

Defining ‘Nominal’ Christianity

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PRE-CONFERENCE DRAFT

Contents

Introduction

The idea of nominality

Not affiliated

Not practicing

Not converted, unregenerated

 Questions

Not committed, superficial

Parameters of being Christian

 Basic dimensions

 The big B’s and more

 Seven aspects or parameters

 Decisive parameter(s)?

How to define nominal Christianity

Introduction

People who claim to be ‘Christian’ but do not regularly attend are popularly referred to as nominal Christians. This perception of nominality is as simplistic as it is unsatisfactory, for a commitment to a Christian life-style embraces other activities besides churchgoing. Yet, the popular definition prevails because it is the most easily quantifiable and places the regular churchgoer outside the problem... Nominality is a problem that lurks in the ranks of the faithful churchgoers as well as among those who no longer occupy the church pews.¹

With these remarks, Eddie Gibbs put the finger on a paradox: in churches and seminaries and Christian organisations we speak about nominality as if everybody knows what we mean, but when asked, we find it difficult to define, because it really is a complicated and confusing subject. In fact, nominality is a collective term for several phenomena. The more we look at them, the more difficult it becomes to identify a common denominator and arrive at an overall definition.²

This paper

Our aim in this paper aims at clarifying this problem of definition. We shall argue that it is virtually impossible to give one general definition of nominal Christianity that will satisfy everyone who uses this term. All depends on the theological views on how to become a Christian and what are the ‘normative’ constituents of being a Christian.

¹ Eddie Gibbs, ‘Contextual Considerations in Responding to Nominality’, in Dean Gilliland, *The Word Among Us*, p. 241.

² See for recent summaries of the discussion: Michael Neumann, ‘Nominal, Nominal Christian’. In Scott Moreau (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, p. 694f.; Eddie Gibbs, ‘Nominalism’. In W.A. Dyrness & V. Karkkainen (eds.), *Global Dictionary of Theology*, 611-13.

This paper is part of a series of two, that have been written at the demand of the organising committee of the Lausanne Movement's Global Consultation on Nominalism, to be held from 14 to 18 March 2018 in Rome.

The footnotes only mention authors and main titles, they refer to the full bibliography at the end of the second paper.

My theological and pastoral position

Let me be clear about my credentials, my theological position is Protestant Evangelical. Affirming the 'solas' of the Reformation (salvation by God's grace alone, in Christ alone, by faith alone, and the supreme authority of the Bible in matters of faith and conduct), I am persuaded of the value and validity of the Evangelical expression of the Christian faith. Evangelical in the broad sense of the term. Leaving aside differences of style and theoretical points of disagreement, Evangelicalism can be characterized by the following points: personal salvation and regeneration, personal faith relation with God, Jesus the unique way of salvation for all men, necessity of evangelism and the call for conversion, participation in a community of believers, the hope of heaven, Christ's return and the final consummation of the Kingdom of God, last judgment and final condemnation of the wicked. Clearly, this position implies a certain idea of being Christian, in terms of piety, spiritual experience, beliefs, Church participation and practical behaviour. Evangelicals are persuaded that 'nominal' Christianity, whatever form it takes, represents less than the 'normal' Christian life. Therefore, it is not something to be simply observed and analysed, but also, if not primarily, a challenge that calls for pastoral and evangelistic ministry to the people called 'nominal'.

The idea of nominality

Discrepancy

According to the latest estimates of the Pew Research Forum, there were 2.77 billion Christians in the world in 2015. They remained the largest religious group in the world in 2015, making up nearly a third (31.2%) of Earth's 7.3 billion people. But the report also shows that the number of Christians in what many consider the religion's heartland, the continent of Europe, is in decline.³

These and other demographic statistics of religious affiliation, such as the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, are based on the following definition:

Christians are all who call themselves followers of Christ, in public or in private or who regard themselves ... as part of the community or who claim to be such.⁴

The demographic statistics of Christianity and other religions provided by the Pew Forum are also based on self-identification. 'The intent is sociological rather than theological, and no set of beliefs (such as adherence to a particular creed) or practices (such as regular church attendance) is used to define who is a Christian.'⁵

However, there is a difference between a stated adherence to a faith and a committed application of that faith. There is often some kind of discrepancy between the two. This phenomenon, which can be observed in all religions, is referred to as nominality. Eddie Gibbs speaks of 'deviation'.

Nominality refers to the extent of deviation between the identity claimed by persons and the actual commitment to that identity.⁶

³ Pew Research Forum, *The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, published 5 April 2017.

⁴ C.K. Barret, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, edition 1982, p. 68.

⁵ See e.g. Pew Forum, *Global Religious Landscape*, 2012, footnote 7.

⁶ Eddie Gibbs, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

As far as Christianity is concerned, 'nominal' is a confusing term and difficult to define, because there are different ways in which the Christian identity can be at variance with Christian belief and practice. In passing, the term 'nominalism' can be misleading, because it has a different meaning in philosophy and historical theology. It refers to a school of thought according to which universal terms are general ideas are mere names without any corresponding reality. Only particular objects exist. We use universal or abstract terms, such as love, to describe certain acts and thoughts that we qualify as 'love' because they correspond to our idea of 'love', but according to nominalist theory, 'such ideas are mere necessities of thought or conveniences of language and therefore exist as names only with no ideal realities corresponding to them'.⁷

On the contrary, nominal Christianity is not a philosophy or a world-view or a school of thought. It is not an 'ism' but refers to a phenomenon, or rather to various phenomena with respect to religious affiliation, beliefs and conduct. Instead of 'nominalism', it seems more appropriate to speak of 'nominality'.⁸

Every Christian or some 'Christians'?

What is a 'nominal Christian'? At face value, it can mean two things, depending on the double meaning of the word 'nominal'.⁹

First: relating to, or constituting a name, bearing the name of a person'. Hence, we speak of 'a nominal roll' of all participants to an event, of all members of a society. In this sense, every Christian is a nominal Christian, because he belongs to the category of persons who bear this name, or who are called by this name. It refers to everyone who is on the list of Christian believers, so to speak.

Who were the first nominal 'Christians' in history? We find them already in the days of the New Testament. In Antioch, only some decades after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, 'the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch' (Acts 11, 27).

The second meaning is: 'existing or being something in name or form only'. Hence, we speak of a nominal head of a political party who has no real power, of a nominal independence of a country that remains occupied by a foreign military force, and so on. In this sense, the term 'nominal' is also used with respect to 'individuals for whom religion plays only a nominal role in constructing a sense of self and of group membership'.¹⁰

This is also the usage of the term 'nominal' in the context of the Christian religion. It refers to a discrepancy between a person's stated Christian identity and his actual commitment to the Christian faith. As Abby Day explains:

By implication, this category [nominalism] suggests an opposition to another, perhaps truer or more authentic form of Christianity, measured by Church attendance and/or subjective questions about the importance of religion.¹¹

Further on, we shall take a closer look at these and other measures that are used to tell the authentic from the nominal, but what we can already say at this stage, is that the term 'nominal' is used to cast doubt on the way in some people express their Christian identity, or even on that identity as such. 'We find that they are not behaving as a follower of Jesus should behave'. Or, 'we are not sure whether they are genuine believers.' To express this doubt, the name Christian is sometimes written in inverted comma's.

⁷ Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th Edition.

⁸ As e.g. Eddie Gibbs, *op. cit.*, and the *Statement on Nominality*, notwithstanding the fact that its authors were convened for the 'Lausanne Consultation on Nominalism' in High Leigh (1998).

⁹ Definitions from Merriam Webster's Dictionary, entry 'nominal'.

¹⁰ Oxford Dictionary, entry 'nominal'

¹¹ Abby Day, *Believing in belonging*, p. 177.

Other terms

In the English-speaking world, nominalism is the most widely adopted term to describe the phenomenon, although other terms are also being used, mainly to give a more specific description of the people concerned: ‘cultural’, ‘notional’, ‘dechurched’ and ‘unchurched’ Christians.

In French-speaking countries, the standard term is ‘sociological Christians’ (*chrétiens sociologiques*), rather than *nominalisme*, which is not widely used. ‘Sociological’ in these expressions has the same connotations as ‘cultural Christians’ in English.

Similarly, the Spanish speak of *crisianismo sociológico* or *cultural*.

Germans speak of ‘name Christians’ (*Namenschristen*). While Evangelical authors adopt it frequently,¹² sociologists and authors with a Roman Catholic or Lutheran ecclesiology prefer to speak of *Kirchenferne*, to indicate ‘those Christians who on their own account keep a distance from the life of their Church’.¹³

Kirchenferne is a typically German word, difficult to translate. It literally means ‘far from the Church’. One could paraphrase it as ‘peripheral’ or ‘marginal Church members’, which is, in fact, the precise meaning of the Dutch equivalent *randkerkelijken* (‘people at the margin of the Church’).

Christian, BUT...

Whatever the terminology, there is always the idea behind it that something is lacking, that something is not as it should be. This is what we call the idea of nominality.

Right from the early Church there have been tensions about what sort of Christian is the true sort, which has always lead to distinguish it from other forms of Christianity. This is also the background of the idea of nominality. There is no consensus about what it stands for, because there is no consensus about the criteria that should be used to draw the line between authentic and ‘in name only’.

Often, ‘nominal’ is defined by way of negation (the *via negativa*), in terms of what these Christians are *not*. This or these lacunae then become the common denominator of all those who are collectively called nominal. This approach can be summed up in one very simple three-letter-word that has the power to change a good reputation, deconstruct a grand idea, take away one’s assurance, tear down a whole argument: BUT.

Here is the beginning of all definitions of ‘nominal’ following this approach, the first half of it: ‘They are called ‘Christian’, but...’ ‘They say they are Christian, but...’

However, all depends on the second half, on what you put behind this terrifying three-letter-word.

How to finish the definition? It is here that the problems begin. Many things are being put forward to complete the sentence. ‘They are called Christian, but they are not members of a Church; ...but they are not regularly going to Church; ...but they are not born again; ...but they are not living as disciples of Jesus-Christ; and so forth. At any rate, when people use the word nominal there is always a ‘but’, somewhere, somehow.

Not affiliated

Let us look at some ways of defining the concept by way of negation. First, ‘*these people identify themselves Christians, but they are not members of a Church*’. In other words, the decisive criterion is affiliation. Nominals, then, are the unaffiliated among the Christian population.

C.K. Barrett and his associates, for example, subdivide the total Christian population in *professing* Christians, who ‘publicly profess (declare, state, confess, self-identify) their preference or adherence in a government census or public-opinion poll’ – and *crypto-Christians*, ‘who for reasons of family,

¹² E.g. Edward Rommen, *Namenschristentum: theologisch-soziologische Erwägungen*, and ‘A Framework for the Analysis of Nominal Christianity’.

¹³ Johannes Först, ‘Kirchenkrise, Kirchenferne und Säkularisierung’.

personal safety, status, employment or other factors do not declare or reveal their commitment to Christ or expose their faith to public or state scrutiny or enquiry but prefer to keep it private'.¹⁴ They further divide the professing Christian population in two categories: *affiliated Christians*. 'All persons belonging to or connected with organised churches'. Or, to be more precise:

Affiliated Christians: the total of all individuals attached to or claimed by the institutional churches and organised Christianity and hence part of their corporate life, community and fellowship, including children, infants, adherents, catechumens, and members under discipline...

Nominal Christians: who for reasons good or bad, do not belong to the visible and organised community of believers, but they define themselves as Christians, though from the local churches' point of view, they are regarded as Christians in name only.¹⁵

The second category includes those who attend church only on civic occasions or state festivals or for special family occasions such as baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Critique

Nominal, then, equals non-affiliated, but this is not the usual meaning of this term in religious studies or in theological and missiological parlance. It refers to some level of discrepancy between Christian identity and practice, both within and outside the registered membership of institutional Churches. Moreover, we should not assume that someone does not practice his stated Christian faith, just because he is not affiliated.

Not practicing

A second way to define nominality in terms of what is lacking, is to finish the definition as follows: '*These people call themselves Christians, but they are not regularly participating in the life of a Church*'. In this case, the decisive criterion is not adherence but attendance.

In field studies and surveys, this is a very common way to measure religious practice. Respondents are asked to indicate the frequency of attending a worship service or going to Mass. Typically, they can choose between once a week, once a month, once (or a few times) a year, and never. A distinction is then made between regular and occasional Churchgoers, but there is no generally agreed standard. Often, the line is drawn at once a month.

In socioreligious literature, regular Churchgoers are called a practicing Christians, *pratiquants* in French. Another term, used in the English-speaking world, is 'churched', as opposed to 'unchurched'. Germans refer to them as 'close to the Church' (*Kirchennahe*) while the Dutch call them 'Church concerned' (*kerkelijk meelevend*).

According to data from the European Social Survey in 2012 show that around a third of European Christians say they attend services once a month or more. This leads Philip Jenkins to the remark that there is in Western Europe still a 'solid minority of committed believing Christians, some sixty million to seventy million, who assert that religion plays a very important role in their lives, and many of those attend church regularly.'¹⁶

Conversely about more than two-thirds of Latin American Christians and 90% of African Christians said they attended church regularly.¹⁷

In Evangelical circles, the frequency expected of a real Christian is once a week. A Pew Forum survey in 2011 among evangelical leaders from all over the world, found that they tend to be frequent churchgoers. An overwhelming majority (89%) say they participate in religious services at least once a week,

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 49, 51 and 70.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ Philip Jenkins, *God's continent*, p. 56.

¹⁷ European Social Survey, 2012, Section Christianity and Church attendance.

with two-thirds (68%) saying they attend more than once a week.¹⁸ Of course, not every member of their constituency is as regular as that, but this is the norm presented by their leaders for ‘practicing’ Christians,

Critique

At any rate, attendance is not a very precise criterion. When ‘nominal’ is defined in terms of non-practicing Church membership, its meaning can range from an irregular Churchgoer to someone who never goes to Church at all. More precision is needed, because a closer look will reveal that there are different categories of irregular Church attenders. We shall come back to this point further on, when discussing different classifications of nominals

Secondly, regular participation in a worship service does not automatically exclude a nominal adherence to the faith only. Of course, regular attendance of church services can be taken as an indication that these Churchgoers take their faith seriously. One can assume that they are also ‘practicing Christians’ when it comes to prayer, studying the Bible, ethical norms in daily life, financial giving, social action, believing Christian doctrines, sharing Christian faith, and so on. But we cannot take this for granted, just because someone sits in the pews for a worship service every week or twice a month.

Not converted, unregenerated

A third criterion to define ‘nominal’ as opposed to ‘authentic’ is a personal commitment to the Christian faith. Terminology can vary. Some speak of being converted, others of coming to faith, accepting Jesus Christ, being saved, or being born again. In social studies the technical term is conversion. The theological terms are repentance and regeneration, referring to the inner transformation that takes place when a person accepts forgiveness of sins through the sacrificial death of Christ at the cross, and opens his heart for the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ.

Viewed from this angle, our beginning definition takes the following turn: *‘These people identify as Christians, or are called Christians, but they are not converted, not regenerated.’* This definition is commonplace in Evangelical circles. No wonder, because the conversion experience is a defining characteristic of the Evangelical movement worldwide. It was reported by nearly all of the leaders surveyed in the already mentioned Pew Forum survey. More than nine-in-ten (93%) say they have been born-again, in most cases at a relatively young age.¹⁹

Non-converted or unregenerated

For many people today, being a Christian means belonging to a certain Church or Church tradition. They define their individual religious identity in terms of the collective identity of the religious group. In surveys, people will respond ‘I am Catholic’, or ‘I am Lutheran’, or ‘Anglican’. A good Christian, then, is someone who belongs to a Church. To the right Church, that is.

Their Church will have the tendency to confirm their idea. Any Church denomination will consider itself as a ‘good’ Church, as part of the universal Church of Jesus Christ, as a genuine expression of the Christian faith. No Church will present its theology as false or its practicing constituency as nominal. Members who confess the doctrine and follow the precepts of the Church are therefore considered as ‘good’ Christians by that Church community.

Evangelicals consider that Christian identity is primarily a matter of personal faith, a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The question to what Church one belongs is only of secondary importance. Viewed from this angle, all those who have not made a faith response to the offer of salvation in Jesus-Christ and a decision to become his follower, lack an essential aspect of being a Christian.

¹⁸ Pew Forum, *Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders: Evangelical Beliefs and Practices*, June 22, 2011, § D.

¹⁹ *Idem*, § A.

'True' versus 'nominal'

Some go as far as saying that these people really are not Christians at all. Whatever Church these Christians-in-inverted-commas belong to and whatever the level of their active involvement in Church life, whatever theological views they endorse and whatever ethical standards they practice, all of them have this in common that they are not saved, non-converted, unregenerated. While they might suppose they are 'in' God's Kingdom, they really are 'out'.

This 'true versus nominal discourse' is widespread in the Evangelical world, especially in churches with a free church and congregational ecclesiology. Tenants of this discourse often assume that 'true' Christians should join an Evangelical Church or at least an Evangelical group within or besides the Church of their upbringing.

Examples of this approach are the Lausanne Occasional Papers, published in 1980, clearly express follow this approach. Its authors describe a nominal Christian among Roman Catholic as...

...someone who has not responded in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord. He is a Christian in name only. He may be very religious. He may be a practising or non-practising church member. He may give intellectual assent to basic Christian doctrines and claim to be a Christian. He may be faithful in attending liturgical rites and worship services, and be an active member involved in church affairs. But in spite of all this, he is still destined for eternal judgment because he has not committed his life to Jesus Christ.²⁰

Similarly,

A nominal Protestant Christian is someone who... would call himself a Christian, or be so regarded by others, but who has no authentic commitment to Christ based on personal faith. This commitment... involves a transforming personal relationship with Christ, characterised by such qualities as love, joy, peace, a desire to study the Bible, prayer, fellowship with other Christians, a determination to witness faithfully, a deep concern for God's will to be done on earth, and a living hope of heaven to come.²¹

In the Occasional Papers, no definition of nominal Orthodox Christians is given. The reader gets the impression that all Orthodox, in whatever country, belong to the category of nominals.

Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk suggest that nominalism is a major issue, 'because many traditionally Christian populations know nothing of a personal faith, true repentance, and a trust in the finished work of Christ for their salvation'. They estimate their number worldwide at 1.2 billion.²² In 2011, Patrick Johnstone provided some updated statistics concerning Europe, based on the same distinction.

Of the 40% [of the European population] who claim to be Christians, only about 16% have any current involvement in church life. The solemn fact is that over half of all Europeans are loosely termed 'Christian' but have either rejected Christianity or have no meaningful relationship with it.²³

Of course, all depends on what one understands by 'meaningful relationship'. What does that imply in terms of believing, doctrinal views, values, Church involvement, daily behaviour and so on? Following the 'true versus nominal' approach, Johnstone answers this question in Evangelical terms.

The bottom-line

Other examples come to mind. Rick Warren quotes recent research statistics and expresses his concern that '90 million Protestant churchgoers in the United States are not born again, and that 44% of Americans are 'notional Christians'.

²⁰ *Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Roman Catholics*, Section 1-A.

²¹ LOP 10, Section 1-A and Section 1-B; LOP 23, § 1.

²² Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World* (2001), 13–14.

²³ Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church*, chapter 5.

These people describe themselves as Christians but do not believe that their eternal hope is based on a personal relationship with Jesus and a belief in his death and resurrection.²⁴

British sociologist Abby Day has called this discourse an ‘anti-nominalist rhetoric’, because it is not just a way of dividing the Christian world in two basic categories, those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’, but also an appeal to evangelise all those who are in the second category. In the final analysis, nominality is not acceptable.²⁵

Indeed, Evangelicals agree that something should be done about it. The response is evangelism, making disciples. As Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, has put it:

A Christian nominalist is one who claims the name Christian, but who has no authentic, personal, sin-forgiving and life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. His allegiance to Jesus is in name, not heart... ‘Christian’ nominalists make up one of the largest mission fields in the world and quite possibly the largest in the United States.²⁶

Richard Nolte corroborates. He argues that nominal adherence to the Christian faith is at best an illusion, at worse a fallacy. In his view, those who bear the name Christian are basically divided in two categories only, those who are born again and the rest who are all nominals.

The largest mission field of our time is nominal Christianity, which is made up of millions upon millions of those who claim to be Christian but have almost no understanding of what the Lord requires of those who follow Him.²⁷

Moreover, the two categories are opposed to each other, as darkness is to light. Nolte places this in an historical and in a certain eschatological perspective. Ever since the first century, he writes, the true believers have been surrounded by so-called Christians, who were opposed to their beliefs and their mode of life. During the period of Christendom, the nominals were the majority and they have often harassed and persecuted the faithful minorities. This will happen again in the end-time, Nolte concludes, and lead to the final separation of the true and the so-called Christians.

Bud Fennel takes issue with those who have not made a faith decision for Jesus, but who nevertheless claim: ‘we are Christians too’. According to Fennel, this is simply ‘a false claim’ to the Christian identity.²⁸

Here we have the bottom-line of the ‘true versus nominal’ approach: nominal Christians are not saved. Hence, they are not part of the true Church universal but a mission field.

Questions

Although it is legitimate and necessary to assess people’s official or self-claimed Christian identity from a Biblical and theological point of view, the true versus nominal discourse raises some serious questions.

True equals Evangelical?

The conversion or regeneration criterion is based on an Evangelical theological understanding of how a person becomes a Christian. This is the subject of Christian initiation. It is closely related to the practice of baptism and the question how one becomes a member of the Church. Various Church traditions hold different theological views on these subjects, even among Evangelicals there is no consensus.

²⁴ Quoted by Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging*, p. 176.

²⁵ Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging*, p. 176.

²⁶ Bill Bright & Mark McCloskey, *Tell It Often, Tell It Well*, chapter 10.

²⁷ Richard Nolte, *Nominal Christianity*.

²⁸ Bud Fennell, *I’m A Christian Too!*

The way in which a person formulates his commitment to Christ depends for a great deal on the terminology used in his Church context, and on the teaching about Christian initiation that he has received.

The definitions of a true or authentically committed Christian that we have quoted, are couched in typical Evangelical language. We are not sure whether all sincere and practicing Christians from non-Evangelical Church backgrounds who have a personal faith experience will be comfortable with the term ‘born again’.

Reading the Lausanne Occasional Papers and the other publications quoted above, one gets the impression that ‘true’ equals ‘Evangelical’, although this is not explicitly stated. Consequently, one is led to think that nominality is something that only occurs in other Churches, with other theological traditions.

Patrick Johnstone, a proponent of the Evangelical view on Christian initiation, is certainly aware of this risk. When presenting the statistics of a given country in *Operation World*, he singles out the percentage of Evangelicals, and further indicates the percentage of the subcategory ‘Pentecostals/Charismatics’. In one of his latest publications about the demographic development of Christianity worldwide, he gives a careful explanation of what he means by ‘Evangelical’ but readily admits that ‘this definition does not equal the number of truly born-again people around the world. Only God knows this detail’.²⁹

Risk of exclusiveness

As Evangelicals we can be convinced of our theological views, but this carries the risk of excluding any other formulation of genuine Christian faith. This might lead us to assume that there is no salvation outside the perimeters of Evangelical theology and spirituality. Of course, that would be presumptuous.

Can we classify people as ‘nominal’ when they do not use our Evangelical language? Is it conceivable that someone who has gone through the Church rites of baptism and confirmation is an authentic believer, even though he does not seem to have gone through a conversion experience? Can someone who does not claim to be ‘born again’ be truly regenerated? Asking these questions in this way, is already giving an answer, to a certain extent. What we are saying, then, is that the ‘true versus nominal’ discourse runs the risk of exclusiveness.

Recognise grades of commitment to Christ

This in turn raises the question whether Evangelicals recognise different grades of commitment to Christ. How do we relate to individuals and Churches of other theological persuasions who consider themselves as ‘Christian’? Do we allow for the possibility that some of them are really Christian even though they do not express themselves in the same ways as ‘we Evangelicals’? Do we expect to find brothers and sisters among them and seek fellowship, or do we put all of them in the same category of ‘nominals’ and consider them basically as not Christian at all? Moreover, how do we react to cases of deficient doctrine, lack of personal piety, conformity to unbiblical norms and values, low level of church attendance, superstitious practices, and so on. Does that always mean absence of ‘true’ Christian faith? Or do we allow for different grades of commitment to Christ?

Not committed, superficial

Some Evangelicals consider that it is not enough to be converted or born again. According to them, the yardstick of true Christianity is commitment. Here is the corresponding definition of nominals: ‘*People who call themselves Christians, but who are not committed to the implications of being a Christian.*’

²⁹ Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church*, chapter 5.

Keyword discipleship

This leads to a ‘committed or nominal discourse’, in which the decisive criterion is true Christian living. Call it discipleship if you like. Taking this as a criterion, Michael Cunningham concludes:

Normally the nominal Christian is one who admits believing in God; believing in the historic person of Jesus, who died and rose again as God’s Christ; and who has some awareness that it is important to recognize God in life. Such people usually pray, occasionally read the Bible, may or may not attend worship or give financially to the church. What they do not do is admit a personal relationship with Jesus that has transformed their lives, seek God’s will in prayer and Scripture for every day’s activities, faithfully minister to the needs of others through their church, or live all of life under the active, personal lordship of Christ. Those who do these things are known as disciples or committed Christians. The others are nominal Christians.³⁰

Another representative of this view is Eddie Gibbs. His book *In Name Only*, first published in 1994 and reissued in 2005, has caught much attention in North America. In his writings and through his seminars, Gibbs aims at tackling the problem of nominal Christianity (the subtitle of his book). He defines it as follows:

Nominality is when people embrace the social cachet of wanting the label of being called Christian but without taking the liabilities and responsibilities that accompany it.³¹

For Gibbs, nominal equals superficiality. An easy-going Christianity that James Packer has qualified as ‘laid-back religion’, believing without commitment, turning the Gospel into ‘cheap grace’ as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it. (Except that nor Packer nor Bonhoeffer depicted all those Christians as nominals.)

Gibbs finds this among the members of the historic Churches, many of whom are members by birth only. And among the second generation of Evangelical churches who are becoming less and less committed.

The major cause of nominal Christianity, in his view, is the failure of churches to disciple believers, especially from the second generation onward.³²

A major concern, he argues, is that the mega-churches, with their multiple programs and their seeker-oriented services tend to foster a consumerist attitude among the believers, and a superficial Christian life. ‘It is all too easy to hide in a large church. There is little evidence of life transformation in those attendees who live at a distance from their church and are not involved beyond the weekend worship services.’³³

How to counter this danger? By developing fresh expressions of the church and by focusing on discipleship.

disciple to make other disciples... Leaders must recognise that evangelism can no longer be understood in terms of ‘decisionism’ or revivalism, but as the first steps in a lifetime of learning what it entails to be a disciple of Jesus-Christ.³⁴

Africa

The same view is also taken by African theologians, who are calling attention to an emerging phenomenon that will significantly challenge the explosive growth of the Christian population, namely the presence of people in local church memberships who are Christians in name only. ‘Church services are well attended, and many people can even join the churches regularly,’ writes Tite Tiénou, ‘but

³⁰ Michael Cunningham, *The Nominal Christian Handbook*, p. 54

³¹ Eddie Gibbs, with Ronald Keener, ‘When “nominal” Christians want only the label,’ p. 69.

³² Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next*, p. 13.

³³ Eddie Gibbs, with Ronald Keener, ‘When “nominal” Christians want only the label,’ p. 70.

³⁴ *Idem*.

does this quantitative growth translate itself into qualitative discipleship? That is the question.’³⁵ He goes on to say that as Christianity becomes more popular, there is a drift from explaining the drift from authentic faith to nominal Christianity.

Nominalism occurs when people identify themselves with a cause without clear understanding of it or serious commitment to it. In that case, such people are affiliated with that cause in name only. Nominalists are those who adhere to the external forms of piety and godliness while denying its power (II Timothy 3, 15). ... Their Christianity does not go beyond mere identification with a church or a Christian body. Such Christians may participate in many Christian functions of their choosing, but they want a religion which is not too demanding.³⁶

Tiénou goes on to say that nominalism encourages the establishment and perpetuation of a religion of spectators. Without the necessary maturity in faith Christians, like other religious people, tend to become mere spectators and not active participants. Content with just watching, such Christians want religious things done to them and for them in exchange for a minimum of personal discomfort. That is why nominalism is a minimalist approach to religion. It also breeds clericalism. A minimalist religion can only succeed where and when clergy are totally in charge while lay people passively follow instructions.³⁷

In his PhD Dissertation on Christian nominalism in Africa, Enosh Anguandia expresses the same concerns. He makes a distinction between two forms of nominality: first the condition of those who are not Christians at all, because they are not converted and regenerated. This corresponds to the ‘true versus nominal’ approach. Secondly, the condition of those who are Christians but who have not grown spiritually. This corresponds to the ‘committed or nominal approach’ that we are looking at in this paragraph.³⁸

During this research, he found that...

...the majority of church leaders and members acknowledge the presence in their church memberships of people who appear to be or are regarded by others as true Christians but are not. (...) Some church members and even church leaders have gone through the rite of water baptism and are ‘actively’ involved in the church, but without genuine repentance and authentic faith in Jesus.³⁹

He further concludes that the pastoral leadership may be to blame for, among other things, not preaching the biblical gospel clearly, not doing appropriate evangelism, not following up those who convert to Christ and not being role models in their lifestyle.

Critique

This view on nominalism looks like the preceding one, but there is an important difference. When the criterion is conversion, the implication is that all nominals are unconverted. This raises the questions that we have formulated at the end of the preceding paragraph.

When the criterion is commitment, the qualification nominal does not necessarily imply that a person is not a Christian, it means that he is not a good Christian, not a committed one. It means that there is a lack of spiritual growth.

Authors presenting this view, mention two categories. Some Christians are not growing into maturity because they are not Christians at all. Others are ‘real’ Christians but their faith remains superficial, partly because their church environment does not train them in discipleship, nor challenge them to follow Jesus all the way and pay the costs.

In fact, this is a view on the Christian life that insists on what classic theology calls sanctification and what today is often called discipleship.

³⁵ Tite Tiénou, ‘Christian nominalism, causes and cures’, introduction.

³⁶ *Idem*.

³⁷ See also: Tite Tiénou, ‘The theological task of the church in Africa’, and ‘The state of the gospel in Africa.’

³⁸ Enosh Anguandia, *Christian Nominalism within Church Membership*, p. vii.

³⁹ *Idem*, conclusion #2.

When we listen to authors like the ones quoted in this paragraph, we hear their desire that all those who have become Christian make a pilgrim's progress in their life. This is understandable and legitimate. However, we have a problem with using the label 'nominal' for Christians who are superficial, because that puts them on the same level as those who are not Christian at all. Isn't that a harsh judgment?

This raises the question whether it is possible at all to use the term 'nominal' in such a general way. Which brings us to the next paragraph.

Parameters of being Christian

A more comprehensive definition of 'nominal Christianity' cannot be apprehended without first securing agreement as to what being a 'normative Christian' entails. Confronted as we are with a wide range of theological positions, ecclesiastical disciplines and models of piety traditions, it soon becomes evident that 'nominality' will be variously described depending on the Christian tradition by which it is judged.⁴⁰

So far, we have looked at some criteria that are being used to assess whether a person is an authentic or a nominal Christian. However, being Christian is not just a matter of belonging to a Church, not just a matter of adherence and attendance, not just a matter of being converted or baptised or confirmed, or just a matter of having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ made a public confession of faith. It is all of that together. These aspects are interrelated, together with other aspects. We call them the parameters of being Christian.

Even if we as Evangelicals agree that conversion (in the broad meaning of the term) and regeneration are fundamental aspects of being Christian, 'nominality' cannot be defined by looking at those two aspects only. Other aspects should be considered as well, such as these peoples' relationship with the Church, their beliefs, their spirituality, their ethical norms and values, etc.

Basic dimensions

Already some time ago, sociologists of religion Rodney Stark and Charles Glock presented a scheme of five basic dimension of being religious:

- *Knowledge* dimension, that people possess at least some minimum information about the basic tenets of the faith and its rites.
- *Belief* dimension, which relates to the theological outlook and the personal acknowledgement of the truth.
- *Religious practice* dimension, which relates to acts of worship and devotion, corporate rituals and private prayer.
- *Experience* dimension, which refers to peoples' expectations which achieve a direct, subjective knowledge of God.
- *Consequence* dimension, that is how people's beliefs, practice, experience and knowledge affect the day-to-day life.⁴¹

Although criticised by some, this scheme is still being used in analysing religious practice, including those of Christians.⁴²

However, it is not easy to determine what it means to be nominal with respect to each of these elements. Consider, for example, the third element: what do we need to know in order not to be considered a good Christian? Know by heart the Lord's Prayer, the Apostolic Creed, the Ten

⁴⁰ Eddie Gibbs, 'Contextual Considerations in Responding to Nominality', in Dean Gilliland, *The Word Among Us*, p. 239.

⁴¹ Charles Glock, Rodney Stark. *Religion and Society in Tension*.

⁴² E.g. by Dean Gilliland, *The Word Among Us*, p. 240f, and by Enosh Anguandia in his recently published PhD dissertation, *Christian Nominalism within Church Membership*.

Commandments? John three verse sixteen, 'For God so loved the world'? Answers will vary from one Church family to another.

The big B's and more

Nowadays, it is commonplace to summarise the parameters of the Christian faith in the triad believing – belonging – behaving.

Believing 'that' and believing 'in'

Often used in the sense of believing 'that' God exists, that Jesus is risen from the dead, that there is a heaven and a hell, that the Bible is the Word of God, and so on. These are beliefs, faith convictions, things we know and hold for true, not to be confused with 'believing in', which is an attitude of having faith in God, putting one's trust in him, having a personal relationship with him. This is the faith by which we are saved, it is related to the inner assurance and the spiritual experience. Call it, if you like, believing with your mind and believing with your heart.

Similarly, Rodney Stark and Charles Glock distinguished the knowledge from the belief dimension. Theologians express this difference by the almost identical expressions *fides qua* (that) and *fides quae* (by which). In the scheme of

Many socioreligious surveys have concentrated on what people believe. While this is still often the case, there is a shift towards asking whether the beliefs of people are important for them, how they influence their behaviour, whether they matter for them. The keyword is the 'meaning'. What does it mean for a person to believe? How does this give meaning to his life?

Belonging and participating

This has to do with the Church, the community of believers if you like. This usually denotes affiliation or church membership. Abby Day writes that 'people "belong" to their religious organisations for a variety of reasons, some of which are unrelated to any relationship with God. In several European countries, for example, belonging to the national church is automatic'.⁴³ Belonging, then is not just a matter of being inscribed on a Church register, besides this official affiliation there is also the affective affiliation. The question is whether people who are attached to a Church on paper, or 'in name', also feel attached to it. So, *attachment* is a better term, as it denotes the two sides of belonging.

Some authors also use it to denote attendance at religious services. Grace Davie, for example, writes about the category of 'believing without belonging', i.e. without (regularly) going to Church.⁴⁴

Belonging in this second sense, then, stands for *participation* or church involvement (attending services, following Bible studies, taking part in activities). According to others, church participation pertains to the practice of one's religion, signified by the third keyword 'behaving'. However, it seems to us that these are corporate religious practices of a church in which the individual participates.

Behaving

This refers to the way in which someone puts the Christian faith in practice, apart from being member of a church and participating in church life. In fact, we are dealing here with to spheres of practice. First in *private* life: prayer, Bible reading and other spiritual disciplines, the so-called praxis of piety. This is the area of spiritual growth or development, the work of the Spirit, transformation, the new life. Second, a person's behaviour in *society*: sharing the faith with others, following Christian norms in marriage, family, school, work, town and neighbourhood, arts, leisure, health care, cultural and social organisations, politics, and so on. With the apostle the apostle James we can speak of 'the works by which a person shows his or her faith'.

⁴³ Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging*, p. v.

⁴⁴ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, p. 6.

Initiation

However, even this amplified version of the three B's do not cover all. Another important parameter is *initiation*. How does one become a Christian? This has to do with Christian education, conversion, baptism and so on.

Seven aspects or parameters

Bringing all these elements together, we arrive at seven aspects of being Christian that can be used as parameters:

- Initiation (how does a person become a Christian)
- Faith (spiritual experience, meaning, believing in)
- Beliefs (knowledge, believing that)
- Church attachment
- Church participation
- Spiritual life (practice of piety, spiritual development)
- Practice of the faith (witness, Christian conduct in daily life in society)

It seems to us that this list is sufficiently complete to indicate the various dimensions of being a Christian. Other authors present even more detailed lists, such as Kenneth Boa, in his widely acclaimed book on spiritual formation, where he distinguishes twelve aspects of the Christian life.⁴⁵

Decisive parameter(s)?

Do all these parameters have the same importance? The answer depends on whether we are talking about becoming or being a Christian

For becoming a Christian

What is the decisive aspect of becoming a Christian? Faith in God, confessing the truth about Jesus? Others consider baptism as such (as infant or later in life) to be the decisive rite that makes one a member of the Church and a Christian at the same time. The question is of course which Church on earth, apart from the universal Body of Christ.

Evangelicals are prone to answer that conversion is the *conditio sine qua non*, or conversion followed by baptism which includes a personal and public confession of faith. This is the view of the 'true versus nominal' discourse. Above, we have shown the problems involved with that.

Classic Protestant theology has always insisted that Christian identity is based on personal faith and confession, following the Pauline summary 'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10, 9). Hence the importance attached to a public confession of faith.

Surely, personal faith implies repentance and turning to God and the Son of God for salvation.

However, it is hazardous to demand a certain manner of conversion in order to be considered a 'true' Christian. Conversion can be a dramatic event, a long process of change, or a gradual appropriation of the faith. When we listen to the testimonies of people's personal pilgrimage, we shall discover that there is no typical narrative, but a wide variety of life stories.

Standing in the Evangelical tradition, we would suggest that the decisive parameter for becoming a Christian is turning to God, faith and confession. French Evangelical theologian Alain Nisus expresses this well:

⁴⁵ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image*. The twelve aspects are relational (love God and your neighbour), change of values, discipline, identity in Christ, motivation, devotion, holistic view of daily life, dynamics of spiritual growth, life in the Spirit, spiritual combat, transmission of the faith, the community of believers. All these aspects are covered by our parameters. On the contrary, his list does not include the elements of initiation (conversion, faith, confession, baptism, etc.).

A Christian is one who believes in Jesus Christ, that is, who recognizes him as Saviour and Lord... A Christian is not simply the one who was baptised when he was a child, or who received a Christian education. When this person does not adhere to the confession of Christian faith, and does not have a real, concrete relation with Christ, he is a 'sociological Christian', someone of a 'Christian culture'... Being a Christian is a choice. A Christian is someone who has personally appropriated the faith and who lives a living and true relationship with God. This personal appropriation of faith is called conversion. Conversion can be a sudden rupture, dramatic, instantaneous. But it can also be progressive, spread over time; as the fruit of a thoughtful and assumed assimilation of a Christian education. One can become a Christian also because one has heard the message of the Gospel, understood it and adhered to it with all one's being (by engaging one's intelligence, one's will, one's feelings, etc.). A Christian is therefore the one who recognizes in Jesus his Saviour, who relies on him for his salvation, for the forgiveness of his sins, for his entire life. He is the one whose life has been enlightened by the light of the Gospel, transformed, restored. He received a new life from God.⁴⁶

For living as a Christian

Conversion and public confession have to do with initiation. Can we say that this suffices to *be* a 'real' Christian, or does that depend on other parameters as well?

Being a Christian is a choice, writes Alain Nisus. To put it more precisely, an initial choice in the process of turning to God and to the Son of God, and by a continual choosing ever after. Therefore, he continues:

A Christian is also someone who wants to live as a disciple of Christ. It means that he is an apprentice in the school of Christ. He tries to live the ethics of the Kingdom and the values of the Gospel. He is concerned with 'sanctification', reflecting Christ, glorifying God in all areas of his life.⁴⁷

Being a Christian is an intention, an orientation, a choice with respect to all the aspects of the Christian life. Functioning as a member of a community of believers. Holding to the true doctrine of the faith, practicing piety, having a personal relationship with God, the transformation of our life, our daily conduct, our discipleship? Didn't the apostle James say that faith without works is dead? In the final analysis, all aspects are important and decisive. So, we should consider them as parameters of being Christian, in a comprehensive way.

At this point, we see the difference between the 'true versus nominal' discourse, and the 'discipleship versus nominal Christianity' discourse. The first is concentrated on authentically becoming a Christian, the second is concerned about authentically living out one's Christian identity

As we have indicated above, we find that latter stretches the meaning of nominality too far, by applying it to all Christians below the level of 'discipleship'. When the bar is put so high, the number of 'true' believers will be limited indeed.

Ideally, all the aspects go together, but this is often not the case in real life. To be strong in one area of religiosity does not guarantee that a person will be strong in all the other areas. Inconsistency may be evident in any one of the parameters of being Christian.

Some believe that Jesus died for their sins without belonging to a Church, or without attending Church services. Others in turn are Church members but do not adhere to the major Christian doctrines. Or they will not abide with Biblical norms and values. And then, when it comes to belief, this can mean an affective relationship with God for some, while for others it is more a matter of convictions, or of agreement with the teaching of the church.

How to define nominal Christianity

This brings us back to the question at the beginning: how to define nominal Christianity? The basic idea of is the discrepancy between the identity claimed by persons and the actual commitment to that

⁴⁶ Nisus, Alain, 'Quelle est la meilleure définition d'un chrétien ?'

⁴⁷ *Idem.*

identity. Therefore, any definition of nominality depends on one's conception of a 'normal' Christian identity.

Confronted as we are with a wide range of theological positions, church disciplines and church traditions, it is evident that we must be clear about our own position in this spectre of opinions and customs. Nominality will be described according to the Christian tradition by which it is judged. We can only define it in the terms of the theological views of which one is persuaded. As for us, this is a broad Protestant-Evangelical position.

We have described our view on becoming a Christian and on being a Christian. How much deviation do we allow, before we judge that someone is 'nominal'? Evidently, it is a matter of appreciation where we put the cursor, there is no standard criterion. Prophetic maximalists with a demanding view of the Christian life will draw the line somewhere, pastoral minimalists with an empathic comprehension of the difficulties of being committed all the time will draw the line elsewhere. Some refuse to draw a line at all. American Reformed theologian Douglas Wilson for instance. He disagrees in principle with the idea of a 'nominal Christian' and argues that all who are baptised (as a baby or later in life) enter in a covenant with God and are obliged to serve him.

There is, therefore, no such thing as a merely nominal Christian any more than we can find a man who is a nominal husband. There are, however, wicked and faithless Christians.⁴⁸

Perhaps this is an overstatement, in reaction to Evangelical authors with an exclusivist view of conversion. But even Wilson draws a line between acceptable and unacceptable conduct. What others call nominal, he calls faithless. Different words for the same problem, i.e. that some people who bear the name Christian live in contradiction with the implications of the name.

Definition or rather description proposal

Since perfect Christians don't exist, every believer shows some measure of discrepancy between norms and practice. Even so, one can be a sincere Christian despite failures and transgressions. Somewhere along the line, though, the deviation becomes a contradiction. Meeting these 'Christians' and looking at their way of life, is like unpacking a product that we bought, and discovering that the content is different from what the label indicates.

So here is our proposed description of nominal Christianity:

People who identify themselves with a Christian Church or the Christian faith, whether registered church members or unaffiliated people, but are in contradiction with basic Christian principles with respect to becoming a Christian, faith, beliefs, church involvement and daily life.

Contradictions

How can we apply this definition, make it more visible and real to life? It seems to us that the word 'contradiction' is important. This is where we would draw the line between 'nominal' and other Christians.

One example of contradiction is well formulated by Jason Mandryk in *Operation World*, where he points out that 'large numbers [of church members] have no clear grasp of repentance and faith in Christ nor of salvation by grace not works'.⁴⁹

Let us try and pursue this line and indicate contradictions with respect to each parameter:

	'Nominal' indicates:
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⁴⁸ Douglas Wilson, *Reformed is Not Enough*, p. 97.

⁴⁹ Mandryk, Jason, *Operation World* (7th ed.). Colorado Springs, USA: Biblica Publishing, 2010, p. 271.

Initiation (how does a person become a Christian) -	No faith response to God's offer of salvation through Jesus-Christ, no confession of the faith in God and the lordship of Jesus.
Faith (spiritual experience, meaning, believing in)	No relationship at all with God, absence of prayer, no interest in spiritual matters
Beliefs (knowledge, believing that)	Views that contradict the clear teaching of the Bible Universalist views denying the uniqueness of Jesus-Christ
Church attachment	Not a church member, or church membership without attachment
Church participation	No involvement, or only occasionally
Practice of piety, spiritual development	Absence of spiritual life, no concern for inner transformation
Practice of the faith in daily life	Practices that contradict the clear teaching of the Bible Forms of syncretism

Granted, this list is far from complete, and the wording is provisional, but it gives the reader an idea of how we can apply a definition of nominality. It would be a good to discuss this diagram during the consultation.

Are we saying, then, that someone who shows one or more of these contradictions is not a Christian?
No, all we are saying is that such a person is a 'nominal' Christian.