

Neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jew

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People will talk, and much of our time is spent in talking about other people. In fact, it is almost impossible to keep personalities out of our conversations. The same was true in Jesus' day. When Jesus became a public figure, he was talked about and discussed as perhaps no other person in his day. The following passage of Scripture reflects these discussions: *"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it'"* (Matthew 16.13-18).

Jesus asked his disciples, *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* And they said, *"Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still other, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."* The rash and weak Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead, for he had had no peace of mind since the day he had allowed a woman's revenge go unchecked (Mark 6.13-15).

Some thought he was Elijah, and others thought he was Jeremiah. It is striking that wherever Jesus went, wherever people saw him work miracles and heard him teach, they thought

he was someone who was great. Yet, in spite of the unintentional compliment implied in their discussions, they did not recognize Jesus as the Son of God.

Fixing Labels

When Jesus came, he said some things which were rather difficult for the people to accept because they would require many basic changes in behavior. Consequently, as they heard him speak and as they watched him work miracles, their tendency was to give him a label, to put him into some already existing, familiar, and convenient category, and to dismiss him from their thoughts. This saved them the trouble of really looking at Jesus and making a fresh, independent evaluation of him. "Who is Jesus?" they asked. Each reply was some familiar classification. Each reply was wrong, but each was completely satisfactory to the one who made it.

Their minds were operating like the skilled arm of a mail clerk tossing letters into pigeonholes. Have you ever stood before an open window of a large post office and watched the workers "case the mail"? The workers pick up handfuls of letters and toss each one into one of the many pigeonholes in front of them until all the mail is in its proper category. So far as the content of the mail is concerned, it means absolutely nothing. They read none of it, but simply sort it, classify it, and put it in its pigeonhole. It is all right for those sorting mail to do that, but when a person sees Christ, it is not enough just to label him and forget him.

The categories into which these people put Jesus were all wrong. He was not John the Baptist, he was not Elijah, he was not Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. It was easy and convenient for them to pigeonhole him. The tragic part of the story is that they never seemed to realize that Jesus was new, that he was unique, and that he did not fit into any of the categories that had been made. Having failed to realize that, these people missed Christianity. Jesus was different from anyone who had ever lived. There was no category big enough, nor adequate enough, for him. Jesus faced the problem of being too lightly considered.

On another occasion Jesus said, *“But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment; and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved”* (Matthew 9.16-17). What did these examples mean? They were simply Jesus’ way of saying, “The teaching that I bring and the life that I live before you cannot be fitted into old forms. My teaching will not go into the old bottles nor onto an old garment.” Jesus fought against the tendency of people to consider him too quickly and too lightly.

Pigeonholing the Church

We face the same kind of problem. There is a tendency among people now to consider the church too quickly and to pigeonhole it without giving it due consideration. We, who are members of the church of Christ, sometimes find it difficult to convey to our neighbors and friends the distinctive position of the church.

Today many people ask about the churches of Christ. The rapid growth in the past few years, coupled with extensive preaching in American and Europe, has brought to the attention of the public those of us who call ourselves only

Christians – members of the church of Christ. To dismiss more than two million people with a label is to miss our uniqueness. In fact, such a procedure is to follow those in Jesus’ day who had ears to hear but would not hear (Matthew 13.15).

Our heritage in Western Civilization has been a great one. The contributions of people of genius and the sacrifices of countless millions have brought us to our present state of civilization and culture. As thankful as we are for our past, we must recognize the mental ruts which have been cut by the past. That is to say, we must be conscious of the convenient labels we invent to paste upon movements and ideas which are new to us. We have concocted labels for all fields and have certainly not missed religion.

There are three great categories into which people normally classify anything religious. They say it is either Protestant, Catholic or Jewish. Our radio and television networks give free time in terms of these three categories, so that countless hours of costly broadcast and telecast time are given to Protestants, to Catholics, and to Jews. When a young man in the Army or in the Navy or in some other branch of the service looks for a chaplain, he finds himself labeled Protestant, Catholic or Jewish.

There is a tendency to classify churches by putting them into these same familiar pigeonholes. It is a common practice of people of our day to classify the church of Christ as just another denomination of the Protestant group. We would like to convey to them that this category does not fit.

A Hard Saying – Who Can Hear It?

When Christ explained his purpose and mission, he said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread*

which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh” (John 6.47-51). Many of the disciples reacted to that statement: *“Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, ‘This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?’ As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore”* (John 6.60, 66). Thus, when Jesus refused to slip into their pigeonholes, they rejected him.

Today, when followers of Christ say, “We are neither Catholics, Protestants, nor Jews,” they experience the same reaction. Our friends say to themselves, “Since you are not Catholics, you must be Protestants, whether you admit it or not.” Whether it is recognized or not, such people are guilty of having the same kind of thinking which caused them to reject Jesus in his day. Those who seek to follow Christ may possess some of the characteristics of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, but we are not members of any ecclesiastical group. We are just Christians only, members of Christ’s church.

Will you take a few minutes to consider how our plea does not fall easily within any of the familiar categories? As Christ did not fit the categories to which he was assigned, so the church of Christ does not fit into the pigeonholes into which people normally place it.

Are We Jewish?

Those who seek to follow Christ today without a human creed are related in a remote sense to the Jews. We worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We read from the Old Testament Scriptures and believe in them. We believe in the same basic principles of morality. Nine of their ten commandments have been incorporated into the law of Christ. Of the ten

only the commandment concerning the Sabbath day has been left behind. Many of the other great principles of the Old Testament have been incorporated into Christianity, for we share with the Jews their faith that the Old Testament is the inspired word of God. Yet we are not followers of the Jewish religion.

The differences which keep the churches of Christ from being Jewish are numerous and significant. The Bible presents Christ as the divine Son of God, and Christianity is based on Christ. The New Testament is also an inspired part of God’s Word (1 Corinthians 2.13). We are no longer under the Law of Moses, for the apostles taught by inspiration that it had been nailed to the cross, fulfilled, and done away (Colossians 2.14). Obviously, then the church of Christ does not fit into the pigeonhole marked Jewish.

Are We Catholic?

Look next at the big category marked Catholic. While we share the same God, while we believe in the same apostles and in the same great characters both of the Old and New Testaments, we do not in many other instances believe and worship alike. We share with the Catholics the great breadth of Christian virtues, faith in morality, and faith in decent, wholesome living. We both believe the Bible to be God’s word. We share the belief that the church is universal or catholic in its scope, for Jesus said, *“Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to all creation”* (Mark 16.15).

Yet, when we go far enough, we come to the crucial dividing line over the position that should be given to the traditions of each person. Our Catholic friends say, “We believe the Bible; we also believe in the traditions of the fathers.” It is their conviction that those traditions of the fathers are equally authoritative with the inspired Word of God. At that point we part company. The true church today is governed by the Bible alone, for: *“If anyone advocates a different doctrine*

and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions” (1 Timothy 6.3-4).

The traditions of the fathers down through the centuries have developed a rather elaborate system of church government. The pope stands at the top, with the cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and parish priests beneath. Since we are pledged to stand with the Bible and only the Bible, we cannot accept that system of church organization. The church acknowledges Jesus as its head: *“And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all”* (Ephesians 1.22-23). The Roman Catholic Church recognizes the pope as the head of the church.

The Catholic Church has an elaborate system of worship, involving the use of incense, the lighting of candles, and the use of images. Since we do not follow the traditions of the fathers, we must leave these alone also. Churches of Christ obviously do not fit into the pigeonhole labeled Catholic.

Are We Protestant?

The third and final category under which people want to classify religious matters is the term Protestant, the pigeonhole where so many are grouped together. We believe in the same God, we believe in the same Savior, we believe in the same apostles and in the same righteous people both of the Old and New Testaments. We believe in the same basic moral principles. We believe in the same Bible. We believe in the Fatherhood of God and the kinship of all people. We also join in protesting against the unscriptural practices and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. We agree that it is an apostate church. One wonders at times,

however, how much of a protest modern Protestant churches are making against Catholic innovations, for the Roman church's celebrations of Christmas, Easter, Lent, and other special days are now widely copied in Protestantism.

But here, too, there comes the parting of the ways. God has not approved modification and change in his original New Testament church (2 John 9). We do not believe in the decrees of religious councils, nor in the creeds which mere humans have written (1 Corinthians 3.4). Rather, we believe that the only authoritative and dependable guide to heaven is the Bible.

The Bible Way

In order to be Christians people must hear the message of Christ and must believe that he is the divine Son of God (Hebrews 11.6, Mark 16.16). Having believed in Jesus, they must make the decision to change the course of their lives and repent (Acts 17.30). Having done that, they must heed Jesus' instruction to confess him before others (Matthew 10.32-33). Finally, as the apostles believed and taught that in order to be Christians they must be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2.38). When we have done these things, we have merely done what was done in the First Century and for generations thereafter by those who knew the will of God most directly and most intimately. Any modification in this method of becoming a Christian is not approved of God. Paul said, *“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed”* (Galatians 1.8-9).

When Christians worship God, they must do it in the way prescribed in the inspired Word of God (1 John 3.18). When people add other elements, they are adding things which God did

not wish to be included in his worship; otherwise, he would have included them from the beginning. We believe that in regard to church government and organization we are to follow the divinely given blueprint as found in the New Testament.

We believe, of course, in living clean, upright Christian lives and in accepting and following the leadership of the Holy Spirit, as he guides us through his message – the New Testament. In short, we are saying that we do not believe that men or councils have the authority to modify the doctrine, teaching, or principles which God gave us in his inspired book.

Christians Only

We are attempting to be in truth and in fact just what people were in New Testament times: Christians, members of the church. If Paul were here today and someone were to ask him if he was a Protestant, he would not understand the question. Paul never claimed to be a Protestant. He refers to himself in 1 Corinthians 4.1 as a “minister of Christ,” that is, a follower of Christ, a Christian. He sought to persuade Agrippa to be a Christian, nothing more (Acts 26.28-29). The church cannot be called Protestant in the ordinary sense of the word because Protestant churches did not exist in New Testament times. Neither then nor now is the church a party within a party, built around a powerful neglect of others. Paul states the reason why this could not be the case when he condemns the people of Corinth for their party divisions by saying. *“So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God”* (1 Corinthians 3.21-23).

The church, as the pillar and ground of the truth, protests just as much against Protestantism as against Catholicism. Christ’s prayer was for unity (John 17.20-21).

Religious division is a prevalent cause of infidelity. Division as it is practiced today is a mark of a sinful attitude (1 Corinthians 3.1-4). Therefore the church, if it is the church of Christ, cannot succumb to party names, to human ordinances, to a pope, or to preaching a denominational message. It is impossible for the church to perpetuate a system which necessarily causes and cements division and discord. There are points of similarity between the church which Christ established and modern day Protestantism, but the church is not Protestant. It is the undenominational church of the living God.

Danger of a Partial Gospel

There is a tendency among people to preach only a partial gospel, tailoring the Lord’s message to suit their own personal inclinations. This has sometimes led them to stop far short of the full gospel of Christ. It has also sometimes led them to go far beyond the teaching of the Lord. These errors are disastrous.

The Apostle John once wrote: *“Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds”* (2 John 9-11).

Visualize a man wearing the badge and the uniform of the police department, officially representing safety and law enforcement. He finds a child on the corner of a busy street, and says, “Son, let me help you get across safely.” Across one lane of traffic he leads him, across the second, and across the third. Then, while a fourth of the distance to the further curb and safety still remains, he says. “Son, you are all right now,” and leaves him to swim alone against the traffic of a great busy street. It would be criminal to treat a child so! Is it any

less serious to lead sincere men and women to believe that they are saved when they have only partially obeyed their Lord?

Conclusion

As Jesus was neither John the Baptist, Elijah, nor Jeremiah, so the churches of Christ are neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish. We are unique and different because we are endeavoring to go all the way back to the original New Testament church. Using the New Testament as our blueprint we have reestablished in our century Christ's church. It fits no modern label. It is not just another denomination. We believe in the restoration of New Testament Christianity, speaking where the Bible speaks and being silent where the Bible is silent. We believe in calling Bible things by Bible names and insist on having a "Thus says the Lord" for all we do. Being neither Catholics, Protestants, nor Jews, we aspire to be Christians only.

The attempt to consider the followers of Jesus Christ under the labels of Western Civilization obscures Christ and the beauty of New Testament Christianity. Is it possible to be just a Christian today? Can a person be a Christian and not be a Catholic? Even the Catholics will admit that he can. Is it possible to be a Christian and not be a Protestant? Most Protestants spend much time in proclaiming that this is true. Is it possible to be a follower of God and not be a Jew? The Jews today will answer in the affirmative.

Then why not be just a Christian, not bound by human tradition, not enslaved by human ecclesiasticism, not tied to any sect or party?

Be loyal to Christ. Study the Bible and see him as he is. Obey his commandments. It is only when we stop pouring the new wine of Christian truth and love into old bottles of tradition that we will be Christians in the New Testament sense. Why not be a Christian and neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jew?

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