

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TRULY CHRISTIAN?

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The bishop is taking a risk letting me speak because I have a reputation of being a bit different, but he has reviewed my talk and doesn't think I'll do much damage. I have also noticed that I am taking the place of the youth speakers, and he has scheduled a choir number to put out any fires I might start, and there are two other speakers to clean up the mess. If I should stray, he has promised to set me straight.

To start, I must explain my personal point of view. In section 46 of the Doctrine and Covenants is a passage that has given me great comfort.

To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world.

To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful. (Doctrine and Covenants 46:13–14)

There follows a list of gifts that some have and others do not: faith, healing, prophesy, miracles, and many others.

At a time when I was very troubled about what I believed and didn't believe, and what I was and was not capable of as a member of the Church, this scripture let me know that it is all right to be less than what I had imagined I should be. I was struggling with doubts, having trouble with my "testimony."

There are words in any language that have more than one meaning. Testimony is one of those words. The word "testimony" comes from Latin and translates literally as "witness." In the scriptures, as in law courts, "testimony" means a recounting by a witness of what one has seen, heard, or experienced. In that sense, a testimony is neither weak

nor strong and shouldn't wax or wane; it just is. In a religious sense, "testimony" has come to mean something closer to "faith."

At that troubled time in my life, I looked closely at my "testimony" from both definitions. I had to admit that I had never witnessed a miracle, or had a vision, or received a burning in the bosom, or had an inexplicable answer to a prayer. In a court of law, I would not be a good witness of the gospel because my testimony is the absence of witnessing.

In the religious sense of "testimony," I felt equally useless. Most people's testimony, or faith, is founded on some kind of experience that I hadn't had. My faith, or, if you prefer, my testimony, didn't exist.

However, I know that all of you have "a testimony" and that it is dear to you and gives you great comfort, even as it grows and shrinks. Most of you are very fortunate because you *have* seen, heard, or experienced wonderful things of which you can bear witness. I have not, but I believe that most of you have. Section 46 tells me that to me it has been given to believe your words, that I also might have eternal life if I continue faithful.

Now that you know where I'm coming from, let's get back to being truly Christian. I have heard that a true Christian is someone who tries first to understand Jesus Christ, second to emulate his actions, and third to follow his teachings.

I have struggled for years to understand Jesus and have come to the conclusion that he, and the culture he came from, are so far removed from me and my culture that I can only get a vague, incomplete, and flawed understanding. So in this first task I have pretty much failed as a true Christian.

The second task is to emulate Jesus' actions. He spent his ministry traveling the countryside working miracles and healing the sick and the lame and spiritually possessed. I haven't had any success at this task either, though for a long time I tried.

But when it comes to teachings, I have the scriptures, and, with diligent research and study, I can find and follow what Jesus taught. Here even someone with very limited gifts has a chance.

One day Jesus was questioned by a Pharisee who asked him how to obtain eternal life. Jesus, knowing the man was an educated lawyer, turned the question back on him and said, “You know the law. What do you say?”

And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.

And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. (Luke 10:27–28)

Here the lawyer tried to get Jesus into a debate. He asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus answered with the parable of the good Samaritan. You all know the story. A man was attacked, robbed, wounded, and left for dead on the road. A priest saw him and passed by without helping. A Levite did the same. Then a Samaritan, a man not related to the Jews and considered by Jewish priests and Levites to be inferior, came and helped the injured man. The lawyer had to admit that the unworthy, inferior Samaritan was the better neighbor.

Jesus taught repeatedly that the second great commandment, in the same class with the greatest commandment, is to love our neighbors as ourselves. And his parable implies that our neighbors are the undocumented immigrants, the new age crystal-gazers, the Baptist missionaries, the people who voted the other way in the last election, the people who play their car stereo so loud it shakes all the other cars at the stoplight, and even people who mind their own business.

This is what I think it means to be truly Christian. This is something that even a person with meager spiritual gifts like me can do. But, always

a skeptic and rarely satisfied with the easy answer, I ask why. Why should I love my neighbor? Why did the Samaritan help when the others didn't?

Huckleberry Finn asked his temporary guardian, the Widow Douglas, why she did "good" things, like taking him in when his father died. She told him she did it to make sure that she would go to heaven and not hell. This, to Huck, and to me, is disingenuous. The Samaritan did not hold the same beliefs that the robbery victim did. He did not act out of fear of punishment or for hope of a reward.

This empathy is not a uniquely human nor, necessarily, a religious trait. A primatologist was studying chimpanzees in a zoo in Holland when he noticed some altruistic behavior. An aging, arthritic female chimpanzee was finding it harder and harder to move. The other chimps seemed concerned. They would try to help her when she tried to get food, and one brought her water by carrying it in his mouth and then spitting it into her mouth.

The scientist was thrilled to see this because it meant that our animal relatives were recognizing that members of their community needed help and were helping, without any concept of heaven or hell. There was no way that they could ever count on being rewarded for what they selflessly did. Likewise, there was no punishment expected if they did not help.

Then one day the scientist witnessed an act of neighborly love that went beyond kindness between well-acquainted chimpanzees. A bird had flown into the area where the chimpanzees lived and, mistaking the reflection in a large window for a tree in the distance, it flew into the window and was knocked unconscious.

One of the chimps witnessed the bird hitting the glass and hurried over to where the bird lay on the ground. She picked it up carefully and examined it. After a few moments, the bird began to move. The chimp, holding the bird carefully, climbed up a tall tree. She gently opened the bird's wings with her fingers and tossed it into the air. The bird flew away. This chimpanzee was empathetic enough to help a member of a different species.

My point here is that loving one's neighbor is something that can happen without any religion involved. I think this is what Jesus meant, even as he neatly slipped out of the Pharisee lawyer's rhetorical trap. The good Samaritan was not thinking of what was in it for him any more than the good chimp was. He saw someone in need and helped.

So, to be "truly Christian" is to love one's neighbor as one's self and recognize that we are all neighbors—everyone. I'm happy to report that everyone I have come across in this neighborhood has treated me in a truly Christian way, even though I am different. I commend you all and thank you in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.