

THREE QUESTIONS

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, 2011

On the Idea: The Identity of a Christian

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

All this week, it seemed that the well had run dry. I had a tentative idea for a sermon for today that seemed as off the wall as some of the things that fellow Eugene Peterson says in his books. I had read all the lessons for today, and all that came were some thoughts about the situation in our country and the world that mated up with what I first thought was the Psalm – I failed to turn a page and read Psalm 90 instead of 91. In Psalm 90, verse 12 spoke to me in a funny way in regard to something I was reading in one of Peterson's books, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*; but that did not really mesh well with either the lessons or my weird idea. The result was a sort of mental paralysis. Finally, at 3:00 yesterday afternoon, I gave up and began typing this, which will go with my weird idea.

This will not be like any of my previous sermons. I may end up doing so, but I am not setting out to expound on any particular text from the Bible. Rather, I want to ask you some questions, not wanting or expecting answers. I just want you to think about your answers to them before I give you some answers to them. Consider it to be a Socratic monologue.

The first question is short and simple: **Who are you?** What is your answer to this when this question is asked of you in a neutral or friendly, nonthreatening manner; not what would your answer be if someone belligerently asked you, “Who do you think you are?”?

The second question is just as short, but may require a little more thought: **What are you?** I shall not elaborate on this even as much as I did on the first question.

The third question is again just as short, but may require more thought: **Why are you?** And if you have a question of your own, the answer may be, “Yes, I am getting to be as weird as Peterson. Well actually, maybe not.

If your unasked question is along the line of “Why on earth is he doing this?”, you are anticipating me, for I am about to tell you. Some time ago, I told some of you that I thought the Episcopal Church did a very poor job of teaching me about the Christian faith. I don't remember whether that was in a conversation, a Bible Study, or a sermon. It doesn't matter; it is still true. I was not taught well. At the Global Anglican Future Conference in Jerusalem in 2008 it was recognized that over the last 50 or so years, Anglican churches have done a poor job of teaching

the Gospel to their own members, much less to the unchurched of the world. We don't do teaching well at home, and we do evangelism even worse, much worse.

Now, teaching, when it is done in a church, is usually spoken of using a word that has its roots in, where else, Greek. That word as a verb in English is to *catechize*, and a teacher is a *catechist*. This comes from the Greek prefix, **κατα**, *kata*, which has the basic meaning of down, and, **ᾠχέω**, *ēcheo*, which means to make a sound. Put them together and we get **κατηχέω**, which came to mean to teach in a systematic or detailed manner. The usual method of catechizing is with a collection of set questions and answers, called, obviously, a catechism.

Just an odd aside, before I knew better, which wasn't very long ago, I thought that the word, catechism came from the Latin word, *catena*, which means a chain, because a catechism is a chain of questions and answers. Just goes to show us that one has to be careful when trying to find the origins of old words.

So what I have done with my three questions is begin a catechism. The first question, “**Who are you?**”, is usually answered by most people simply by saying their name. The question, “**Who are you?**” is asked 20 times in the Bible. Six times it is answered by the giving of a name. Many times it is not answered at all by someone who does not want to give his name for reasons that are not really good. In Exodus 3:3, when Moses approached the burning bush, He did not know that it was God doing that so he did not ask, “**Who are you?**”; but God spoke to him outright and after calling to Moses and telling him to take off his sandals, He identified Himself saying, Ex. 3:6 **6 "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.** However, Moses did ask God to tell him His name when he knew God wanted to send him to talk to all the people of Israel and to the Pharaoh; so in verses 13 and 14, we read, Exodus 3:13-14 **13 Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"**

Names are important. When asked “**Who are you?**”, most people will give their name, unless they have some reason not to do so, usually not good, but sometimes good. Even Jesus did not give his name in answer to this question once in John 8:25.

The second question, “**What are you?**”, is a little more pointed, and the answer usually depends on the context. Most people are likely to think that the question is asking for their

occupation., so the answer could be anything such as: I'm a cop.; I'm a truck driver.; I'm a geezer. I'm a Christian.; I'm a Baptist.; or I'm a Reformed Episcopalian. In an AA meeting, the answer might be, "I'm an alcoholic." Sometimes it's citizenship, as in, "I'm an American." which many people might say when what they really mean is, "I'm a citizen of the United States." There are lots of possible answers.

The third question though is the one that might give you a hint as to where I am headed with this. "Why are you?" I can guess that your first reaction might have been, "What? What did he say? Why am I? Why am I what?" Then maybe, or maybe not, you figured out that I was really asking a pertinent question, but it was deliberately obscure. If you thought that, you'd be partly right. The question I was really asking was, "Why do you exist?" To be is to exist, so to ask "Why are you?" is to ask why are you here, now, in this flesh. I am not asking "What is your purpose in life?", but rather "Why are you alive and here on this earth?"

These are the first three questions I would ask if I were writing a catechism. They were asked the way they were to make them all have only three words. so maybe they aren't as clear as they could be; but that makes it more fun and more educational. This came about partly because I misremembered how the Catechism in the BCP goes, and what its answers are. That Catechism, which begins on page 577 of the PB is one that I memorized most of when I was in the first grade. Its first question is, "What is your name?", which is more straightforward than my, "Who are you?" and can have only one answer, ... your name.

However, for many many years, I thought its second question was, "What are you?" for which I thought the answer was, "I am a child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven." I had forgotten that the question was, "Who gave you this name?". It is asked that way so that the answer brings forth the Sacrament of Baptism and its conjunction with the giving of your name (your Christian name) and the function of your parents and God-parents and the result of that Baptism. I had also forgotten that "a member of Christ" was part of the answer. It was that faulty memory that brought forth the theme of this sermon and that odd third question, "Why are you?"

I asked that third question so that the three questions together would bring out answers that together would give the more complex answer to the question, "How do you identify yourself?" The reason for all this to find the answer to the question, "How should we, as Christians, identify ourselves 'at all times and in all places'?" My motivation for asking the third question is a

matter of completing that identification, and it stemmed from my reading of other Catechisms and from not knowing the answer to a question I was asked on my oral examination back in July of 2008, which was, “What has God been doing all through the Bible, but especially from Abraham on?” The answer to that I now know is: **Creating for Himself a people so that as He so often says, ‘I shall be their God and they shall be my people.’**

With this knowledge we can now answer my three questions.

To answer “**Who are you?**” you just give your name. Adding anything else would be providing part of the answer to the second question.

The answer to “**What are you?**” I would suggest should be, “**I am a child of God, a member of Christ, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven.**”, and yes, in that order. When we speak of God without modifiers or qualifiers, I think that should come before any mention of the persons of the Trinity. What’s more, this should come before any mention of Baptism or of how we got to be His children, which happens to be the answer to the third question.

The answer to “**Why are you?**” is simply this, “**Because God wanted me to be His child.**” This stems from one of the attributes of God and one of Jesus Statements about God’s action of grace. That attribute is the foreknowledge of God. Many verses of the Bible attest to this foreknowledge: Jeremiah 1:5 **5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."**. Romans 8:29 **29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.;** and 1 Peter 1:1-2 **Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:.** The action of God’s grace is shown attested to by Jesus in John 6:44 **44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.** If God the Father puts it into our hearts to come to faith in Jesus Christ, we cannot deny that that is a gift of Grace greater than any other, for He has drawn us to salvation. Salvation exists and is found only in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. If you read that Catechism in the PB, you will much description of what is required to lead a godly life and partake in the life of the church, but this central fact of the Gospel that Jesus Christ died for our sins is not stated directly anywhere in that Catechism. That

fact needs to be stated directly and repeated until it is part of our being. As Presiding Bishop Riches told his clergy at Synod in his sermon two years ago, “**Preach Christ crucified.**”; so I do.

That study by the Global Anglican Future Conference prompted two of the greatest theologians of our day, James I. Packer and Thomas Oden, to put together a statement of belief based on the Gospel. It is called, *One Faith*, a title taken from that quote from Ephesians that is on the front of the Bulletin. Packer is an Anglican and Oden is a Methodist, only one step away from being an Anglican. It is a wonderful book and is quite comprehensive, but it is not a Catechism. Its comprehensiveness and 174 pages make it too long to become a Catechism. The Catechism of the PB is not bad; there is nothing in it that is false. It just needs to have a few things added to it. I think we should be able to come away from a Catechism able to answer my three questions like this: **I am Randolph Constantine. I am a child of God, a member of Christ, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. I was born because God wanted me to be His child and a brother of His Son, Jesus Christ.**

If you can identify yourself in that way, there is a nasty question that begs for an answer from every person on this earth: “If you can identify yourself that way, why don’t you live as if you believe it?” The answer to that is that we still live in a fallen world and bear the curse of original sin; but we are on that narrow road of sanctification. We may slip off into the ditch, but the Holy Spirit helps us out so that our feet do not slip, at least not immediately, so that each day we get a little farther down that road toward the narrow gate. It is only through that gate do we find and enter into the Family of Christ of which we were destined to be members.

AMEN