ask if I am a Christian, I would immediately answer, “YES.” The question is easy and the answer is straightforward. If, on the other hand, someone asks me if I am Christian, the situation changes radically. This is a searching and disquieting question. The question is not easy, nor is the answer straightforward. Do you recognize the difference in the two questions? It makes a big difference if we use “Christian” as a noun or as an adjective.

Am I a Christian? Yes. Am I Christian? That is a haunting question. It is not a simple “yes or no” matter when any of us who seek to follow Jesus ask ourselves seriously “How Christian am I?” This is not a settled matter. Perhaps I was fairly “Christian” in the ways I dealt with students and colleagues a week ago in my office. I was almost certainly less “Christian” in my irritation and responses to horrific traffic last Wednesday afternoon on I-85! How Christian am I when discussing and debating public policy issues such as war and peace, the use of drones, climate change and the environment, or support for public education?

Christian: Noun or Adjective? The noun is comforting; the adjective is demanding. The noun is static; the adjective is dynamic. The first question needs to be asked once. Are you a Christian? The second question—Are you Christian?—could and should be asked daily... if not hourly.

Recalling the origin of the term “Christian” is instructive. According to the Book of Acts, the term was first used in Antioch. As with other names designating members of a new religious group—such as Quakers, Methodists, Pietist, Muhammadan—the name was employed by outsiders and usually with a measure of disdain. The Roman Empire called the disciples of Jesus “*Christianoi*.” Members of this early church resisted the appellation at first, saying in effect, “We do not deserve to be called Christ-like.”

Late in the first century, St. Ignatius became bishop of that same Antioch. Early in the second century, he was on his way to Rome where he was to be put to death during the persecution of Trajan. His extant letters reflect the discomfort believers had in bearing the name *Christianoi*. Ignatius said this: “Let us accept the name, not as something of which we are worthy, but as something to which we aspire. They will put me to death because they say I am *Christianos*. I hope that I may be found so—not in name only, but in fact.”

Recall last February 17 when we had an international dust up between Pope Francis and Donald Trump.

Pope Francis: (After a six day trip to Mexico, the pontiff spoke to a reporter on the plane travelling back to the Vatican.) “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not in the Gospel.”

Donald Trump: “The pope is being told that Donald Trump is not a very nice person. I AM A VERY NICE PERSON! Questioning my faith is disgraceful.”

The Pope didn’t question his faith; he said building walls that divide rather than bridges that bring people together is not Christian. It is not in the Gospel. In his view, it is not Christ-like behavior. The pope was using “Christian” as an adjective, not a noun. Mr. Trump and most of the media missed the point. The press had a field day as the Republican leader sharply criticized the pontiff. Trump insisted he is a Christian. An interesting and provocative contrast to

the humility expressed by St. Ignatius on his way to being martyred as he hoped he would be found worthy of being called *Christianos*.

Pope Francis' remarks came at the end of a six-day visit to Mexico and in the context of his ongoing and highly visible concern with the plight of refugees and migrants. He has continually called upon Christians and all people of goodwill to respond constructively and compassionately to the needs of our neighbors. The Gospel, he insists, calls us to help, to build bridges to connect, not walls to separate, especially those who are in great need of relief for themselves and their families.

I believe the Pope is right on target and speaking from a very solid biblical foundation when he speaks of "Christian" behavior directed toward our neighbors. Consider the three well-known texts we have read this morning. They speak directly to us if we genuinely desire to be worthy of the designation "Christian."

First, in Exodus 20:16, one of the Ten Commandments instructs us "not to bear false witness against our neighbor." How can we not bear false witness when we often know so little about our neighbors who share our planet, our country, and our community? Not only is our world increasingly interconnected and interdependent, our communities are religiously, culturally, and ethnically diverse. Any city in the U.S. today that has 100,000 people is literally a microcosm of the entire world. You can find every type of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, practitioner of Shinto, Native American, and so on right in your community.

As a longtime student of world religions, I can say without equivocation that for most Christians in the U.S. today, the most misunderstood neighbors are Muslims. If we wish not to bear false witness against our neighbor, we must endeavor to learn more and to engage our neighbors as human beings. When we do, we'll discover that the fears and deep biases against Muslims are often tied to images and actions of extremists on the fringes of Islam. The overwhelming majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are as horrified and

offended by the actions of violent extremists as are all of us here today. A few statistics from my home state of Oklahoma help give us some much-needed perspective. Muslims comprise less than 1% of the population in Oklahoma. Did you know there are 372 Muslim physicians practicing today in Oklahoma City? Did you know there are more than 400 Muslim physicians practicing today in Tulsa? Did you know there are about 50 Muslims on the full-time, permanent faculty at Oklahoma State and at least that many at the University of Oklahoma (OU)? The largest homebuilders in the state of Oklahoma are two Muslim brothers who came to OU to study architecture from Iran back in the 1970s. These and many other neighbors love this country and celebrate our freedoms—including freedom of religion. Yet, how many of us pass on emails or say things that stereotype Islam as somehow inherently violent and menacing? How easy it is to bear false witness against our neighbors... rather than learning about and engaging our neighbors in dialogue and cooperative efforts that serve the needs of our communities. Just how “Christian” are we?

I am convinced that one of THE defining issues in the 21st century will center on interfaith understanding and cooperation. How will we be “Christian” in our increasingly interdependent, religiously diverse and all too quarrelsome world in the 21st century?

When Jesus was asked what one must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus responded with a question. He asked the lawyer, “What was written in the Law?” The man replied, “You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus told him he had given the correct answer. He said, “Do this and you will live.” But the man, wanting to justify himself, asked “And who is my neighbor?” Luke then reports Jesus’ response in the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. The example of the Samaritan, the “outsider,” is highlighted as he had compassion and provided assistance to the person who was in great need.

Jesus provides a clear example of what it means to love God and love your neighbor. The Good Samaritan was not a Christian, but it is clear to me, he was “Christian.”

When we see the plight of more than one million Syrian refugees and innumerable others forced from their homes and countries by war and brutality and the plight of many right here in our communities, how are we responding? It is easy enough to say we are Christians. But, how “Christian” are we?

Finally, when Paul writes to the believers in Rome, he eloquently identifies the “Marks of True Followers of Christ”:

Let your love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not pay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ***If it is possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.*** (Romans 12: 9-18)

We don’t need to expound upon these marks of true Christians, simply let the words sink in: Extend hospitality to strangers... live in harmony with one another... do not pay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all... If it is possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.

Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

There is no shortage of serious problems and vexing challenges in our world today. We are reminded daily of the horror and life-threatening circumstances of several million refugees. We all know people and families who are struggling with addiction, depression, a devastating medical prognosis, economic distress, and many other debilitating problems. Concern for the future of our planet and the world we will leave to our grandchildren and their children brings climate change issues sharply into focus. The list of vexing challenges goes on and on.

While people of faith will not always come to the same conclusions about what their faith requires or compels them to do in different difficult situations, when we who accept the designation Christian are willing to think not only of the term as a noun but an adjective, we'll be on the right track.

Not too many years ago it was fashionable in many quarters to wear a bracelet displaying the letters WWJD. What Would Jesus Do? Much like many people wear a cross, it was a popular way for people to identify themselves as Christians. Perhaps we should bring back that practice or some other way to remind ourselves daily to ask "How Christian am I?" in whatever circumstances and with whomever we encounter.

In the United States, the founders were very careful and clear to emphasize that there must be no test or religious requirement for public office. But, in this upcoming presidential election, the two presidential candidates and the two vice-presidential candidates of the two major political parties have all been explicit about the importance of their faith as Christians. Upon close inspection, we find four approaches or traditions—a Methodist, a Presbyterian, and two distinctly different approaches from VP nominees who are Catholic. Having made this a key feature of presenting who they are, it is well worth exploring how these candidates have sought to be "Christian" over the years. In the bright light of the public square, how have they answered the question, "What would Jesus do?"

People who readily and openly confess, “I am a Christian”—as I presume most or all of us do in this sanctuary this morning—must also be willing to move the focus from being a Christian to being Christian in our daily lives.

The words of St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch who was martyred in the early 2nd century, send us out from worship into the world. “Let us accept the name *Christianos*, not as something of which we are worthy, but as something to which we aspire.” I pray that we will be Christian not only in name, but in our lives and actions as we endeavor to love God and love our neighbors always fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Ordained as a Baptist minister, **Dr. Charles Kimball** received his Th.D. from Harvard University in comparative religion with specialization in Islamic Studies. He is the author of five books, including *When Religion Becomes Lethal: The Explosive Mix of Politics and Religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. His previous book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, was named one of the “Top 15 books on Religion” by *Publishers Weekly* and one of the top ten books of the year by the Association of Parish clergy. Kimball has also been intimately involved in interreligious dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims for over three decades, at home and abroad in the Middle East.

© CHARLES KIMBALL 2016
FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.