

Are You a Competent Christian?

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Holy Communion
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“Do you understand what you are reading? . . . ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’” -- Acts 8:30

In a few minutes, we're going to celebrate Holy Communion. We'll mark the start of that process by singing a hymn, and for many centuries, during the singing of the hymn before Communion, people who had not been baptized as adult believers would leave the worship service. Not only were unbaptized persons not permitted to receive Communion for many centuries, they weren't even permitted to be present while Communion was received by others. The reasoning was that Communion was a Christian mystery – the only Christian mystery, in fact, still visible to the naked eye – and that mystery could only be apprehended and received properly by those who had made an adult commitment, through instruction and baptism, to the way of life exemplified and commanded by Jesus.

And preparation for baptism was a process that took weeks, months, sometimes even years. Persons who wanted to know what Christianity meant or who wanted to join the Christian church weren't simply signed up, the way many churches take in new members today. In the early days of the church, gaining membership was a strenuous process, and the lengthy period of instruction was designed as much to weed out the unqualified wanna-be's as to provide genuine recruits with the fundamentals of the faith.

The Greek word for instruction is *catechesis* and the pupils were called catechumens. The teacher, in the early days of the church, was the bishop, since preparation to become a Christian was considered too important and too complex a matter for a local priest, who might not be able to read or write himself.

The church believed that the Christian faith wasn't simply emotional – how one felt about Jesus. The church has always believed and in those days strongly believed that Christianity has intellectual content, a body of teachings that had been received and passed on, and that it was important for people interested in Christianity to know what they were getting into.

Christianity in those days wasn't the 2,000-year-old cultural artifact it is with us. Christianity in its early days was regarded as a new-fangled cult and a threat to society. Around the year 112, the Roman governor Pliny wrote to the emperor Trajan back in Rome asking what to do with the followers of what he called a “depraved, excessive superstition.” Pliny told Trajan that if someone were brought before him, having been accused of being a Christian, he gave the person three chances to deny their Christian superstition; if they refused three times, they were executed. Is this okay?

Trajan replied that Pliny was essentially doing the right thing and that he shouldn't waste time and precious resources hunting down Christians; if they were ratted out by local officials, then yes, continue as before: give them a chance to recant and if they didn't, put them to death.

Pliny's opinion about Christianity wasn't unique; it was shared by most people of his age. The stories of Jesus's teachings and lifestyle, the reports of his miracles, the salvific power of his execution as a common criminal, and the conviction of his followers that God has raised him from the dead – all of that struck Pliny as so much superstitious nonsense. A lot of people in Pliny's time shared that opinion; a lot of people in our time share it. Have you ever wondered why they do and you, apparently, do not?

It's because Christianity, at some level and in some way, makes sense to you as a way of life. While you may not know everything there is to know in this rich religion of ours, you know enough to know that it's for you. You vote in favor of Jesus Christ, his church, and the Christian life with your feet, Sunday after Sunday, and many of you, I know, are making that same decision, in small ways and large, on other days of the week as well.

Without prefacing everything you do with the words, "As a follower of Jesus Christ," I know that many of you are feeding the hungry, caring for God's creation, comforting the dying, and bringing relief to the suffering in countless ways. You are part of that scattered "servant church of the servant Christ" that we'll speak of in our closing prayer in a few minutes.

But what about instructing others in the Christian faith – could you do it? Can you articulate why you do what you do for Jesus? Are you as competent as Philip was to help guide the stranger from Ethiopia into a relationship of knowledge and love of Jesus Christ?

I know we have dedicated Sunday School teachers in this church, but if the curriculum weren't there, and you had to wing it, could you? Are you confident enough of your life as a Christian, as someone who's spent a lifetime in the church, to show someone else how your faith is part of something vast and ancient and good?

Let me rephrase these big questions in a simpler, smaller way. Do you say grace at meals, even when you eat out and even when you dine alone? Pausing before we eat to remember to thank God for the long chain of labor and blessing that keeps us from hunger is one of those small but important markers that distinguish religious people from people of no religious sensibilities. By itself, of course, saying grace hardly constitutes a mature life of faith, but it's one of those small, regular, reflexive habits that keep us in touch with God, and keeping in touch with God is what ultimately develops a Christian person's competence.

All of us who try to maintain some degree physical fitness know that it takes a series of small steps, repeated day in and day out, to remain fit. Exercise by itself won't do it; diet plays a role, but dieting alone won't make you fit. Muscles and joints need exercise, and we all need to get more sleep, drink more water, and go outside and play. Competence, when it comes to physical fitness, is a matter of small steps that become part of our routine.

Christian competence works the same way. It's a series of small steps, repeated day in and day out, without a great deal of fanfare or bother, that become part of us – who we are.

Regular prayer is a must; I cannot overemphasize the importance of prayer. Prayer needn't be elaborate or lengthy; it simply needs to be frequent and sincere.

Worship, the study of the Bible, and knowing the basics of the Christian faith are indispensable. Many of us liberals become tongue-tied and self-conscious in the presence of our more conservative, evangelical, and articulate sisters and brothers, and Karen and I have worked very hard to try to give all of you greater facility and confidence with basic Christian vocabulary and ideas, but our efforts are no more effective than a trainer's: ultimately, if you want to get in shape, you have to do the work.

And keeping company with people who recognize, honor, and support you in your Christian faith is tremendously important. That's one of the principal purposes of the church. We gather as a local church, in part, to remind ourselves that none of us is in this business of Christianity alone. We have help, we have companionship, and we have resources to help us along life's way, and those comforts count for a very great deal.

Those small steps – regular prayer, regular worship, regular study, regular service, regular fellowship – those are the sorts of steps that make Christians competent, and competent Christians are the sort of people who keep Christianity alive and well and they're the sort of people whom Christianity keeps alive and well. Competent Christians are confident Christians, who neither cower nor bully when it comes to living out and speaking about their faith. They're people of kindness, patience, peace, love, joy, generosity, and all the other fruits of the Spirit Paul lists in Galatians. Life really is different for such folks – it's better. Try it and see for yourself.