

What is Christianity?:

Answering one of life's *simple* questions

by William Boekestein

“...According to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my Fathers...” (Acts 24:14, NKJV)

Sometimes the simplest questions are the hardest to answer: What is life? What is love? What is happiness? These are concepts that are as important as they are difficult to define. So it is with the question in focus in this article: “What is Christianity?”

I begin by stating the importance of this question for each of us. Many of you may already be Christians. Seventy-six percent of Americans, in fact, identify themselves as Christians. But in light of that statistic we wonder two things. First, how many of us could give a helpful definition of “Christianity?” You cannot share the Christian message if you are unclear about what it is. Second, how many of us are living out the Christian message? We cannot live out what we do not know.

Some of you may not yet be Christians. But if Christianity is true then its message *does* concern you. Truth doesn't depend upon one's subscription to it. The law of gravity impacts all of us whether we believe in it or not; so too with Christianity.

Some of you may not know if you are a Christian or not. You know *about* God, you may have spent some time in a Church. But you aren't really sure if that makes you a Christian. You may not understand what Christianity is all about. You might not be sure that you *want* to be a Christian based on what you think you know about Christianity. Let me suggest the possibility that you have only known caricatures of Christianity and not the real thing. This article doesn't claim to offer the only or even the best definition of Christianity. But I believe if you test these things against the Word of God and against practical experience you will find them to be true.

Let me offer this one sentence definition of Christianity and then say a few things about its four parts in the remainder of this article. *Christianity is a way of life centered in God, directed by the Bible and enjoyed into eternity.*

Christianity: A Way of Life

When we say that Christianity is a way of life we are talking about how it is *expressed*.

Christianity is not merely a set of beliefs; it can not be limited to a particular way of *thinking* (anymore than it can be limited to a particular way of doing or feeling).

The fact is, Christianity *does* have quite clearly defined beliefs. The basic beliefs of Christianity are summarized by the Apostles' Creed which is essential to believe if you are to be a Christian.

Still, Christianity is much more comprehensive than a set of beliefs. The early church was referred to as “the way” (Acts 22:4, 24:14). A way is a road that is walked. And this is descriptive of Christianity. Christianity is a faith that is lived out.

This is not to suggest that our relationship to God is based on our performance. The Bible clearly teaches that election to salvation is by the grace of God alone and not of works (Romans 11:5,6). But as James says, Christianity is the demonstration of the work of God's grace in us, showing itself through real-life expressions (James 2:14-26).

One of the greatest dangers to Christianity today does not come from outside of the church but from within. It is a mentality that assumes that the ideals of Christianity do not pertain to real life. We frequently meet people who think like this. Recently I

was invited a local gentleman to a Bible study, the goal of which was to learn about how to live out the biblical religion. His response: "I already go to church and that's good enough for me." What a sad substitute for vital religion!

My friends, you are not a Christian simply by believing that God exists. You are not a Christian simply by going to church. A Christian is a person who has a total life-commitment to the will of God that flows from a total trust in the God of the Bible.

And that's the next part of this definition. Christianity is a way of life *centered in God*.

Christianity: Centered in God

When we say that Christianity is a way of life that is centered in God we are talking about *ultimate reality*.

People organize their lives around that which is most real to them. That's why some people find their center in music. Some find their center in romance. Others find it in charitable involvement or in nature. Whatever you understand to be ultimate reality will be that around which you center your life.

That said, the Bible teaches us that the ultimate reality is the Lord God, maker of heaven and earth (Acts 17:24-28). In fact, not only does the Bible teach us this, so does all of nature. The universe is a book "...wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, namely his everlasting power and divinity."

There are relatively few people who deny the existence of a divine being who is greater than us. But very many people fail to live out the implications of the assumption that God exists. If God exists, if he has created us and all things, and if he is infinitely greater than us then he must be the center of our lives.

The fact is, many of us fail to appreciate who this God is. He is at once infinitely transcendent and intimately relational. This combination of the "farness" and "nearness" of God is evident in the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity. The Bible presents God as one transcendent divine being who exists in three persons in holy fellowship; the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. It is this unique essential make-up of God that singularly qualifies him to be the center of our lives. Being transcendent he is *worthy* to be our center and being quintessentially relational he is *able* to be our center.

It is with this God that we were created to live in fellowship. And yet, some people carve out a small part of their lives as "God-time." Perhaps this describes you. Upon basic examination, their lives are usually centered around themselves.

The Christian life is not organized around the self but around God. Anyone who understands that we find meaning, fulfillment, happiness and purpose in the God who created us will seek to find their center in him.

How do we do this? That question gets to the next part of the definition. Christianity is a way of life centered in God *directed by the Bible*.

Christianity: Directed by the Bible

When we say that Christianity is a way of life directed by the Bible we are talking about an *authority for our lives*.

Everyone subjects themselves to some authority. Some people are *driven* by a desire for success. Others *answer* to the authority of peer pressure. Others *obey* the call of adventure and freedom. Still others *submit* to the dictates of personal happiness; they do whatever is required to be pleased.

The Bible is uniquely given to man as the ultimate authority because it is the Word of God. And as the word of the God who created you it has much to say to you. In fact, it has everything to say to you. When Jesus was being tempted by the devil he told Satan: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every* word of God" (Luke 4:4). God

breathed his word into the Bible. We are to receive it as if God were speaking face to face to us. As we open its pages, we may experience, as it were, the sweet aroma of the breath of God.

How is the Christian life directed by the Bible? The Bible directs us in three basic ways. In other words, the Bible is a story with three main themes.

By Nature We Are Sinners.

One of the first themes of the Bible is sin. From the beginning of the Bible till the end we see men going against the good plan of God. We see this in our day as well. There is sin all around us. But the Bible teaches that there is sin around us because there is, first of all, sin in each of us. God calls you through his word to admit the plain truth about ourselves; we have guilty hands and guilty hearts.

Jesus Christ Is Our Only Hope for Salvation

The Bible does not, however, dwell on sin. It's primary purpose in setting forth the bad news of sin is to provide a backdrop for the good news. Not sin, but Jesus Christ is the main character of the Bible. He is God in the flesh; the mediator between God and man. His perfect life and sacrificial death offer hope for new life as we trust in him. Outside of Christ, God's answer to sin is death. In Christ, God's answer to sin is eternal life.

We Were Created to Do God's Will

Third, the Bible teaches us how we are to live rightly in God's world. I was recently talking with someone who was experiencing all kinds of troubles, many of which they brought on themselves. I pointed out that the Bible sets before us the life that God blesses and the life that God judges. They were clearly living the latter. We cannot expect to live fulfilled lives when live contrary to his will. But as God works faith in us by his Holy Spirit, we are given the freedom to obey his will and live lives that are pleasant to him and to us.

Perhaps you've seen this billboard. It says something like "When everything else fails, read the instructions" and then it has a picture of the Bible. But I ask you, why wait until everything else fails? God has set forth a good life for those who order their lives around his word. And he says to us, "Choose life."

We sometimes hear that living according to the Bible sounds like wearing a straight-jacket. I've heard this before. But I don't believe it's true.

This gets to the last part of the definition. Christianity is a way of life centered in God, directed by the Bible and *enjoyed into eternity*.

Christianity: Enjoyed into eternity

When we say that Christianity is a way of life enjoyed into eternity we are talking about a *goal*. The goal of Christianity is to bring glory to God and to experience personal joy in him.

The final words of this definition are chosen carefully; each of them has rich meaning. To expand these three words, Christianity is a way of life that is to be enjoyed. That joy begins now but it extends and blossoms into eternity.

Sad to say, some Christians don't understand that Christianity is a way of life to be enjoyed. You almost get the impression that Christianity is only a duty to be discharged or even a cross to bear. And, in fact, it is both of these. But in the midst of duties and cross-bearing God gives his people inexpressible and abiding joy.

In saying that Christianity is a way of life that is enjoyed into eternity we don't mean that there is joy *only* in eternity. God has promised that our greatest joy awaits us in heaven. But we begin experiencing it now. In my own life I can affirm that since

beginning a sincere walk with God I have known much disappointment, frustration and discouragement. But I have also known a joy that I never knew during the years that I was running from God.

There is great joy in friendship isn't there? Essentially Christianity is a relationship of friendship with God. In this present life there are challenges to our friendship with God. From God's end, he leads us through difficult times in order to test our faith. From our end, we offend God every day by our sin.

But a day is coming when Christians will enjoy the fullest expression of a sort of joy unlike we have ever experienced before.

Conclusion

This article has considered a simple definition. We have said that Christianity is a way of life, centered in God, directed by the Bible and enjoyed into eternal life.

If God is pleased to make that definition the definition of your life, then you will begin experiencing a profound and lasting change. And to the degree to which these principles are lived out by us the world around us will begin to change as well.

If you have read this article it was not by accident. God has called you to begin or continue walking the way of eternal life known as Christianity. Please know that no one who has ever walked this path has been disappointed in the end.