

Until the Lord Returns

How do you define a Christian? The sad history of brutal wars among different branches of Christianity for more than a thousand years illustrates painfully how hard it is to answer that question. In the last century the squabbles within Protestantism alone, though seldom leading to actual violence, have convinced some outsiders that if that is what Christianity is all about, Christians are welcome to it, thank you very much. More than 50 years after the beginning of Billy Graham's global ministry, some Christians still think he has betrayed Christianity.

Traditionally, Roman Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians have tended to define themselves by the creeds they assent to. All three major branches of Christendom have at least accepted the Nicene Creed (A.D. 381) as the core profession of Christian belief for the last 1,600 years.

When we go beyond this milestone document, however, our difficulties increase. What about the infallibility of the pope, the validity of infant baptism, the authority of Scripture or the theological significance of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, to name a few?

And that's just the theological side of the disagreement among Christian churches around the world. Unfortunately, there are profound historical animosities, too: the millennium-old antagonism of much of the Orthodox world to Roman Catholicism (Catholic crusaders sacked the Orthodox city of Byzantium in 1204), the Protestant resentment of 400 years of mistreatment by Catholics, and the suspicion among Catholics and the

Orthodox that Protestant missionaries in modern times are “sheep-stealing” by enticing followers of these traditions to embrace evangelical Protestantism.

With all of this doctrinal and historical baggage lying around the Christian world, can there ever be a genuine unity among all of the groups that are recognizably Christian to the extent of embracing the Nicene Creed? Probably not, until the return of Jesus Christ Himself.

But there are certain biblical guidelines to help us at least get along with one another, fellow believers of different denominational backgrounds, until the Lord Himself tells us who is right (certainly none of us in every way).

First, on the question of who is or isn't a Christian, we may never know in many cases until we get to heaven. We will probably be surprised to discover who made it and who didn't. For that reason, I think the most helpful individual definition of a Christian, beyond the core doctrinal points of the Nicene Creed, is very simply “one who loves Jesus.”

Are there strong points of difference among us on other points, such as water baptism, wine at communion, women in leadership to name a few? Probably.

But are the fruits of the Spirit visible in the lives of those whose doctrinal practices differ from ours? If the answer to that is yes, then we almost certainly have a brother or a sister. It was Jesus Himself who said, “‘You will know them by their fruits’ ” (Matt. 7:16, NKJV).

Looking at the brothers and sisters in our own local-church

bodies, do we notice some glaring and even irritating faults in them? Yet, don't we have strong biblical rules on how to behave toward them—with forbearance rather than judgment, prayer rather than criticism and humility at all times (see Eph. 4:2)?

Many non-Christians often lay their blame for not becoming a follower of Jesus Christ at the door of the multiplicity of denominations throughout Christendom. If there are so many points of difference among these Christians, they say, then what does that tell us about Christianity?

In fact, it tells us everything about God's grace. The truth is, we are all so vastly idiosyncratic, eccentric and plain different from one another that it would be intolerable if we all had to worship the Lord in exactly the same way.

We do not have to agree with our brethren. But as long as they are pointing their people to Jesus Christ, we need to support, encourage and pray for them. Perhaps, in return, they will overlook our weaknesses.