

Native American Pastor - Catoosa

How compatible are Native American beliefs with Christian beliefs? Native American beliefs stem from more than 1,500 diverse traditions, and Christianity itself has a host of variants. In comparing the general beliefs of the two, terminology becomes significant. Many Christians, for example, refer to God as “Lord,” while many Native Americans prefer the term “Creator.”

Many Native Americans will always have a bad taste in their mouth for the word “Christian.” Many of them who fit the classical definition of a Christian — one who believes in Christ’s death and resurrection — refuse to identify themselves as Christian when asked. For Native Americans, there is little distinction between their everyday life and their spiritual life. All that they are and all that they do is their religion, and so they would rather not be limited to the label “Christian.”

That’s according to longtime Catoosa resident Kenny Brown, of the Delaware Tribe, who says he is a born-again Christian though he still observes native cultural practices.

“I was under conviction and guilt for being a bad example for my children because of alcohol and tobacco abuse and a vulgar vocabulary,” Brown said. “I opened my heart to Jesus, believing He was the Creator’s son. I felt immediate relief from my sin, but realized I had become a ‘Christian.’ Knowing the history between Native People and supposed ‘Christian missionaries,’ I thought, ‘what have I done? I can’t be Indian and Christian.’”

Now, however, Brown is working to help bring a better understanding of Christianity to area Native Americans.

“A true man of God, my pastor Ernie Gill, encouraged me to study the Bible and pray about my situation,” Brown said. “God showed me not only was Jesus the Creator’s Son He was the Creator, and He didn’t want to change my culture and identity — He wanted me as His child. He told me as long as practicing my culture didn’t become more important to me than Him, all was well.”

Several years later, Brown began working with North American Baptist Missionary to Native Americans Gary Hawkins, and the Baptist General Convention’s church planting strategists, saw the need, after doing a demographic study, for an American Indian church in the Catoosa area. The study found that in a 10-mile radius around First Baptist Church of Rolling Hills, there are 13,000 Native Americans, and the vast majority — as much as 90 percent — are unchurched.

With their training and help, Brown, along with his wife Vicky, formed a ministry team. On Oct. 31, 2005, the ministry team started a Monday night Bible study.

On April 16, 2006, that Monday night Bible study turned into a church. Brown said he was praying about a name for the newly-formed church from the scriptures that Native Americans could identify with. He came up with “Shield of Faith.”

“The Lord gave me Ephesians 6:16,” he said.

That passage reads, “In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.”

Shield of Faith is a Christ-centered, Bible-believing church that focuses on reaching Native Americans. It currently is ministering under the First Baptist Church of Rolling Hills constitution and by-laws until the church is able to constitute as a self-sustaining body, Brown said.