

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BASIC CHRISTIANITY?

Christianity in today's world is not what it was in the time of the original apostles. Times and values have changed. Ecclesiastical politics, theology, philosophy and higher criticism have all had their part in complicating the simple beliefs and practices of the original Christians. As the Apostle Jude exhorted, it is time "to earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered."

Does a true Christian have to become a student of today's complex, often abstract theology to be saved? Must a true believer be able to wrap his or her mind around the sophisticated theology of Barth and Nietzsche to make it into the Kingdom of God?

Some scholars have presumed to call the faith of the original Christians "primitive." They have looked down upon the theology of Peter, Paul and John as being "less advanced" than the confusing, complex abstractions of today's theological thinkers.

James, according to one of the reformers, wrote "an epistle of straw." Another scholar claimed that Jesus Christ, the Savior of all mankind, was nothing more than a pious fraud—a charlatan and a fake who plotted his own crucifixion! Still other modern thinkers have introduced such concepts as the death of God and "situation ethics." There is almost no part of the Scriptures which is not considered to be unreliable by one scholar or another. The first eleven chapters of Genesis have been declared "myth" by a major "Christian" denomination in Canada.

A substantial majority of modern biblical scholars have embraced the idea that Isaiah wrote only the first thirty-nine chapters of the book attributed to him. The remainder of the book is thought to have been written by other hands at a much later date.

The accounts of miracles in the Bible have been discounted on the basis of their scientific unprovability.

Much debate has taken place over the integrity of the existing texts or manuscripts of the Bible. Alleged contradictions and discrepancies have been cited as reason for rejecting the Scriptures as a reliable guide to living.

The musty halls of cloistered monasteries echo the footsteps of learned monks who spend whole lifetimes in a search for spiritual enlightenment. But it doesn't seem to be of much help to the American Midwest farmer who seeks to be in the Kingdom of God. It doesn't appear to assist the spiritual development of a construction worker in northwest England. It provides little encouragement to the average alcoholic who is struggling to reach the hand of Christ.

Something is horribly wrong with the world of organized Christianity. Somehow, the simple, yet profound, faith of the early Church has been lost in the shuffle.

The intricacies of ecclesiastical politics and higher finance, along with the confusing complexities of theological debate, have somehow clouded the vision of *basic Christianity*.

Unnecessary Knowledge. How much does any Christian need to know in order to be saved? Must each child of God become a learned theologian in his own right—able to

resolve in his own mind the debates of centuries of scholarship?

Obviously not.

There is no need for average laymembers to know how to resolve the problem of "Deutero-Isaiah," for example. John 12:37-41 makes it plain that the early Church believed the Jewish tradition that Isaiah wrote the *entire* book attributed to his name. John quoted from *both* "sections" of Isaiah (Isa. 53:1 and 6:10) and attributed both to the traditional authorship.

Nor does the average Christian need to resolve the question of whether the miracles of the Old Testament and the account of the first eleven chapters of Genesis are mythological. The Apostle Paul taught that "*all* scripture is given by inspiration of God..." (II Tim. 3:16). Jesus taught that God's Word is *truth* (John 17:17).

Christ also taught that man should live by *every* word of God (Matt. 4:4 and Luke 4:4) and that none of the Bible is to be rejected.

If you believe the New Testament, then you *must* believe the Old. And if you don't believe the New Testament, how then can you call yourself a Christian? The New Testament is the *only* reliable record we have of the life of the Messiah, the beginnings of the Church and the beliefs and practices of early Christianity.

In the absence of updated revelation from God, we have to rely upon the New Testament—or nothing! It

is the main source of knowledge and the foundation of true Christianity. To reject the New Testament—or any part of it—is to reject Christ and His teachings.

To accept the New Testament and its teachings is to accept Christ. The relationship of Christians with Christ is not complex, complicated and confusing. It is simple, yet profound.

Speaking of the local congregation at Corinth, the Apostle Paul wrote: "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the *simplicity that is in Christ*" (II Cor. 11:3).

What is Christianity? Well, what is true Christianity? What do you have to know to be saved?

Let's look at the word "Christian" first. What does it mean? Where did it come from?

Acts 11:26 answers: "... And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." Those who were Christ's students—those who followed Christ—were given the name of "Christians" by the citizens of the city of Antioch. A Christian is simply one who believes, believes in, and follows the lead and example of Jesus Christ who is the Son of God. (Peter himself later used the term [I Pet. 4:16].)

But what does such belief involve?

Christ came as a Lawgiver—like Moses. He came to fulfill and redefine those principles which involve man's relationship with his Maker and his fellow citizens of planet earth. All of the teachings of Jesus were based on one single overriding principle—*love*.

Jesus's philosophy rose above picaresque points of theological debate in His day. When asked by a lawyer (an expert in Judaic law) what the "great" commandment of the law was, Christ reduced the whole matter to one simple principle—love. "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*" (Matthew 22:37-40).

These two principles have one common denominator—love. Love in two directions—toward God and toward one's fellowman.

This is the *essence*, the heart and core, of Christianity! Jesus said that love was the greatest and most obvious way to recognize a true Christian: "*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*" (John 13:35).

The Apostle Paul later elaborated on this fundamental teaching of Christ. He taught Christians: "Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law" (Rom. 13:8).

Think about that. It's at once both simple and profound. A person who has Christ's love dwelling in his heart and mind is not going to do any evil to his neighbor. He or she is not going to steal from his neighbor—or lie to them—or murder them. A Christian who loves his neighbor is not going to covet his belongings or commit adultery with his wife. A child who loves his parents is not going to dishonor them.

A Christian, in short, *keeps* the law of God *because* of the element of love that exists within him. (After all, if you're not breaking the law, you're keeping it!) As Paul said: "Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10). This is how Christ Himself fulfilled the law (Matt. 5:17) and thus set an example for all Christians. He laid down his very life in sacrifice in the greatest fulfillment of this central principle of love (upon which all of God's law is based)—and he did it for you and for me!

Love is the centrality of all true Christianity.

How God's Love is Acquired. Loving God and one's neighbor does not come naturally for most of us. The ability to express godly love is an acquired characteristic. In fact, it's a gift.

God makes the first move. Paul explained that we love God because He *first* loved us (I John 4:19). God draws us to Him by His Holy Spirit (John 6:44). He begins the process of bringing us into a relationship with Him by attracting us to His gospel.

We respond by asking the question: "What must I now *do* in the light of what I now know?" God answers: "... Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Once this is done, the Christian begins to bear the fruit of the Spirit. "... The fruit of the Spirit is LOVE, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness,

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goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23). Notice! The very first fruit listed is love. This is the first result God begins to produce in the life of a converted Christian.

Why?

Because it is the basis and the foundation upon which all other beliefs and practices of Christianity are based. Love is the primary characteristic God is developing in His children.

It is a most necessary prerequisite to entry into the Kingdom of God. It is more important than knowledge and understanding. It is far more important than prophecy. It transcends even faith, without which it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). It is the very best gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul taught Christians to eagerly desire the *best* gifts (I Cor. 12:31).

He placed love in its proper relationship to all the other gifts, talents and abilities which a Christian could possess: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity [Greek *agape*, love], I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of *prophecy*, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all *faith*, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity [love], I **NOTHING**"! (I Cor. 13:1-2.)

A Christian who does not have the love which comes as the result of the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit is *nothing*, spiritually speaking. He is no Christian at all. If you don't believe that, then you don't believe the Christian Bible!

Love batters down all barriers. Yet is not militant. The Christian is patient and kind. He is not self-seeking because he seeks the welfare of others before that of himself. Vanity and jealousy have no place in the makeup of a Christian. The converted mind does not delight in scandal and the knowledge of evil and sin in others (compare I Cor. 13:4-6). All these characteristics are the *result* of that indwelling love which is the product of the Holy Spirit.

A Christian who loves God deeply and sincerely is not going to erect an idol. Nor is he going to loosely or carelessly use the name of

God. He will respect that name and use it in reverence and esteem. He will have no other gods before the true God. Nor will he run roughshod over the Sabbath day which commemorates the creation and the beginning of the great plan of salvation. He will set God apart in his heart and mind *every* day—not just on the Sabbath.

The truly converted Christian enters into a relationship with God which is based upon and motivated by love. It is a response to the incredible compassion exhibited by God when He took the first step and forgave every rotten, heinous, sinful act and thought you and I ever committed.

Love Is the Motivation for the Gospel. Every Christian who has been granted the priceless gift of conversion is going to want to share his understanding, his way of life, his knowledge of God with others. He will be "moved with compassion," as was—and is—Jesus Christ (cf., Mark 1:41; 6:34 and 8:2), when he surveys the contemporary human condition. He will have the same loving attitude Christ exhibited when He cried with deep emotion: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how

often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not"! (Matt. 23:37.)

"That's a lot of religious sentimentality and mush," you may be thinking. No. You're wrong. What you are reading about is *basic Christianity*! If you reject love as mere religious emotionalism, then you are rejecting Christ the very essence of true Christianity!

Jesus Christ of Nazareth was not ashamed to openly express the very depths of His emotions in public. He wept openly on one occasion over the lack of faith of some of His contemporaries (John 11:35).

Jesus was particularly close to the Apostle John, who used the word "love" more than any other single writer of Scripture (John 21:20). (Just for your own edification, why not take your concordance and look up the word "love" and note just *how many* times it occurs in both the Gospel and the letters of John?)

The Apostle John, writing toward the end of the first century (after all the other original apostles were martyred), wrote: "For *this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another*" (I John 3:11).

If You'd Like to Know More

Many hundreds have written asking if we have representatives in their areas to counsel with them personally and to answer their questions.

The answer is yes, we do.

The Worldwide Church of God stations personal representatives (most are ordained ministers) in the United States and British Commonwealth and many other areas of the world. These local ministers will visit you, if invited, directly in your own home.

So if you have spiritual matters to discuss or questions to ask about biblical topics such as repentance, baptism, etc., please feel free to write us and request a private appointment. Worldwide mailing addresses and phone numbers are as follows:

• United States: P.O. Box 111, Pas-

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Love is at the heart of the gospel message. It is a message of outgoing concern; it is the Church's gift to the world; it is an expression of love. The gospel of the Kingdom tells of a better way of life, a way of peace and harmony, and of a better world to come. It is a message of hope; it is a burning, white-hot light that shines in a darkened world.

The Apostle Paul, speaking of his own nation Israel, wrote: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

He was so filled with a loving desire for the welfare of the people that he said with deep emotion and feeling: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (Rom. 9:2-4, *The New International Version*).

Paul was willing to sacrifice him-

self if that's what it took to bring about the salvation of Israel. Moses, many centuries earlier, had much the same attitude about the nation of Israel (compare Exodus 32:32).

Should not Christians have a similar attitude toward all society? Can we look at the intense agony and suffering of humankind—at the general wretchedness of the human condition—and fail to be moved to at least *communicate* with that world? Can we not earnestly desire that the world be granted *both* physical and spiritual salvation? After all, isn't that what the gospel is all about?

To Summarize. All religious arguments crumble into a meaningless jumble of hollow words in the face of godly love which is the basis of real Christianity. Love transcends everything! You are a Christian if you have received God's Holy Spirit and are now bearing its fruits in your life.

Paul summed it all up quite succinctly in Ephesians 1:13-14: "... Ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom [Christ] also after ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest [pledge or downpayment] of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory."

You are even now reading the words of that gospel. Believe it. Repent and be baptized and you will be granted the priceless gift of God's Holy Spirit, by which you will be sealed and preserved to eternal life! You will be assured of your place in eternity—in God's Kingdom.

And, if you are already baptized, examine yourself. Are you bearing the fruits of God's Spirit? Are you motivated by love toward God and your neighbor?

Are you living and experiencing *basic Christianity*? □

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