

I Quit!
September 12, 2010
I Corinthians 1:10-17

I Corinthians 1:10-17 (The Message)

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.

Let us pray.

Holy One, you are still speaking God - enable us to be a still listening people. May my words and the conversations they produce draw us closer to Jesus and to all who seek to follow him. Amen.

Church fights happen more often than we like to admit and can do more harm than a damage assessment report might suggest.

Arguments can begin with something as routine as choosing new carpet for the fellowship hall or as theological as what version of the Bible to use in worship. They escalate into fights when people step outside of the prescribed change process and begin recruiting folks to take sides.

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 trying to end the fighting, 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."

While many leave the church as the result of a church fight others make the move because they are disillusioned by irrelevancy.

Best-selling author Anne Rice fits in the latter group. Until a few weeks ago she was known primarily for her books which have sold over 100 million copies. Lately she is better known for her decision to leave the church. Her initial words were posted on facebook:

"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." (*July 28, 2010*)

Anne Rice's openness about her decision to quit Christianity for Christ has inspired me to be equally open with you about my decision to quit Christianity.

I stand before you today as a quitter – one who has quit Christianity as it is often presented in our culture or constrained by denominationalism. . .

I invite you to listen to three key parts of my story of quitting and to find yourself in 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 here in the United States and globally.

How many times have you heard or read something that suggested that Christianity's best days in America have passed? I hear it often enough that I feel a need to correct some common myths that masquerade as truth.

Myth: The high point was the late 1960s and ever since Christianity in America has been declining.

Reality: You can measure Christianity in a number of ways, but one of the best is church attendance, which has been very steady since the early 1970s. Research shows weekly church attendance was 36% in 1973 and was still 36% in 2007 and never varied by more than a few percentage points in the years between. (*Rodney Stark, What Americans Really Believe, p. 9*)

Myth: Far fewer young adults attend church today and unless this trend reverses the long term stability of the church is questionable.

Reality: Rates of church attendance by young adults today are strikingly similar to prior generations among those who are married. What has changed is that the age at which young adults marry continues to rise. (*Robert Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers, p.55*)

Myth: No matter how well or how poorly things are going here in America, globally our numbers are fading fast.

Reality: Statistically, Christianity is doing just fine. What has changed is where Christians live. A century ago 80% lived in North America and Europe whereas today those areas account for less than half that number. Christianity is no longer primarily white and Western. It is now geographically and ethnically diverse.

These are but a few of the myths that need to be confronted. More thoughtful reconsideration of commonly quoted gloom and doom projections is needed. However, we must be careful not to linger here and miss the bigger issue: Christianity is a living faith best known not statistically but experientially.

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. In recent years, the number has grown from dozens to thousands.

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 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 initial theological studies and learned the centrality of the New Testament.

Lutheran

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

Presbyterian

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

United Church of Christ

I was welcomed by this congregation and am learning to see the church as a welcoming and 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 who share 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 (below), 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.

Being known for what we are against is an issue for those within the family, but is trumpeted even louder by those outside of it. Today most cultural characterizations of Christianity are caricatures built from news reports about those on the fringe or those outside the Big Tent of Christianity. The so-called pastor seeking to burn the Quran yesterday on 9/11 serves as a very powerful example.

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?

Telling our side of the story won't change minds, but 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.

"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.

You may know those as the words from Mark 12 or 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 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.

Now . . . As for my story . . . I have become a quitter. . .

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. 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. You will always be my family.

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.