

A 10-Letter Word  
Matthew 28:16-20  
May 18, 2008  
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This may or may not surprise you, but I am a complete nerd. On our vacation in January to Mexico, I read 5 or 6 books – none of which were fun novels. One of books I read, while on the beach, was the 2007 the Barna Research Group book entitled, “UnChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity and why it matters.” Thousands of people of all ages were polled and the focus was really on the 16-29 respondents. This book has picked up a lot of attention in the time it has been out and was highlighted through the efforts of youth and young adults at the UMC General Conference last month. So, if you were keyed in on that (or have read the book), don’t give the answers away...The study isolated six things that “outsiders,” meaning people who are not Christian, think about Christianity (from pages 29 & 30):

- Hypocritical: Christians convey a polished image that isn’t reality. They say one thing and do another.
- Too focused on getting converts: Outsiders feel like targets, not like people.
- Antihomosexual: Christians are bigoted against gays and lesbians. Christians are fixated on curing homosexuals and leveraging political solutions against them.
- Sheltered: Christians are old-fashioned, boring, and out of touch with reality. They prefer simplistic approaches to the world instead of recognizing necessary complexities.
- Too political: Christians are overly motivated by a political agenda that promotes conservatism.

- Judgmental: Christians are too quick to judge others and don't love others as they say they do.

This Confirmation Class has been struggling with throughout this year with these perceptions. I've heard them talk about how people at school make fun of them for going to church. I've heard them talk about how they're the only Christian they know at school. I've heard them talk about how they have a speech planned for when their asked about their faith. I have a feeling that they aren't the only ones. The interchange might be something like this:

-You're religious, right?

-Yes, I'm a Christian but I'm not like the kind of Christian you hear about in the news. I don't hate people and I'm not closed-minded. I go to church every week but it's not that kind of church.

Sound familiar? I'm guessing so. I have a problem with it, though. Not, mind you, to say that I haven't had that exact same conversation. And one with more layers – just try going out as a pastor. They say you're not supposed to talk about politics, religion, or sex at parties, right? What does a pastor have talk about at parties? Pretty much my life and life's work is one of the three taboos. This is a conversation I'm familiar with. But as I said, I also have a problem with it. You see we're falling into the same trap of negativity that is highlighted in this book. Out of the six key perceptions I just shared with you, 2 are about being against – antihomosexual and judgmental. One is “hypocritical” which is pretty similar. Folks interviewed saw Christians going to church and pretending to have it all together when secretly they were just as confused and made just as many mistakes as the rest of the world. The survey found that outsiders often saw Christians put on their

Sunday best and bring their best selves to church while covering up their imperfections. But God doesn't want your best behavior or your best clothing or you to pretend that you don't have any problems. God wants your messiness and confusion and mistakes and brokenness – otherwise, where is there room for healing? where is there room for God to really affect the deep part of you that is longing to connect? where is there the admission that humanity (even if we're Christians) are not God and can't do this thing called life alone? And it sets Christians up against everyone else. The attitude is: "We Christians are living perfection because we're Christian." "We're good and you're not. If you want to be good, you'll be like us" (which, of course brings us to another point on the list – that Christians are too focused on conversion).

Born again Christians are reading *UnChristian* and trying to figure out how to change their public image. And probably their private one, too. After all, public images come from somewhere. The Barna Group has pointed out what's wrong with how evangelicals have been marketing themselves and their faith for the past few decades. In this book, it is pointed out that "Young people said they formed their views of Christians based on conversations with others, often with Christians." Some of the people polled have been to a church, some have not. The fact is that Christians are responsible for the way our religion is seen by those who are not inside it.

But here's the thing: evangelism is not the territory of evangelicals. Evangelism is the territory of Christians. In Greek the word for "Gospel" is euangelion and the verb (what might be evangelizing today, is euangelow (I bring a good message). Evangelism is "gospeling"

Here's what I hope: I hope you heard that list, nodded, and said, "yes, I can see how outsiders could view Christianity like that." I hope you also shook your head and said, "that's so sad, that's not how I feel about my faith." I *also* hope you said, "wow – that's not what my church is like." Put all this together and you're probably realizing something that I've been working on with this Confirmation Class. We cannot let the message that the loudest Christians are proclaiming be the one that defines us. The young people in our Confirmation Class have decided today to become adult Christians. Despite the fact that the perceptions out there are negative about our religion, these young people have thoughtful and faithful reasons why they are going to label themselves Christians. Why would anyone do that, knowing what others will think?

I hope you are feeling a little bit obstinate and ready to reclaim evangelism. When we go gospeling, it would seem obvious that the message we share has to be good; it's in the definition of the term. A message of hatred is not the good news, a message of ignoring the world around us is not good news, a message of hypocrisy is not good news, a message of right-wing political agendas is not good news, a message of judgment rather than love is not good news, a message of outsiders being targets and not people with whom we want to be in relationship is not good news.

Folks, we in this congregation need to evangelize. We need to stand up proudly as Christians who are for the kind of loving community these youth have just joined. We need to stand up and quit defining ourselves as "not like those other Christians" but as ourselves. We are not not-something. We are who we are. We are a community of loving individuals who come together to be relationship with one another and with a just, loving, all-inclusive, liberating God. We are Christians who are for love and equality. We are

Christians who are brimming over with good news and we have to stop being afraid to share it.

I think it's nothing short of a miracle that, with all the bad press Christianity gets in the world, we are all in this room. It is proof of a living God that we are sitting here. Motivated by the Spirit, searching for something, coming with questions and openness to finding the answers with God. I think it is nothing short a miracle that these 7 youth want to join the Christian church. And this is the kind of every day miracle we start expecting if we can evangelize in the way it was intended. This lesson from Matthew is called the Great Commission, it is where the Scriptural basis for evangelism is most often found. So this morning, I am challenging you all and myself, to be who you are openly and beautifully. Next time you're at a party let people know that you are Christian. And follow it up with, "And yes, I am that kind of Christian. The kind who really loves people and struggles to do justice in a world of injustice. Yes, I am that kind of Christian who knows that faith isn't just about me and my relationship with God, it's about my relationship with humanity and the world we all live in. Yes, I am that kind of Christian, who sometimes messes up and doesn't have all the answers but is constantly trying to figure out what the right way to bring the kingdom of God closer might be. Yes, I am that kind of Christian that you've heard so much about – the kind who is radical in my love and striving every day to show this world what it means to believe in a God who is crazy in love with us all."

Stand up and be for something. Stand up and be loving. Stand up and be a Christian who isn't afraid to let people know. Don't apologize, evangelize! Don't

apologize for what others have defined you as – stand up and evangelize with what you actually are!