

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: "When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee. That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it" ([Mat 16:13-18](#)).

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elias, and others, Jeremias, 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 to go unchecked ([Mar 6:13-15](#)). Some thought he was Elias, considered by many to be the greatest of all Old Testament prophets. Others thought he was Jeremias, who played so large a role in the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian captivity. It is striking that wherever Jesus went, wherever people saw him work miracles and heard him teach, they thought about 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 for 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 a/ready 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 men "case the mail"? Each man picks up a handful of letters, tosses each into one of the many pigeonholes in front of him until all the mail is in its proper category. So far as the content of the mail is concerned, it means absolutely nothing. He reads none of it, but simply sorts it, classifies it, and puts it in its pigeonhole. It is all right for a man sorting mail to do that, but when a man 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 Elias, he was not Jeremias, he was not 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 ever 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, "No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved" ([Mat 9:16-17](#)). What did these examples mean? They were simply Jesus' way of saying, "The teachings that I bring, and the life that I live before you cannot be fitted into old forms. My teachings 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 men 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, particularly have this problem. We find it difficult to convey to our neighbors and friends the distinctive position of the church.

Today many people ask about churches of Christ. The rapid growth in the past few years, coupled with extensive preaching in America 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 this more than one and a half million people with a label is to miss our uniqueness. In fact, such a procedure is to follow those of Jesus' day who had ears to hear but would not hear ([Mat 13:15](#)).

Our heritage in Western Civilization has been a great one. The contributions of men of genius and the sacrifices of countless millions have brought us to our present state of civilization or culture. As thankful as we are for our past, we must recognize the mental ruts which have been cut by the past. Which 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 men 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 boy in the Army or in the Navy or in some other branch of the service looks for a chaplain, he finds him 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 the category does not fit.

A Hard Saying-Who Can Hear It?

When Christ explained his purpose and mission he said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you. He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" ([Joh 6:47-51](#)). Many of the disciples said, "This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" And "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" ([Joh 6:60](#); [Joh 6:66](#)). 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 are guilty of doing the same kind of thinking which caused the people 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 men 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 and believe in the Old Testament scriptures. 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 Jew his 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 church of Christ from being Jewish are numerous and significant. The Bible presents Christ as the divine Son of God, and on Christ is Christianity based. The New Testament is also an inspired part of God's Word ([1Co 2:13](#)). We are no longer under the law of Moses for the apostles, by inspiration, taught that it had been nailed to the cross, fulfilled, and done away ([Col 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 ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" ([Mar 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 men. 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 any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings . . ." ([1Ti 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 hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" ([Eph 1:22-23](#)). The Roman Catholic church recognizes the pope as the head of the church.

The Catholic 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. The church of Christ obviously does not fit into the pigeonhole labeled Catholic.

Are We Protestant?

The third and final category under which men are wont 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 worthies 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 brotherhood of man. 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 ([2Jn 1:9](#)). We do not believe in the decrees of religious councils, nor in the creeds which men have written ([1Co 3:4](#)). Rather, we believe that the only authoritative and dependable guide to heaven is the Bible.

The Bible Way

In order to be a Christian a man must hear the message of Christ and must believe that he is the divine Son of God ([Heb 11:6](#); [Mar 16:16](#)). Having believed in Jesus, he must make the decision to change the course of his life, or repent ([Act 17:30](#)). Having done that, he must heed Jesus' instruction to confess him before men ([Mat 10:32](#); [Mat 10:33](#)). Finally, as the apostles believed and taught, in order to be a Christian a man must be baptized for the remission of his sins ([Act 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 though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again. If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" ([Gal 1:8-9](#)).

When a Christian worships God he must do it in the way prescribed in the inspired Word of God ([1Jn 3:18](#)). When man adds other elements he is adding things which God did not wish to be included in his worship, else 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; 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 doctrines, teachings, 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 would ask him if he were a Protestant, he would not understand the question. Paul never claimed to be a Protestant. He refers to himself in [1Co 4:1](#) as a "minister of Christ," and that is a follower of Christ, a Christian. He sought to persuade Agrippa to be a Christian, nothing more ([Act 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 personality or built upon one

passage of scripture to the 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, "Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's" ([1Co 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 ([Joh 17:20](#); [Joh 17:21](#)). Religious division is a prevalent cause of infidelity. Division as it is practiced today is a mark of carnality. ([1Co 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 preach 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 men to preach only a partial gospel, tailoring the Lord's message to suit their own personal inclinations. This has sometimes led men to stop far short of the full gospel of Christ. It has also sometimes led them to go far beyond the teachings of the Lord. Either error is disastrous. The Apostle John once wrote: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed: For he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds" ([2Jn 1:9-11](#)).

Visualize a man wearing the badge and the uniform of the police department, officially representing safety and law enforcement, finding a child on the corner of a busy traffic-filled street, and saying, "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 farther 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, Elias, nor Jeremias, so the church of Christ is neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish. We are unique and different for 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 the twentieth 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 saith 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 the 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 wines of Christian truth and love into the 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?