

Identity Crisis: What is the Christian Brand?

INTRODUCTION:

When you hear the word, Christian, what other words come to mind? If you ask someone who claims to be a Christian, they might say: faithful, loving, Jesus follower, servant's heart.

But if you ask someone who isn't a Christian, they probably have very different words. Judgmental, crazy, behind the times, hypocritical. And this is not just a few people.

Research shows that the overwhelming majority of people not connected to a church hold negative perceptions of Christianity. And it's not because of Christ. It's because of the people who claim to follow him.

Much like any other major label or brand today, perception is reality. How people see you says more about who you are than what you believe yourself to be. And Christianity needs to admit that we have an image crisis.

While we may be confident of our values and what it means to be Christian, somehow others aren't. And if we are truly honest, it might be that we are part of the problem.

One time, in the midst of healing and teaching, Jesus turns to his disciples, his closest followers, and asks, "*Who do people say that I am?*" He gets various responses. Some say Elijah, others a prophet. Then he asks, "*And who do you say I am?*"

Knowing who Jesus is helps us remember who we are supposed to be. Remembering what Jesus did helps us to know what we are supposed to do. Being Christian isn't just about claiming Christ, it's about living out Christ in a way that makes other people want to know Christ.

If Christianity is a brand, then we are supposed to be the ultimate brand ambassadors.

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?

Identity Crisis: Perception is Reality.

WEEK TWO:

“*Make people happy*” – That’s the company motto of Best Chevrolet, one of the most successful GM dealerships in the entire country.

Their focus is entirely on making the customer and their employees happy. From the moment their customers walk onto their lot, they want them to feel at ease, comfortable, like the company cares about them. It takes happy employees to make that happen, so the company also invests in its staff to ensure they feel empowered and recognized.

In other words, the number one thing this top rated paradigm of a car dealership tries to do every day is NOT sell cars, it’s to make people happy.

As a Christian, what would you say is the number one thing we should try to do every day?

A lawyer asked Jesus that exact question: “*Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?*”

For the Jews there were 613 commandments, so asking which was the greatest was pretty snarky. But Jesus responds right away, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*” And THEN he adds to that immediately, saying, “*The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.*”

The number one thing we should be doing as Christians every day is loving God and one another.

That’s what we should focus on getting right. Because when we do that, everything else falls into place. And it’s not enough to simply claim you love God, you’ve got to love people. Loving God and loving others go together.

In 1 John, the author reminds us, “*Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*” (1 John 4:20-21) You can’t separate the two. As Christians, love of both God and others should be that thing we strive for every day.

Now, as Christians we are called to share the good news of Christ, to serve and care for others, and invite people into the community of faith. But all of those things are based on our love for people. We teach them the good

news that Christ loves them, we serve them and care for them in the name of Jesus, and we invite them to be part of a community that will love them and help them to love others. But if we don't love them first, then whatever we do afterward is meaningless.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, *"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."*

However amazing, or faithful, or powerful, or selfless the acts we do are, if they don't come from a place of love, they mean nothing.

And it's not easy. It can be hardest to act loving to the people we are the closest to. How easy is it to be rude to your mom or your spouse because...well, they're your mom or your spouse! You see them every day, and it's easy to get in the habit of living with them, instead of loving them. Especially because love isn't a feeling. If we look at the totality of scripture and how it talks about love, it is clear that love is not just how we feel about someone at any given time. We might feel loving toward someone, but love is how we treat someone, even when we don't feel like it.

Again, 1 John says, we must love *"not in word or speech, but in truth and action."* (1 John 3:18) And 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us exactly what kind of action is loving: being patient, and kind, and rejoicing in truth, and not being envious or boastful or rude. Love is not irritable, or resentful, but bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

That's what it should look like to love others. If we're supposed to love, and love isn't warm fuzzy feelings we have towards someone, but is actually how we treat them, then that's not just something that happens. It's something we have to decide to do every single day.

And that's where we as Christians need to start. Identity crisis or not, that's what we need to return to every day. How am I loving God? How am I loving my neighbor? How am I loving my enemy? How am I loving the stranger, the mess up, the competition?

Perception is reality. Our identity as Christians means that everything we do points back to Christ. How people perceive us is how people will understand who Christ is. And love is essential to who Christ is.

In the Gospel of John, as he is preparing to go to the cross, and spending his last few days with his disciples, Jesus gives them some final instructions and reminders. In John 13:34-35 he says these words, *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

In other words, the one thing that you have to do so that people will know you are connected to Jesus, is love. And love is the one thing Jesus wants to make sure people know is connected to him.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you think it's fair to sum up all the commandments into love God and love one another?
- Does that make being a Christ follower hard or easy?
- What makes you feel like someone loves you? What do you do to show someone else that you love them?
- Do you express love more easily through words or actions?
- Who are the people in your life that are hard to love? What makes you hard to love?
- Do you believe Jesus loves you?

Identity Crisis: Two Non-Negotiables for the Christian Brand.

WEEK THREE:

Let's say you have a company. Let's say that company is the Four Seasons, one of the hotels consistently on the top 100 list of companies to work for. How do you go about hiring an employee? You have a job that needs doing, and you need to hire someone who can do it. But, you also want the right kind of person that fits in with your company and can represent it well. So, it's a little bit of a science, because you have a job description and need to hire someone who fits it, and it's also a little bit of an art, because you also need someone who fits in.

In other words, you need to be somewhat structured and go by the rules, and also somewhat open to opportunities that might break some of the rules. In fact, the Four Seasons is notorious for hiring for attitude rather than simply aptitude. Isadore Sharp, the founder of the hotel chain, said, "*Competence we can teach; attitude is ingrained.*"

When we think of the source of the Christian identity - the guide for how we are supposed to be and how we are expected to treat each other, and how we are meant to figure it all out - it's a little bit science and a little bit art. Or, to use more religious terms, it's a little bit of truth and grace. It's not one or the other.

For us in the church, this is an ongoing tension. Some lean one way, some the other. There are some of us who aren't good at playing in the sandbox with those who lean the opposite way. But, as Christians, we are called to embrace both. And when we do, we truly represent the reality of life in Christ.

Truth helps us to know the way we are to live, what is righteous or not, what will bring us into right relationship with God. Grace is that somehow God loves us and forgives us even when we have messed up and gotten that relationship wrong. We are called to live in the truth, to follow the path Jesus has laid before us. But we also celebrate God's love for us, even to the point that Jesus lived, died and was resurrected to restore us to right relationship with God, when we found ourselves way off that path.

In Jesus's time, the religious authorities were good at truth. They had their rules and knew how to follow them. Their job was also to get everyone else to follow the truth. The problem was they had forgotten about grace and how much grace God shows to God's people. They looked down on those they considered unclean or unrighteous. They used what they saw as the truth to limit, exclude, and control who was in and who was out.

One time, they scoffed at Jesus when they witnessed him heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a day of rest. You weren't supposed to heal, which would have been considered work. Jesus reminded them that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. In other words, Sabbath is good and true, but only as long as it gives life to people. It shouldn't be used to prevent people from living. Jesus offered the man with a withered hand grace, in spite of the Sabbath, and Jesus calls us to do the same. (Mark 2:27-3:5)

Another time, Jesus tells a story about two men, one a Pharisee, or a religious ruler, and the other a tax collector, one of the most unclean and despised characters of the time. They were both praying in the temple. The Pharisee looked up to heaven and said, *“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”* In contrast Jesus explained that the tax collector was standing far off and would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* In a surprising turn of events, Jesus says the tax collector is the one who leaves justified, not the Pharisee. (Luke 18:9-14)

But the reality is that we need to be like both! We should not steal or commit adultery, and we should fast and be generous with our income, just like the Pharisee. Those are things that followers of Christ should do; those are righteous acts that should reveal the truth of a relationship with God. AND we should also recognize that we are all still in need of God’s grace, just like the tax collector. We should acknowledge that it is by God’s grace that we can even know truth in the first place.

How are we supposed to figure out what we do? We look to the truth of what Christ calls us to do, and recognize that there will be grace along the way. We are called to help others see the truth AND ALSO offer them grace.

It would certainly be easier if it were one or the other. It would be easy if we could relax and not worry about anything and just do what we want because God’s grace covered it all. This is a critique of Christians who seem to only focus on God’s grace, forgetting about the truth that Christ also preaches. On the other hand, it would be easy if we could have a list, nice and neat, with little check boxes that would tell us without a doubt what was right, and we could just check each one off the list, until they added all up to a right relationship with God. This is a critique of those Christians who make it more about the rules. But it’s not easy. It’s not one or the other.

In the beginning of the gospel of John, we are told that the Word became flesh and through him, we not only have received grace upon grace, but he also helps us to know the Father’s heart. Grace and truth. Truth is tidy, grace is messy. Truth is definite, grace is infinite. Truth is black and white, grace is all sorts of gray. Truth points us to Jesus, and grace is a gift from Jesus.

Both grace and truth come with Jesus Christ. We need both to understand how to truly be Christians.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- With which are you more comfortable, truth or grace?
- Is it better to follow the rules or to go with the flow?
- Do you have trouble balancing the two?
- How do you approach the Sabbath?
- Do you identify more with the Pharisee or tax collector?
- What makes you most uncomfortable with truth? With grace?
- How can you hold both as a Christian?

Identity Crisis: It's Not About What We're Selling.

WEEK FOUR:

Most businesses are concerned with keeping customers. That's because it is by far cheaper to retain a customer, than it is to go out and drum up a new one. So most companies want to keep current customers happy and coming back for more.

While that makes a lot of fiscal sense, if a company isn't careful, it can begin to tailor its energies completely towards those on the inside, rather than continuously looking to who might still be on the outside. Like a club that only exists for its members, companies or groups that focus on those on the inside can quickly become out of touch with the world around them.

Unfortunately, this is how much of the church has become. Perhaps unintentionally, we've created insular spaces and communities that simply support those already on the inside. And we like it that way. It's comfortable and easier, less messy, and a lot less expensive.

It also means we're failing at our entire purpose and mission.

The church should be the one place designed to focus outward. Being an insider should mean that you are tuned to the needs, pain, hopes, and joys of the world around you. It was for the world that Jesus came, lived, died, was raised, and led his followers. So why would Christians not think we needed to be for the world as well?

It's not quite that simple though, for us Christians. For example, even if a company does focus on the outside, it's almost always with the goal to bring people in. Naturally, that's what a company trying to sell a product does. The problem is that can lead to all sorts of maneuvers, manipulations, guerrilla advertising, political leveraging, and downright lying to get people to buy a certain product, instead of depending on the value of the product itself.

Instead of selling a product they actually believe will make people's lives or the world around them better, some companies just want to make a profit.

As far as the church goes, of course we want to invite people into a relationship with God, through Christ and the Holy Spirit! We believe without a doubt that a relationship with God makes us complete as human beings the way nothing else can, and that it has eternal implications. But as Christians, we have to be careful not to be so focused on getting people in, that we forget to care about the people themselves. In fact, as Christ did, we should focus on caring for people regardless of whether or not they ever come through our doors. That's what it means to love someone unconditionally, which is how Jesus loves all of us.

A pastor told a story of encountering someone in just this type of situation. This pastor spent his mornings in a local restaurant, talking to folks, listening to their stories, and simply getting to know them. None of the employees or regulars ever attended his church though and there was one particularly negative man who no one enjoyed being around. Week after week, every time the pastor encountered this man, he was rude and dismissive, brushing off any attempts at connection.

One day, that man's son died in a horrible accident with a gun nobody realized was loaded. Out of his grief, he shared his pain and devastation with the pastor. He had been in the army and had fought in Vietnam. He had done many things he believed were unforgivable, and wanted to know if this was punishment for having killed children over there. This pastor comforted him, assuring him that what happened was not God's punishment.

Later this man asked the pastor to speak at a private gathering in honor of his son. After the fact, the pastor wrote, *"I have been going to the [restaurant] regularly for over three years now. Sometimes I wondered if I needed to continue going... If you go by traditional church metrics, my time investment has not led to 'church' growth or increased 'numbers in the pews.' It has not resulted in one penny going into our offertory plate... But God, through just being faithful, has given me an amazing opportunity; to be welcomed into their house... and share the love of God with them. And that is my heart's desire, not to see them as an 'evangelism opportunity' but a family in pain that simply needs the love of God, and to love them. I pray I may honor this."*

In the book of Acts, it tells the story of the early church. We hear that they spent their time devoted the teaching of the church and to being together, eating with glad and joyous hearts, praying and worshipping, and in general having fellowship together. They would heal people and care for people. The texts say that they had the goodwill of all the people. Everyone liked them! They were good to be around, and people were grateful for their presence. And because of that, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Act 2:42-47)

They weren't hiding out in their buildings, worshipping amongst themselves, and only engaging with one another. They were out-and-about in places, engaging with all sorts of people. And because of who they were and how they treated others, more people joined up.

Other people becoming Christian is most often a result of Christians living the way they are supposed to. Christianity is attractational, and invitational, and compelling. It shouldn't be forced or manipulative or nominal. Christianity really isn't about getting a bunch of people to wear a logo tee, it's about being willing to give other people the shirt off your back. People buying in is a natural result of living true to the image of Christ.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to love and care for someone unconditionally?
- Have you ever felt like someone was trying to manipulate or force you to buy into something?
- Have you ever done that to someone else? What was the result?
- Who will see your life and decide to follow Jesus?
- Do you have the goodwill of all people even if they're not Christian?

Identity Crisis: Becoming a Brand Ambassador.

WEEK FIVE:

At Disney theme parks, every cast member (which is Disney speak for “*employee*”) understands that their job is to help create “*special moments*” for guests. This includes every single person, regardless of what their tasks are, from the folks who serve in the dining rooms, to the street sweepers, to the princesses themselves. In fact, it’s the people on the front-lines who interact with the guests the most, not those sitting in an office somewhere, who constantly have the ability to make or break a guest’s experience.

At every point, one negative experience could result in someone not coming back. So Disney trains its cast members well, and has built in systems for recognizing and rewarding cast members who help create “*magic*,” empowering them to do whatever they need to help a guest. Disney is known the world over for its customer service and even has an Institute for companies to attend and receive coaching. And the whole thing starts at the smallest level with a single employee, who, no matter what their job is, believes that they are an essential part of the whole.

Christianity is like that, too. Before he died, Jesus said to his followers, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.” (John 15:15) He was making sure they knew that when he was gone physically, they would now have a hugely important role to play. They were no longer mere slaves, subservient, without agency, or activity, or power. No, they were now Christ’s friends, connected, and if not on equal footing, then pretty darn close. They had authority in a way they never had before.

They knew Christ’s mission, and they would help him fulfill it.

With authority comes responsibility. It means something to have this kind of level of involvement. It’s like going from a simple checklist, or a series of tasks, or a part-time job, to a full-time job, or even ownership in the company. We have all been made a partner in the firm. And how we conduct ourselves means something. We can truly think of ourselves as brand ambassadors and have tremendous influence and power over how others perceive the brand of Christianity.

How will you wield that influence and power?

Being a Christian is about being bought in, all in. Not just, I like this but not that. Not just I’ll give a bit here, but not there. Christianity is selling out for all that Christ did and taught and is. It’s about being committed in a way that almost doesn’t make sense, but that is also compelling.

The earliest generations of Christians faced insane amounts of persecution. Jail; torture; loss of power, rights, family, loved ones; and even death. And yet so many of the accounts of those who witnessed the early martyrs expressed awe and wonder at their dedication to their faith in the one true God. In fact, every time a Christian was martyred, people were so inspired by their fearlessness in the face of persecution that they decided to join the faith. Even knowing they themselves would likely be persecuted!

When someone is all in, believes in something with every fiber of their being, it attracts and inspires others.

Christianity is about Jesus, the base noun, but as Christians, we are Jesus' hands and feet in this world, and our role is essential to completing the mission of Christ. For some crazy reason, God didn't just create us to sit around and adore our Creator, but puts us to work for the sake of the world. The future hoped for kingdom of God isn't something that's only in the future, it's actually here now. Jesus himself ushered it in, and the Holy Spirit empowers us as Christians to do something about that.

An executive at an international company once said, *"Every organization has a purpose that is bigger than the product it creates. That's because every company produces an experience as well as a product... something that makes the whole more than the sum of its parts."*

The Apostle Paul said something along those lines in a letter he wrote to the Corinthians, *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."* (1 Corinthians 12:12-14)

We are the body of Christ! We are all, each of us, individually part of it, and together we are greater than the sum of our parts. We are empowered with the Spirit and have a purpose beyond what we could ever accomplish on our own. Each of us is necessary, each of us is important, each of us has the chance to shape the way the world sees the body of Christ. It matters how we live and how we treat others, it matters how we talk about God, and how we talk to one another. It matters what we do and what we say and who we claim to be.

Being a Christian is getting to represent the best company, product, brand, identity, way of life in the whole world. And every time we get it right, we have the chance to change the world.

So, let's get it right. Let's remember our first love, and do what we have been called and created to do from the beginning. Let's help the image crisis Christianity finds itself in turn around so the work of God in this world will be that much closer to completion.

Perception is reality, so let's make the perception as great as the reality is.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to be someone's friend as opposed to someone's servant?
- Do you feel like you can actually make a difference in how Christianity is perceived? Why or why not?
- How do you see God's kingdom already present in the world? Where is there still work to do?
- How does the "*body of Christ*" imagery help you understand your role? Someone else's?
- What are things you can do this week to represent Christ, and help bring God's work to completion?