

Identity Crisis: Is the Christian Brand in Trouble?

WEEK ONE:

What does it mean to be a Christian? Let's start with a brief grammar lesson. Consider the suffix “*-ian*.” By definition, it denotes one who belongs to, comes from, specializes in, is a proponent of, relates to, or resembles something or someone.

A Floridian is someone who comes from Florida.

A comedian is someone who specializes in comedy.

Describing something as Orwellian, means it resembles the world George Orwell created in his book 1984.

Here's the key to this suffix: it always points back to the base noun. It's all about the noun.

So, what does it mean to be a Christian?

It means to be someone who belongs to, comes from, specializes in, is a proponent of, relates to, and resembles CHRIST. If we claim the name, it's not actually about us, it's about Christ.

So, when we think of what it means to be a Christian, we have to start with who Christ was and is. If we're honest though, it often happens the other way around. We are who we want to be and simply claim the name Christian. And since perception is reality, when people see us, they think that's who Jesus is.

In the mid to late 90s, right around when I was starting to drive, it was really cool, in the Christian world at least, to have a silver fish decal on your car. Like a WWJD bracelet, it was a way of telling everyone around you on the road that you were a Christ follower. All of my friends were getting them and putting them on their cars or their parents' cars. But one of my friends refused to do that. Now, she was dedicated to the faith, very involved at church, and an overall terrific person. I remember being curious as to why she didn't want to have that fish decal on her car. Because, she told me, she was way too reckless a driver to want anyone to know she was Christian. She understood that if she had a Christian fish on her car, however she drove, good or bad, it would reflect upon Christ. And she didn't want that kind of pressure!

But here's the deal: If you think of the good news of Jesus Christ as the ultimate brand, product, or message that we believe everyone in the world should have access to, then as Christians we are the ultimate brand ambassadors. We don't have a choice. We are faced with that pressure. It's up to us to point to the brand, the noun, and help others to catch on.

When we don't represent the brand well, when we only do what we want to do without worrying about what Jesus would do, then we end up hurting the brand. In a way, my friend was right. But, instead of driving differently, she disconnected from the brand itself (only in the car, I might add, but still).

In many ways, that's completely understandable. The Christian brand can be intimidating. In the letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul describes the marks or visible behavior of a "*True Christian*."

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:9-18,21)

Sounds easy, right? It's a lot! And the idea of having to do all of those things is overwhelming. So perhaps it is easier to simply disconnect from the brand in one way or another so that we can do what we want without worrying that we'll reflect badly on our Lord and Savior.

Or...we can actually live like a Christian, and point back to the base noun, Christ himself. If we really want to be Christian, we don't need to disconnect and do what we want, we need to reconnect and do what Christ did.

One of the most powerful things that Christ did was to flip every expectation of what he SHOULD do on its head. While he was still alive, he was being recognized by more and more people as the Son of God, the Messiah, the anointed one whom all the prophets had proclaimed would come to save Israel. He was descended from King David, and therefore, was the rightful and righteous ruler of the true kingdom of God's chosen people.

But, instead of riding into the capital city of Jerusalem and claiming his throne, vanquishing the Roman army, raising up Zion forever, commanding honor, and associating with the religious elite and socially powerful, he walks around with common laborers and women. He sits and eats with the outcasts of society, heals the grotesquely ill, teaches out in the open where anyone and everyone can hear, as opposed to the temple, where only certain people could go. He lets children come and be with him and honors them. He ushers in the kingdom of God in a way that was completely unexpected and calls his followers to participate in it. He goes to the people whom no one else goes to and expresses deep disappointment in the religious leaders who seem to have forgotten the point of their religion. He reminds his own disciples, when they were arguing about which of them would be greatest in the kingdom, that none of us should strive to be viewed as great, for really those who are first will be last.

He says in Mark 10:35-45, referring to himself, that "*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*"

When we look at what Jesus did, one of the things we see time after time is that he came to serve those who no one else even wanted to be around. Instead of retreating to places of comfort and honor, the Savior of the world got on his hands and knees and washed his friends' feet. So when we think of the brand Christian, one of the things we need to ask ourselves as brand ambassadors, is who are we serving?

When other people see that we are there not to judge them or boss them around, but to help them, to serve them, to take care of them, even if it costs us greatly, and we do all of that in the name of Jesus, it completely changes how people see Jesus. And the identity crisis we're in begins to turn around.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- If you claim to be a Christian, how good are you at focusing on Christ in your daily life?
- What keeps you from orienting yourself to Christ?
- According to the "*marks of the true Christian*" in Romans 12, which of those things is easy for you? Which of those things do you struggle with?
- What do you notice about the list?
- What does being Christian have to do with helping to usher in the kingdom of God?
- Who are you serving as Christ served you?