

## 22 Pentecost 2019

Eternal God, Touch our souls with comfort and calmness. Help us to look forward with confidence and assurance, trusting in your wisdom and love. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't know about you, but unless you are or have been a teacher, most of us do not think about how we define parts of speech or sentences. At least not since elementary school. And yet, most can describe what a noun is and what an adjective is.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary; an adjective is: "a word belonging to one of the major form classes in any of numerous languages and typically serving as a modifier of a noun to denote a quality of the thing named, to indicate its quantity or extent, or to specify a thing as distinct from something else. An example is; The word red in "the red car" is an adjective and car is the noun. Seems pretty simple. Well Maybe not. When it comes to the noun, Christian, we tend to modify the heck out of it.

The term 'Christian' is found three times in the New Testament. Twice in ACTS and once in 1 Peter.

Acts 11:26, "and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."

Acts 26:28, "And Agrippa replied to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."

1 Peter 4:16, "but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God."

In each circumstance, Christian is a noun, no adjectives needed. It is not used as an adjective as is often the case today. Such as, "I am a Christian teacher, or a Christian politician, or a Christian women/man. Or we see posted signs of a Christian counseling Center or a Christian Academy, or a Christian Daycare. The problem with this usage is that an adjective enhances or describes the noun, and the adjective becomes secondary to the noun. That is not how the Bible treats the word Christian.

For those of us who would be followers of Christ, the most basic question we need to ask ourselves is "What is a Christian?"

C. S. Lewis once said, "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

I am sure you that some of you have heard Jeff Foxworthy tell his "you might be a redneck" stories. I adapted some of the statements from Brett McCracken's book; "Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community".

1. If there's absolutely no friction between your Christianity and your partisan politics, you might be a comfortable Christian.

Regardless of which political party you may choose to follow, if any; if you never feel any tension between the party platform and policies, and your Christian beliefs, you may have become too complacent in your beliefs.

2. If you never ponder or wrestle with the mind-boggling tenets of Christian theology, you might be a comfortable Christian. A healthy, uncomfortable faith constantly prods you, and leaves you restless to want to know more about God.

3. If your friends and coworkers **are surprised** to learn you attend a church, you might be a comfortable Christian.

A sure sign your faith is too comfortable is if nothing in your life sets you apart as a follower of Jesus, to the point that even those who know you well can't tell you're a Christian.

4. If you never think about or even remember the sermon on Sunday afternoon, the sermon may have been especially boring or you might be a comfortable Christian.

5. If no one at your church ever annoys you, you might be a comfortable Christian.

If you only go to church with people who are always easy to talk to, always fun to be around, and always agree with your opinions, tastes, and preferences, that could be a sign that your Christianity is too predictable.

6. If you never feel challenged in your daily lives, you might be a comfortable Christian. If your Christian faith never challenges your sinful habits—but only ever affirms you as you are—it can be a sure sign of a too-comfortable faith. To believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ is to believe in change. The Christian life should be marked by growth, forward momentum, and change for the better.

Jesus was not afraid to challenge the status quo of his day. In many cases, Jesus is posed with a question that has the potential to cause him risk on political or theological grounds. But by speaking the truth with authority, he was able to stand firm. Paul also spoke the truth boldly, and as a result, frequently ended up beaten or in a jail cell. He addresses the Thessalonians this morning and says:

“So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter”.

Paul had established the Church in Thessalonica about 18 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. A relatively short period of time. In his first letter, Paul reminds them that Jesus could certainly return at any time and that they needed to be prepared. But at the

same time, he reminds them to warn the lazy, to comfort the frightened, to be joyful, to do good to everyone, to pray continually, and to be thankful. In other words, to live out their identities as followers of Christ. But, apparently, some had become very anxious with stories that the second coming had already occurred or, at the very least, was happening any day. Some had even stopped working because it no longer seemed important. They sat and waited. Paul lovingly reminds them that they need to live out their Christianity by spreading the Gospel, reaching out to those in need, comforting those who are anxious, and building the church.

Some of the issues that Paul wrote about, to the Thessalonians, still occur today. I remember a similar flurry of anxiety among Christians when the first books called "Left Behind" came out in the early 1990's. The authors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins stated the following:

"Jesus' disciples asked Him a classic question 2000 years ago: "What shall be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?"

That remains one of the most prominent questions to this day. The fact is that the signs of the times are all around us. Many are asking, "How long can it be until the end of history, the end of life as we know it?" In our book 'Are We Living in the End Times?', we list many of the signs of the times apparent in our generation. We believe that while no one knows the day or the hour when Christ will return, we have more reason to believe He could come in our lifetime than any generation before us". For many this created great anxiety. Like the Thessalonians, some quickly worked on their own Christianity but stopped living it out in the world. Some others became sidewalk prophets of gloom proclaiming "the end of the world is near". Either way, 25 years later, we are still waiting.

I think that Paul would tell all of us today what he said back then: Don't be anxious or alarmed. Do not be deceived concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember

what you were taught. We don't know when Jesus will return. We still have a job to do as followers of Christ just as those have done before us. Levi Coffin was just such a man.

Levi is an unsung hero of the American anti-slavery movement. In the 1820's Coffin moved to Newport, Indiana and opened a shop. His home soon became a central point on the famous Underground Railroad, a pathway from slavery in the USA's South to freedom in Canada. People like Coffin would take enormous personal risk to help fleeing slaves on their journey. Coffin provided refuge for up to 17 refugee slaves at a time at his house, and so active was he that three major routes on the Underground Railroad converged at his place which became known as Grand Central Terminal.

Because of his activities Coffin received frequent death threats and warnings that his shop and home would be burned. Yet he was undeterred. Like many of the whites involved in the Underground Railroad he was driven by his Christian convictions. Coffin was a Quaker and explaining his commitment said "The bible, in bidding us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, said nothing about colour."

He is just one example of a Christian who decided to do what he could about an injustice he saw. And his action resulted in hundreds of oppressed slaves finally finding their freedom.

{Source: reported in Readers Digest July 2001} It was his way to be a follower of Christ.

We know that God loves us. We need to find a way to let others know how much they are loved. This may mean standing our ground when others ridicule us and our beliefs. It means working with other Christians, who do not necessarily believe all that we believe, but are followers of Jesus just as we are. As we are all painfully aware, not all Episcopalians understand things in the same way either.

But I believe we can all work together, in love, for each other, those that we serve, and those whom we have not yet met.

In the third century, St. Cyprian wrote to a friend, Donatus:

"This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high road, pirates on the seas, in the amphitheater's, men murdered to please the applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world.

"Yet in the midst of it, I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians ... and I am one of them."

And my friends, so are we all.

AMEN!