

What does it mean to be a Christian plumber?

Most of us have nouns in common; it's the adjectives that divide us.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 23, 2022](#) issue



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A plumber in my town is not shy about marketing himself as a Christian plumber. The fish decal and the “Plumbing for Jesus” tagline on his van reveal his spiritual bearings. For some time, though, I’ve wondered what makes him a Christian plumber. Is there a specifically Christian way to clean out a clogged toilet, or an unchristian way to install a faucet? I can’t imagine there is. What’s probably behind the phrase “Christian plumber” is some confusion between the qualities of a man who must be deeply Christian and the activity of plumbing that can’t be Christianized at all.

Sometimes I wince when I hear *Christian* used as an adjective applied to people. Adjectives are splendid inventions of grammar, yet they do not carry the definitive strength or force of nouns. Their main purpose is to modify or qualify something that

is larger and more important than they are. This relational ordering is why I like to think of myself as a Christian first and a Lutheran second—a Lutheran Christian. The adjective *Lutheran* merely adds texture, depth, and light to my more central identity as a Christian.

When we look at the particulars of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, there are many things we don't know, of course—his IQ, his cooking abilities, his physical strength, to name a few. But according to Carlyle Marney, we know something of his spiritual genius because of his ability to distinguish adjectives from nouns. Marney insisted that Jesus differed from others of his time by understanding the clear difference between words like *Samaritan*, *leper*, and *sinner*, which function like adjectives, and *human being*, *person*, and *child of God*, which serve as nouns.

Marney suggested that most of us get the nouns and adjectives involving humanity all mixed up. Yes, adjectives offer particularity. But when we insert adjectives to represent people in place of nouns, the damage can be immense. Once we elevate adjectives like *male*, *female*, *liberal*, *conservative*, *illegal*, *gay*, *straight*, *Black*, and *White* to the status and importance of nouns, we rob people of their larger humanity. We steal some of their uniqueness and depth from them. Most of us have nouns in common; it's the adjectives that divide us.

The Christian community in Le Chambon, France, secretly sheltered some 2,000 Jewish refugees during World War II. When Vichy authorities ordered pastor André Trocmé to cease his activities, he refused, saying, "I do not know of Jews. I only know of human beings."

Malcolm X, in his autobiography, describes the day a car pulled up beside him at a red light. A White man in the passenger seat stuck his hand out the window and called out, grinning, "Malcolm X! Do you mind shaking hands with a white man?" As the light turned green, Malcolm X told him, "I don't mind shaking hands with human beings. Are you one?"

We often assign adjectives more authority than they deserve. But one of the beautiful features of church communities that prize heterogeneity, it seems to me, is their quiet encouragement for people to become more noun-conscious Christians. Adjective Christians may like to be described by what they do or how they behave. Noun Christians are known by who they are. When all is said and done, I want the Christian faith to define who I am, not how well I can fix your toilet.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The grammar of faith.”