

Be A Quitter
June 15, 2014
I Corinthians 1:10-17 (The Message)

This morning's Scripture reading is found in the first chapter of the first of Paul's two letters to the church at Corinth. In his opening appeal, Paul calls them to move beyond their factions toward unity.

I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends, using the authority of Jesus, our Master. I'll put it as urgently as I can: You must get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another, cultivating a life in common.

I bring this up because some from Chloe's family brought a most disturbing report to my attention - that you're fighting among yourselves! I'll tell you exactly what I was told: You're all picking sides, going around saying, "I'm on Paul's side," or "I'm for Apollos," or "Peter is my man," or "I'm in the Messiah group."

I ask you, "Has the Messiah been chopped up in little pieces so we can each have a relic all our own? Was Paul crucified for you? Was a single one of you baptized in Paul's name?"

I was not involved with any of your baptisms - except for Crispus and Gaius - and on getting this report, I'm sure glad I wasn't. At least no one can go around saying he was baptized in my name. (Come to think of it, I also baptized Stephanas's family, but as far as I can recall, that's it.)

God didn't send me out to collect a following for myself, but to preach the Message of what he has done, collecting a following for him. And he didn't send me to do it with a lot of fancy rhetoric of my own, lest the powerful action at the center - Christ on the Cross - be trivialized into mere words.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Holy One, help us to overcome the temptation to choose sides by recognizing that we are all on the same side. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Churchy Christians often say, "Wherever two or three are gathered in God's name, God is present."¹

While they are likely right, practical Christians recognize that wherever two or three are gathered, many perspectives are present. And somehow, more often than we care to admit, extended conversations that highlight our differences turn into arguments.

Good Christian people have been known to argue about nearly any and every thing. I know better than to offer examples from this congregation, so let me share from my experiences elsewhere.

Believe it or not people of faith argue about creature comforts – How much padding is enough on the pews? – What is the proper temperature in the classrooms? – Should we offer valet parking?

They also argue about serious topics, especially theological topics – you know things like "Who really gets to go to heaven?" – "What is the best version of the Bible? – or, for those who need a controversy especially appropriate on Trinity Sunday: "Did the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father or from the Father and the Son?"

Some arguments can be helpful; others escalate into fights. When fights break out people step outside of the normally accepted boundaries, and start to recruit others to join their side. The focus shifts: winning at all costs becomes the goal.

To remind us that church fighting was as much an issue in the 1st century as the 21st we need look no farther than this morning's Scripture reading. Paul addresses church fighting and factions as the first topic in the first chapter of his first letter to the church at Corinth.

Paul's concern was bringing the fighting to an end, but my concern is the damage that has already been done. As the result of church fights many have walked away from the church, but not their faith. This growing group of people goes by many names, including "de-churched" and "formerly churched." They also account for a significant number of the "spiritual but not religious."

¹ Matthew 18:20

While many leave the church as the result of a church fight others make the move because they are disillusioned by irrelevancy. The best-selling American author Anne Rice fits in the latter group. While her books have sold over 100 million copies, she used a Facebook post of under 100 words to alert the world of her decision to leave:

For those who care, and I understand if you don't: Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being "Christian" or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to "belong" to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.²

Anne Rice quit, and her very public declaration inspired me to be equally open about my decision to quit Christianity. I stand before you today as a quitter.

I have chosen to quit Christianity. More specifically, I quit Christianity when Christianity is confined to its most popular expressions in our contemporary culture.

Rather than polling you to see how many of you are ready to make a similar declaration, I will give you some time to process this idea as I share my story. As I offer insights into three parts of my own story of quitting, I invite you to find yourself in one or more of them.

Part one: I quit Christianity if Christianity is a dying religion and destined for extinction in a few generations. The kind of Christianity I have experienced is alive and well. It does not, however, look like it did decades ago.

Every century since the first century the number of Christians has increased. Over the last 100 years, the number of Christians worldwide nearly quadrupled from "about 600 million in 1910 to more than 2 billion in 2010."³ Of course, it is important to note that during this period of time the global population also grew significantly. Expressed as a percentage of all of the people living at a given time,

² Posted to Anne Rice's Facebook fan page on July 28, 2010. <<https://www.facebook.com/antericefanpage>>

³ "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population." Pew Research, Religion in Public Life Project. <<http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>>

the number has been surprisingly consistent: Christians now make up around 32% of the world's population compared to 35% a century ago.

Geography is the most notable shift in the last 100 years. A century ago 93% of all Christians lived in the Americas and Europe; that number has fallen 63%. Christianity has become far more geographically and ethnically diverse.

Christianity is changing or, if you prefer, evolving. We Protestants lost our majority status just a few years ago.⁴

Despite what you may hear on popular programs, recent scholarship suggests that American Christianity in recent decades is marked by significant stability alongside some decline.⁵

There are also reasons for realistic optimism - signs that renewal is beginning here in our country and throughout the world. Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity After Religion*, believes that we may be at the start of the Fourth Great Awakening.⁶ She suggests that while this new Great Awakening will include our churches, it also is already moving beyond them.

The Spirit of change is guided by the Holy Spirit. Since we just celebrated Pentecost last week, the topic is fresh on our minds. While it is just a day each year for us, it is an everyday reality for Pentecostals. Pentecostalism is only 100 years old, yet Pentecostalism has grown so rapidly that now just over 1 out of every 8 Christians in the world is a Pentecostal.⁷

Phyllis Tickle claims that we are entering a period she has labeled the Great Emergence – a time that is increasingly best understood as the Age of the Spirit.⁸ Spirit directed Christianity is very much alive; it is a difference making, growing, and experiential form of our faith.

⁴ Teresa Watanabe. "Protestants No Longer Majority in U.S." Los Angeles Times; October 10, 2012.

<<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/10/protestants-no-longer-majority-in-us-study-finds.html>>

⁵ See especially Mark Chaves. In *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton University Press, 2011) he wrote, "there is much continuity, and there is some decline, but no traditional religious belief or practice has increased in recent decades," p.14.

⁶ Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (HarperOne, 2012).

⁷ "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population." Pew Research, Religion in Public Life Project. <<http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>>

⁸ Phyllis Tickle. *The Age of the Spirit: How the Ghost of an Ancient Controversy is Shaping the Church* (Baker Books, 2014).

This move toward the experiential leads me to **part two:** I quit Christianity if it is defined by a single denominational tradition. The kind of Christianity I experience is far richer than any one expression.

Throughout most of Christian history there were few denominational choices. Since the Protestant Reformation the number has grown exponentially. Sociologists now count some 30,000 different Christian denominations.⁹

In this new environment, many groups are quick to talk using “us” and “them” language. The term “us” is usually reserved for those in the same denomination or those denominations in close fellowship and with similar theological perspectives.

My Christianity isn’t “us” and “them,” it is “us” and “us.” I am a Christ-follower who has the privilege of learning from many Christian traditions by participating in them.

Baptist

I attended two Baptist seminaries and learned to value the priesthood of all believers.

Churches of Christ

I completed my doctoral studies in a university affiliated with the Churches of Christ and learned to place a heavy emphasis on the authority of the local congregation.

Disciples of Christ

I served as pastor of two congregations and learned the importance of Communion/Eucharist/Lord’s Supper.

Independent Christian Church

I completed my undergraduate theological studies at a school affiliated with this tradition and learned the centrality of the New Testament.

Lutheran

I served one congregation and learned something of the richness of baptism.

National Association of Congregational Christian Churches

⁹ There is no universally accepted number. The most frequently cited number of denominations range from 30,000 to the low 40,000s, and are continually adjusted upward as time passes.

I served one congregation and
learned to be Spirit led

Presbyterian

I served two congregations and
learned the value of church order at all levels of the church.

United Church of Christ

I served two congregations and
learned to see the church as a welcoming, inclusive community.

I have participated in other groups though to a lesser extent. Susan and I were married in an Episcopal church and began our life together in a non-denominational congregation. Additionally, I have been privileged to spend time in congregations affiliated with numerous other traditions in a variety of capacities.

My experience has taught me that we are a large and diverse family with a great deal in common. It has also taught me that we can't control how our family is portrayed by others.

Part three . . . I quit Christianity if Christianity is known primarily by what Christians are against. The kind of Christianity I experience is based on that which Christians are for – that which all who follow Christ hold in common.

When best-selling author Anne Rice issued her statement about quitting Christianity she followed it up a few minutes later with another to explain her decision:

As I said, I quit being a Christian. I'm out. In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian.¹⁰

Being known for what we are against is a real problem. The first class I taught after moving to Florida was a book study of *UnChristian*. Written by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, the book focuses on the unflattering – even unChristian – perception non-Christian young

¹⁰ Posted to Anne Rice's Facebook fan page on July 28, 2010. <<https://www.facebook.com/anericefanpage>>

adults have of Christians. The top terms include hypocritical, anti-homosexual, and judgmental.¹¹

Given these perceptions it isn't surprising that many cultural characterizations of Christianity are caricatures built from news reports about those on the fringe or those outside the Big Tent of Christianity. Sadly, nearly everyone knows of the hate enacted by members of Westboro Baptist Church.¹²

Instead of being known for what some of our sisters and brothers are against, why don't we come together around what we are all for? I don't think such a shift will immediately change public perception, but do believe that living in unity with our Christian brothers and sisters is an important step in the right direction.

There are many possible starting points, but only one seems adequate for such a grand undertaking: The Jesus Creed.¹³ It is the one creed capable of uniting creedal and non-creedal followers of the Way of Jesus.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul,
with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself.
There is no commandment greater than these.¹⁴

You may know this as the Greatest Commandment. I prefer the term Jesus Creed, which was coined by New Testament scholar Scot McKnight as a way of pointing us all back to what is at the center of the Christian faith and what Jesus intended as a guide for all who call themselves by his name.

Whatever you call these words, embrace them as words that lead us forward. Make them a part of your story.

As for my story . . . I must confess that I have become a quitter:

¹¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why it Matters* (Baker Books, 2007), p.28.

¹² Westboro Baptist Church <http://www.godhatesfags.com/> has received far greater media attention than other churches of similar size engaged in hate-based acts.

¹³ Scot McKnight. *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Paraclete Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Mark 12:29-31

- If Christianity is a popular religious option of the past, I quit.
- If Christianity is defined by them and required of me, I quit.
- If Christianity is about being against the right things, I quit.

Label me as you like. Don't worry - I have been called many things over the years.

As you label me, realize that while I may quit Christianity for Christ, I will not and cannot sever my ties with the family of Christ followers known as the church.

Whether your experience matches mine or not, I think you will agree with the way best-selling author and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor explains our current reality. In her latest book published just a few weeks ago she writes:

The old ways of being Christian are not working any more, not even for those who are old themselves.¹⁵

Can you identify a few perceptions of Christianity you need to leave behind?

- Perhaps there are ways that once worked for you, but no longer make sense.
- Maybe one of the issues I surfaced is also an issue for you.
- Or, quite possibly, you may just need to stop majoring in the minor details and refocus on what really matters.

Listen again to Paul's words of pastoral concern for the Christians in Corinth and for all who follow Christ. Hear them now and live them out always:

I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends, using the authority of Jesus, our Master. I'll put it as urgently as I can: You must get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another, cultivating a life in common.

Amen.

¹⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (HarperOne, 2014), p.141.