

Tare-ism
Wedgewood Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina
July 25, 2004
Delbridge E. Narron

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The struggle in the Christian church community to determine who is and who isn't a "REAL" Christian is a long struggle. In fact, the early history of the Church is a history of competing traditions and belief systems; competing bishoprics; competing geographical areas. The winners wrote the creeds and then used the creeds to further demonstrate the correctness of their beliefs. Did you know that the eastern and western churches ostensibly split over the addition by the eastern church of two Latin words to one of the creeds? The western church said that the holy spirit proceeded from the father "et filioque" – and the son. The eastern church maintained that the holy spirit proceeded from the father alone. Of course, the purported reason is not the only reason and political considerations perhaps had much more to do with the split than theological concerns, but who am I to argue with the church?

In and about the sixteenth century, many of the reformers accepted the idea that the church was dual – the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church would consist of all the people who might show up for worship; the invisible church was that subset of those folks who were actually Christian. For Calvin, those who were preordained; for the Mennonites, those who were truly saved; etc.

All my life, I've heard people from time to time talk about whether certain folks were "really" Christian or not. When I was in college, for instance, the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship took it upon themselves to develop a list of those folks around campus who were "not going to heaven." I'm pleased to report that I made the cut!

And some of you remember just a few months back when about eight folks left this congregation partly because they were sure that I was not a Christian – or at least not enough of a Christian to be allowed to preach from this pulpit.

So it should not have surprised me to read in the Charlotte Observer on Monday, June 14, 2004, that I was not a Christian. At least not according to the wisdom of S. Donald Fortson who is, after all, a professor in a local seminary. Dr. Fortson assures us that "[p]ersons are free to embrace whatever ideas they like, but they are not free to distort traditional teaching and then boldly declare these new revisionist ideas to be "Christian."

Oh my.

Well. Okay. I've been known to say that, well, sure you can worship God in your backyard or in Yosemite Park, but you can't practice Christianity except in community. Maybe I was wrong. I'll have to ask Dr. Fortson since he seems to have the manual. I've not yet, however, been arrogant enough to say that anyone who disagrees with historical "assertions" (and that's what he calls them "assertions") is not a Christian. I don't actually think Dr. Fortson really

believes that. Take slavery for instance. As late as 100 years ago or so, dominant Christianity in the United States (and by dominant I mean white folks) was certain that the entire history of Christianity affirmed the practice of owning slaves. Every minister in the country – with few exceptions – could and did cite multiple passages of scripture to prove that slavery was not just okay but encouraged.

As late as the 1950s at least, a majority of white Christians (at least, I don't want to believe that black Christians agreed) believed that the Bible clearly taught that mixed race marriages were against Christian teaching. Some sects have been lightening up on women in the pulpits for about 100 years, but for the most part, Christianity resisted women in positions of authority until relatively recently – and pointed to historical and biblical evidence to support this. The Roman Catholics, to name just the most obvious sect, still sticks to this, well, fallacy.

Also, the use of labels to define people leaves a lot to be desired. Take “racist” for example. A lot of folks like to use it to do battle against people. But does it really help to point at someone and call them a racist? Ok, fine, I'm a racist...if that makes you feel better. But isn't how we act much more important than what our inbred or indoctrinated initial responses might be? In other words, our beliefs are admittedly important, but I think our actions are what really have meaning.

So some people like to use the label “Christian” to control others. There really are a lot of folks out there in the world who worry that there might be someone out there who thinks they are not Christian. Moreover, there are lots of folks who are concerned about whether everyone else is Christian. And if someone points at me and says “not a real Christian”, that might mean something to some folks.

Do I do the same thing? I don't know. I think I probably use the label “stupid” more than “non-Christian” but it might work out to the same thing in the end.

In the passage I read earlier, we hear a story about a wheat field that has been surreptitiously sown with weeds. “Tares” one bible dictionary tells me were weeds that were very similar to wheat. Tares were difficult to discern from wheat. Of course, it might have just been common vetch – but in any event, if you pull it up in the middle of growing season you're more likely to harm the wheat than save it. Who are we to try to weed out others, no pun intended?

Matthew can't resist explaining that weeds really are weeds and that there will come a time when all those nasty weeds will be burnt along with weeping and gnashing of teeth and I don't know what all. But I'm okay with that ending because it's God, in the end, who makes the decisions about who is wheat and who is a tare. Matthew thinks that people will get burnt, I disagree. I don't think that means the two of us are on different journeys – just at very different places on that journey. And I should point out that being on the same journey doesn't mean being on the same road. We might be all headed to the same place, but we are all coming from different origins. That is, you and friend might both be headed to Chicago, but if you're leaving from Charlotte and your friend is leaving from San Francisco, your journeys are going to be quite different even if your goal is the same.

I hear people argue that homosexuals are sinful and that God can only accept them if they try to control their natural, albeit sinful, inclinations. I hear others say that single people should never have sex unless they get married first. Love the sinner, hate the sin. I don't know whether these folks are devoid of compassion or just full of conceit. But I guess I think they might just be as Christian as I in terms of the "who does God love" question.

A friend of mine says that we have every right to assert that our chosen religious way is better than the chosen religious ways of others, because if we are not willing to say it's better than what rationale do we have to following it?? Well, the answer is this, I think. My religious way is best for me at this time. That doesn't negate anyone else's chosen way, does it? That's not to say I'm not willing to stand up and say someone is wrong about issues. Fortson, for instance, is just way off base about gay and lesbian folks. He is, simply, wrong. But is he not a Christian just because he's wrong?

One of my mentors years ago preached a sermon on Easter about Judas. I don't remember lots of the details, but one thing sticks in my mind. Near the end, he speculated on what was going through Judas's mind, etc. and concluded by saying, well, I'll just ask him when I get to heaven. Then he raised one eyebrow (an act I cannot accomplish) and said, "Do you think Judas won't be there? Well, if Jesus didn't die for Judas, then how could he have died for any of the rest of us?"

I don't swallow the substitutionary atonement theory inherent in the question, but you get the drift. Until cats are free, none of us are free. If God can't choose all of us, then God might not choose any of us. Thank God it's not my place to parcel out the wheat and tares. And praise God, Donald Fortson isn't in charge either.

Sometimes I have folks help me in my garden and invariably they pull up flowers along with the weeds. Weeding is a dangerous game. I've even been known to pull up my own flowers when weeding. Plants look so much alike! Instead of weeding God's garden, why don't we just concentrate on watering and feeding the plants we find there and leave the weeding up to God. I really don't think God is all that much in need of our help in protecting the faith. To the extent it's the truth, it'll survive just fine without our interference.