

## Some Christians Use New Name

### In the News

The March 16 edition of *Newsweek* magazine carried an article titled "A Christian by Any Other Name" which reported on a trend in which many people who would formerly have identified themselves as "Christians" are now choosing to call themselves "followers of Jesus." The move appears to be driven by the perception that "Christian" has come to have certain baggage attached. That baggage may include assumptions about the personal habits and politics of the person identified as a Christian that may not be true of that person.

The article's author, Lisa Miller, points out that in earlier generations, denominational labels -- Lutheran, Nazarene, Baptist, etc. -- helped identify where people were on the spectrum of Christian faith (leaning left, leaning right, somewhere in the middle, liberal, conservative, etc.).

But as nondenominational churches began growing quickly in the 1980s, a number of Christians stopped identifying themselves denominationally. They sought other terms to describe their faith positions. Initially, some chose "born again," but after that term was applied to both Jimmy Carter and Jerry Falwell, men who were at different places on the Christian spectrum, and after the media began using that term derisively, many moved away from that label.

Others selected "evangelical," but as that came to cover conservatives, fundamentalists, progressives, members of the religious right and even some members of mainline denominations, it also became baggage-laden.

Many eventually settled for calling themselves simply "Christian."

But "as the Christian world continues to refine its identity," said Miller, "another label is gaining currency: 'follower of Jesus.'" She pointed out that on the social-networking Web site Facebook, more than 900 groups use some variation of "follower of Jesus." That label is also popular among small groups that meet regularly for ecumenical prayer.

Proponents of "follower of Jesus" say that the term has at least two advantages over either "Christian" or "evangelical." The first is that it doesn't carry baggage. It can be used to identify Christians in Islamic countries without giving offense. Likewise, it sits easily in mixed groups, where some are Jewish or adherents of Eastern religions. Second, it distances the person from the culture clashes in the United States, such as where political parties argue over which party's values are "Christian values."

While no one within Christianity appears to object to the new term per se ("follower of Jesus" is essentially a synonym for "Christian"), two questions are sometimes raised. One is whether the new label adequately acknowledges the full divinity of Christ (scholars sometimes use "Jesus" to refer to

his human identity and "Christ" to encompass his divine and human identity). Second, what is the role of the church? Many who claim identity as followers of Jesus are not affiliated with any church.

The question of how Christians should describe themselves also came up at an unrelated theological symposium that was in session at the same time Miller's article appeared. Speaking at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, scholar and author Diana Butler Bass, along with two other speakers, addressed the theme "New Ways of Being Church." All three agreed on the need for radical changes in the church to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Among those challenges are research results showing that the United States is growing less religious. Between 1990 and 2008, the number of people claiming no religion has almost doubled, from 8.2 percent to 15 percent.

These figures show "a decline of interest in parties and labels," Bass said. "People don't even like the label 'Christian' anymore." She went on to say that many don't identify with denominational labels and are increasingly put off by all the competing subgroups within denominations (conservatives, liberals, evangelicals, progressives, etc.).

Christians need to come up with new language to describe ourselves, she said. "We simply must have the language that carries the deepest sense of our passion to the world, so those who are busy rejecting us might give us another hearing." She also said that Christians need to look for ways to tell the story of Jesus that don't come across as "us versus them."

More on this story may be found at these links:

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/188198>

[http://www.churchexecutive.com/news.asp?N\\_ID=1786](http://www.churchexecutive.com/news.asp?N_ID=1786)

### **The Big Questions**

*Here are some of the questions we will discuss in class:*

1. What occurrences within the Christian world sometimes make you hesitant to identify yourself as a Christian? Have you ever wanted to say, "Yes, I'm a Christian, but I am not *that* kind of Christian"? If so, under what circumstances?
2. Is it true that "follower of Jesus" has less baggage than "Christian"? Would someone who takes offense at your identifying yourself as a Christian not take offense at your calling yourself a follower of Jesus? Why? Does changing our name really affect how people think of us?
3. Would changing our religious name change our behavior? Why or why not?
4. What might it mean to tell the story of Jesus in ways that don't come across as "us versus them"?

5. Have you ever wanted to not be identified by the name of your denomination? If so, under what circumstances?

6. Do religious subgroup labels (conservatives, liberals, evangelicals, progressives, etc.) serve any helpful role within the church? If so, what role? If not, why not?

### **Confronting the News with Scripture**

*We will look at selected verses from these Scripture texts. You may wish to read these in advance for background:*

Acts 9:1-9

Acts 11:19-26

Acts 26:24-29

1 Peter 4:12-19

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Matthew 16:24-26

*In class, we will talk about these passages and look for some insight on the big questions, as well as talk about other questions you may have about this topic. Please join us.*