

CHRISTIANITY MISUNDERSTOOD

Jim Fowler

I was invited to speak at a weekend men's retreat. The topic I chose for the weekend was "Christianity is Not Religion," with the counter-theme being an emphasis on the declaration that "Christianity IS Christ."

As I began to introduce the topic for the weekend, I detected some rumblings of conversation among the audience. When I stopped to determine what was going on, the men began to challenge my thesis. "Without a doubt, Christianity is religion," they asserted. "It is absurd to say that 'Christianity IS Christ; it is obviously religion,'" was their contention. There was an adamant consensus within the group that my thesis was absurd and fallacious.

Calling a "time-out" from the prepared message, we began an open-ended discussion of our preconceptions and use of words. Obviously, we had a different understanding of what comprised Christianity.

"What comes to *your* mind when you use the word 'Christianity,'" I asked the fellows in the group.

"When people use the word 'Christianity' today," the men explained, "they are referring to what takes place in the churches, in the Christian organizations, in the christianized political and social action groups, in Christian broadcasting, merchandizing, etc. All of these are self-defined expressions of 'Christianity,' and they are obviously manifestations of religion."

I had to admit that the popularly accepted definition of 'Christianity' was indeed referring to the social, ideological, and organizational expressions of what I often referred to as "Christendom" or "Christian religion." My theses became absurd when formulated in this context: "Christian religion is not religion." "Christian religion is Christ." My vocabulary failed me at this point!

"What do *you* mean by the word 'Christianity,'" they then asked.

"We obviously have a semantic difference in our vocabulary," I explained. "Coming, as I do, from a lifetime of theological studies, I use the word 'Christianity' as reference to the composite expression of Christian faith in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. More specifically, it refers to all who have experienced the unique gospel reality of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. My primary definition of the word 'Christianity' is 'Christ-in-you-ity'."

Their comeback was, "If your thesis is 'Christianity IS Christ,' then why don't you just avoid the ambiguity of the word 'Christianity' and simply refer to 'Christ'? That is what we have settled on in our vocabulary. We just want to speak about Jesus."

I was certainly in agreement with their conclusion, but explained that it would take some time to change my vocabulary usage. So I begged their indulgence to understand how I was using the word 'Christianity' for the remainder of the weekend together. We enjoyed delightful Christian fellowship.

Jacques Ellul

French sociologist, Jacques Ellul, experienced the same difficulty in his book *La Subversion du Christianisme* (English title: *The Subversion of Christianity*). Part of his thesis was 'Christianity is not an -ism' – not an ideological or institutional construct. But the French word for 'Christianity' is *Christianisme*. The thesis becomes an absurdity when one attempts to state, "*Christianisme* is not an -ism."

Without a viable word to express his premise in his native language, Ellul's solution was to refer to the phenomenon of 'Christianity' with the symbol "X," by which he meant the reality of the risen and living Lord Jesus Christ, functioning both in individuals and in the collective expression of the Church. His use of the "X" symbol certainly coincided with a long-standing tradition within the church to use the "X" symbol in reference to the cross of Christ. Whereas in mathematics the *x* symbol often represents the unknown quantity, Ellul's "X" symbol represented the known reality of the living Christ that was inexpressible in his native French language, and seems to be increasingly inexpressible in the English language also.

Modern World

Throughout the modern world reference to "Christianity" is developing an increasing negative connotation. In many regions of the world the designation "Christianity" conveys the connotation of a Western (primarily European and North American) religion that is inextricably connected with Western civilization and its cultural expressions. The liberalized moral decadence of Western civilization – viewed by many in other cultures as "*Christian* civilization" – has, in fact, fueled a backlash of repudiation of "Christianity" by other religio-cultural societies. Reverting to a radical conservatism of their own religio-cultural values, some have identified Western religious "Christianity" as the "Great Satan" that threatens to subvert their established way of life and religious worship. Islamic fundamentalism and its proclaimed *jihad* against Western thought and religion is the foremost contemporary example of this phenomenon. "Christianity," as thus understood by much of the modern world, has been cast in a most unfavorable light.

Just a Word

We know that words in every language are constantly evolving with different meaning. One example is the English word "cult," derived from the Latin word *cultus* meaning adoration or devotion. Until less than one hundred years ago the word "cult" was used to refer to worship, and it was not uncommon to see references to "Christian cultic practices," referring to the worship and ritual practices of Christians. Then, in the twentieth century, the word evolved into a negative connotation of reference to an aberrant, unorthodox, or spurious religious group. Now, most Christians would eschew use of the word "cult" in reference to their own group or practices.

Is the word "Christianity" undergoing just such an evolution of meaning? In the next few decades will this word develop such an ambiguity of meaning or such

accretions of identification that Christians will decide to retire the word or excise it from their Christian vocabulary? Will the word “Christianity” eventually become another anachronistic anomaly that many Christians will seek to avoid?

After all, it’s just a word, a term we employ to convey a particular meaning. If the meaning is lost, distorted, or so convoluted as to disallow the expression of what we mean, then the word “Christianity” might have to be disposed of and relegated to obsolescence.

It should be noted that “Christianity” is not a biblical word. The word “Christian” is found in the New Testament, but the word “Christianity” was a later development. Followers of Jesus were “first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:26). Perhaps it was initially a label of derision or derogation, but King Agrippa seems to have used the term as a neutral designation of one believing in Jesus Christ (Acts 26:28), and Peter employs it as an accepted reference to those identified with the name of Christ (I Peter 4:16). Soon thereafter the over-all phenomenon of persons identifying with Jesus Christ was generalized as “Christianity.” Ignatius and Polycarp, disciples of the apostle John, used the Greek word *christianismos* in the late first or early second century, and later writers used the Latin word *christianitas*. These were the root words of our English word “Christianity.”

If the origin of the word “Christianity” does not have biblical precedent or divine decree, then is it not conceivable that it might be withdrawn or retired? The word “Christianity” is not necessarily divinely inspired.

How do we respond?

Some readers will have a difficult time accepting that the word “Christianity” might have to be abandoned. It is a primary word by which Christians have identified themselves for many centuries. But words have a tendency to pick up baggage along the way, sometimes with negative connotations and interpretations that project the wrong meaning.

It is not my objective to lead the charge for the jettisoning of the word “Christianity” from the Christian vocabulary. I only seek to reveal that “Christianity” increasingly evokes a negative reaction in contemporary thought and language. The Christian community will have to determine how they will respond to the changing meaning of the term.

Large percentages of people throughout the world have accompanying identifications with the word “Christianity” that cause them to react to it with repulsion and animosity (even war!). An increasingly large percentage of persons in Western Europe and America have developed a concept of “Christianity” that is freighted with negative connotations that cause them to respond with disdain and vexation (even violence!). If our objective is to share the good news of the living Lord Jesus as the only hope for mankind, then we might have to reconsider whether it should be packaged with the word “Christianity.”

In conjunction with the men mentioned at the beginning of this article, perhaps we should abandon the utilization of the word “Christianity,” and refer only to Jesus Christ. The Christian message will be clearer and to the point if we just share Christ. Christ alone! Christ only! *Sola Christos!*