I Can Christian Today

Sunday, October 27, 2019   2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Have you noticed the meme floating around that says, "I can't adult today"? The expression is stenciled on T-shirts, posted on office walls, and kiln-fired onto coffee mugs. "I can't adult today!" It sounds clumsy with its unconventional use of "adult" as a verb, but it's not hard to understand what the saying means: "At the moment, I'm not capable of being a responsible grown-up." Sometimes, we just want to hit the pause button on the duties of adulthood.

A pastor and writer, referred to this not long ago in a blog post titled, "I can't Christian today." He wasn't trying to be funny or sarcastic, but after declaring, "I can't Christian today," he added, "I can no longer be tethered to this thing that is so toxic and so painful to so many. I can't wade through any more bad theology and predatory behavior from pulpit-pounding pastors who seem solely burdened to exclude and to wound and to do harm. I can't sift through all this malice and bitterness masquerading as Christianity to try to find what of it is left worth keeping." Yikes! This blogger has had his fill of people who are Christians in name, but who are not, in his view, demonstrating the love of Jesus in their words and actions. He wonders if Christianity is helpful to anyone anymore.

It's easy these days to see the "us versus them" mentality to which he alludes. It surfaces in many denominations as followers of Jesus squabble over what serving him should look like and how the Bible should be applied. The "them" may be evangelicals generally labeled as conservative and reactionary, and the "us" may be "progressives" who generally have more liberal views. Or vice versa. With such rabid partisanship in play today, it's not surprising that some would endorse the blogger's conclusion that in today's culture it is not helpful for followers of Jesus to identify themselves as "Christian."

The Apostle Paul respectfully disagrees. He is distressed with the behavior of some who call themselves Christians. Against these people, Paul minced no words: "*Keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded*" (Romans 16:17-18).

In Paul's case, the "troublemakers" were those who argued that Christians, whether Gentile or Jew, must observe all the Jewish religious customs, including the dietary laws and physical circumcision. Paul countered that new Christians needed to do no such thing. It bothered Paul that some Christian teachers argued otherwise. Nonetheless, Paul freely and gladly identified himself as a follower of Jesus. To the Philippians he wrote, "*It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain*" (Philippians 1:20-21). It's impossible to imagine Paul getting up one morning and declaring, "I can't Christian today."

Then there's our text, which the New Testament identifies as a letter from Paul to Timothy, in which Paul, apparently sensing the end of his life drawing near, wrote, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*" (2 Timothy 4:7). He got to this place in his thinking by getting up day after day with the attitude that he *could* serve Christ that day. Here he is facing death, an unnatural death by execution for his beliefs, yet he's still able to say, "Hey, another day to be a Christian! I *can* Christian today!"

What about us? Can we Christian today? Or are we too discouraged to even try anymore? Are we troubled by how some people behave in the name of Christ? Are we sometimes embarrassed by church professionals, not wanting others to think these people truly represent what "Christian" means? How do we feel when politicians, wanting our votes, claim to be Christians while espousing ideas that are far afield from what Jesus would advocate? How do we feel about our fellow Christians who support such politicians?

Today, Christians are splintered into many divisions and factions. Not only are we divided into numerous denominational camps, we're divided by various and sundry political and cultural boundaries. For many, these boundaries are far more important than the denominational and doctrinal ones. Whatever position we take on immigration, the border wall, same-sex marriage, presidential politics, Supreme Court nominations, abortion, welfare, or the legalization of marijuana, some Christians will immediately call into question our relationship with Jesus Christ.

When this happens, some might say, "Well, if this is what it means to be a Christian, I want no part of it." Or, they might simply say, "I'm done. I can't Christian today." When we say this, of course, we immediately become one of the partisans we condemn.

What if the heroes of the Reformation woke up one morning and declared, "I can't Christian today"? Martin Luther called the church to reform itself solely based on God's Word and God's grace, on Jesus Christ and our faith in him, and on whether our actions brought glory to God. Luther was tried, imprisoned, exiled, and excommunicated by his church. Yet Luther said, "I <u>can</u> Christian today!" and the Protestant church found its voice.

What if John Calvin, a Huguenot (protestant) in Catholic France, decided he couldn't Christian any longer? Exiled in Switzerland, Calvin "Christianed-on" expanding Luther's ideas and creating the governing system for the Presbyterian Church. What if John Knox, a student of Calvin, decided not to Christian when facing fierce opposition from the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots? If Knox quit Christian-ing then the Presbyterian Church would never have become the national church of Scotland, and Scottish immigrants would not have brought their faith to the New World.

What if the Puritans and the Pilgrims decided not to Christian when faced with persecution from the Church of England? Instead, they crossed an ocean to worship God openly and faithfully, establishing the congregational church in the American colonies. We take our cue from the reformers and pioneers when we consider "Christian" as though it were a verb. While in standard usage "Christian" is normally a noun or adjective, in *practice* "Christian" is a verb, a word used to identify an action.

The truth is, there are millions of Christians who don't want to be associated with people of questionable views and practices. But it is equally true that those same millions are out there "Christian-ing" day after day, serving God faithfully on behalf of this troubled world. They are building hospitals and schools; developing programs to help the poor and needy; working to provide for refugees; helping immigrants to get safe housing and to learn English; mentoring people with differing levels of ability; tutoring teens who need help with academics; delivering meals to the elderly; and leading Bible studies at nursing homes. They aren't going to let their work be derailed by those who, in their opinion, are silly, misguided, immature Christians blabbering nonsense in the public arena.

The remedy for those who say "I can't Christian today" is to go to a homeless shelter and ladle soup or to pound some nails at a Habitat for Humanity house. Make being a Christian a powerful statement of love in action. Or, as Paul put it to Timothy: "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed*" (2:15).

We can also take a clue from something the resurrected Jesus said during a conversation with Peter on the shores of Galilee. After Jesus renewed his call to Peter to serve him, Peter looked at one of the other disciples and asked Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus replied, "*If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!*" (John 21:22). In other words, "Don't worry about how he interprets Christianity? I'm talking to *you*. What does it mean to you to be a Christian? *You* follow me!"

Here are four words to remember when we get distressed with other Christians: *So, what? Follow Me!* Print those words out, laminate them and tape them to your office wall. Go online, find a photo of a cross, and Photoshop the words onto it, print it and post it. Write these words on a sticky note and put it on your laptop. Stencil them on a t-shirt.

So, what? Follow Me! There are times when, as faithful Christians, we must rebuke those whose views and actions discredit Christianity. Prophets are always needed to call the faithful to account. The thing is, currently there's no shortage of prophets. The prophetic word is out there already. In fact, we have too many competing prophets, and their shouting back and forth in the public square is hard not to miss. So, the rebuking, the standing against, the warnings and so on is pretty much covered right now. That could change. But right now, we're good with the prophetic ministry.

So, maybe it would be better to shut our mouths and open our hands to show the love and grace and mercy of Christ reaching out to a fallen world. Christ calls us to be people who say, "I <u>can</u> follow Jesus today. I <u>can</u> Christian today." We don't need more squabbling Christians in the world, but we surely need more of Christ in the world, and that's up to us, with God's help. That's what enables us, when the end comes, to say with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Go, and Christian today!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I give you my hands to do your work. I give you my feet to go your way. I give you my eyes to see as you do. I give you my tongue to speak your words. I give you my mind that you may think in me. I give you my spirit that you may pray in me. Above all, I give you my heart that you may love in me. I give you my whole self that you may grow in me, so that it is you, Lord Jesus, who lives and works and prays in me. Amen.

Source: Pavlovitz, John. "Losing faith: Christians may need to abandon their religion to save their souls." *Milwaukee Independent*, December 22, 2018, milwaukeeindependent.com. Retrieved March 25, 2019.