

## What is Christianity?

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If you walk down Washington's 16th St. from Silver Spring to the White House you will pass by over 30 churches of almost every conceivable variety -- a regular cafeteria line of religious faiths, practices, ceremonies and traditions. This is Church St., U.S.A., and if you have never taken such a long stroll it's a rather unusual Sunday morning experience. Many questions will pop into your head as you go from the Syrian Orthodox to the Greek Catholic to the black Methodist to the Unitarian to the Swedenborgian to the Episcopal Churches. You may wonder, what is unique about Christianity? What is distinctive? What is there about it which would produce all those sacred buildings on one street?

As you well know, there are a variety of ways to define what Christianity is. For example, there is a creedal definition. A Christian is someone who holds a certain set of beliefs. People will tell you they are Christian because they accept the Apostles Creed, or the Nicene Creed, or the Westminster Confession or the Baltimore Catechism.

Then there is the liturgical explanation. A Christian is one who attends Mass, or gets baptized all over, takes the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, goes to the Wednesday night prayer meeting, says the rosary, can speak in tongues, or recites the Lord's Prayer.

In the third place there is a moral interpretation of Christianity. Being a Christian means obeying the Ten Commandments, following the Golden Rule, applying the law of love, practicing the brotherhood of man. A man's faith is demonstrated by his works, said St. James and Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

Fourthly, there is what can be called the bookish interpretation of Christianity. A person is a Christian, we are told, if he accepts the King James Bible from cover to cover, or studies Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, or reads the Book of Common Prayer every Sunday, or believes that God has revealed His Word in the Book of Mormon, or subscribes to the Watchtower magazine. Being a Christian, they tell us, has something to do with a book.

There's one more common definition which has lots to do with 30 or more churches on 16th St. Let's call it "follow the leader." According to most churchgoers a Christian is someone who submits to the authority of a recognized guide. Christians of various kinds say, "I follow Martin Luther, I follow Billy Graham, I follow John Wesley or John Calvin or Joseph Smith." People are Christian, they say, because they accept the guidance of the Bishop of Rome, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Mother Eddy, Jean Dixon, Edgar Cayce, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, the Archbishop of Canterbury or somebody else. As one of the avant-garde Catholics put it, "Pope Paul VI is my guru."

All five of these standard definitions of Christianity have considerable merit and far be it from me to

minimize their usefulness. But none of them gets to the heart of the matter. They are not false but inadequate, not irrelevant but a little too superficial. Christianity is doctrine, yes; ritual, yes; ethics, yes; book-related, yes; leadership-oriented, yes. But more, much more.

Almost everybody agrees that if you want to discover what Christianity is all about you should look at the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Unfortunately, most people read the Gospels not as they are but rather in the light of their preconceptions. When you do that it is comparatively easy to find the Vatican Jesus, the Baptist Jesus, the Christian Scientist Jesus, the Jehovah's Witness Jesus. But what if you look without any biases, without any desire to see what you want to see?

If you read the New Testament to discover the Man of Nazareth, you may dig up a most unusual definition of Christianity. What is Christianity? What is the unique message of Jesus? Let me put it bluntly. Jesus said: "Find God where nobody else bothers to look. Find God in unexpected places."

Now let's look at the proofs for this rather unconventional statement. If you had asked a Jew of Jesus' day where to find God he would have told you to visit the magnificent temple of Solomon, especially on a High Holy Day. God is there, right there. That's His house. That's where He lives. As all the 1st century Jews of Jesus' day would have said, Solomon's temple is the dwelling place of the Most High. Like his fellow Jews, Jesus went to the temple. He prayed there, offered sacrifice, took part in the impressive ceremonies. But when it was all over, and he was asked what he thought of the place, he said, "Consider the lilies of the field how they grow... Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these!"

Suppose someone were to visit Washington from Des Moines, Iowa, or Butte, Montana. He sees everything a tourist is supposed to view. When he gets back home, some neighbor asks him what impressed him about the nation's capital. Was it the White House, the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, National Cathedral, the Supreme Court Building? He replies, "You should have seen the loveliness of the dandelions in Lafayette Park!" That was exactly the reaction of Jesus. After viewing the marble splendor and gorgeous ceremonial of Solomon's temple, he praised the beauty of the ordinary wayside flowers. He could find God where nobody else bothered to look.

According to a proverb, one swallow does not prove that summer has come, so one example may not demonstrate the unusual definition of Christianity given by Jesus. Here's a second. Jerusalem was a tourist city in Jesus' day. People flocked there as they now fly to Paris or the Riviera or the Pyramids. In a tourist city one of the worst nuisances are the little kids with their hands out. They gather at your hotel, they flock to the entrance of the cathedral, they wait for you at the gate of the famous old palace. As it is now, so it was then in "tourist traps" like Jerusalem.

Over in the thrift shop on 14th St. you can find a book for sale with a title something like "Little Boys and Other Beasts." Through most of history that's been the grownup's attitude toward kids. Even today we have Dennis the Menace.

But what did Jesus do? When a crowd of disciples had gathered around him, he grabbed one of those little street kids who probably had his hand out, put his arms around him and said, Look at him, this is a sign of the kingdom of heaven. If you cannot see God in this dirty-faced, dirty-pawed little beggar, you cannot understand the kingdom of God! Dennis the Menace is God's little angel.

In Jesus' day as in ours there were very respectable human exemplars of God's favor -- the rabbi who stays up all night studying Scripture, the rich matron who gives generously to every charity, the high priest who presides at the most important religious services. But Jesus's example was surprisingly different. He held up an ordinary street urchin and said, "Behold, of such is the kingdom of heaven." He could see -- as most of us fail to see -- that God reveals Himself in unlikely people.

Let me give one more illustration. Again the example is so familiar we ignore its original shock appeal. One day Jesus was asked what it was like to practice religion. Do you recall his story? He told the parable of the good Samaritan. Jesus spoke in the vernacular in terms of an ordinary life situation. He was not talking about ancient and dead squabbles using stilted Elizabethan language, so let me retell the story as if he were telling it now.

Once upon a time there was a little girl, age 6, who wanted to go to Rock Creek Park but there was no one to go with her, so she sat on the doorstep feeling sad. Down the street walked the Cardinal Archbishop who preached last Sunday at St. Matthews Cathedral on the blessed children, but he walked past the little girl because he was on his way to a meeting of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine where he was to read a learned paper on why Catholics should not go to a mass in Latin conducted in Maryland by a priest who was defying his bishop and canon law. The little girl just sat and cried. Next came Rev. Dr. A. Washburn-Smythe (please Smythe, not Smith), but he was too busy to help a little girl because he was making the final arrangements for a \$25 a plate lobster and steak dinner on behalf of a Korean Christian who was in jail because he read a statement advocating the overthrow of the Park Chung Hee government. Dr. Smythe walked by on the other side of the street. The little girl kept crying. Then along

came one of those "brainwashed" Moonies -- you know the ones you read about in *The Enquirer* and *True Confessions*. She saw the little girl, took her to the park and brought her back two hours later. Of course, the point of this Parable of the Good Samaritan is that God shows up in the most unlikely places.

Jesus said we could find God in unusual places, unlikely people, and not least important, in strange times. At one of their festivals, Jews always keep a chair empty in case the Messiah unexpectedly shows up as a guest. That's one of many signs of a truly great religion. Ordinarily men believe that God was very real in the distant past or He will be in the distant future. When was God close to men? we ask. We are told that He appeared face to face with Moses, actually spoke to Jesus and was very real to men and women of the medieval age of faith. A Roman Catholic historian once entitled a book "The 13th, Greatest of Centuries" because God was really present at that time in a way He has not been since. Let me mention in passing a corollary belief: God is not very real here in the way He is real in Israel or India or Tibet. There is a common notion that God is clearly apparent in some distant time or place in a manner far different from His presence here and now.

Again, Jesus disagrees completely. For him there are no spatial or temporal limitations on God's presence. Peter and John are no worse off than Abraham or Moses. Repeatedly Jesus insists on the Now-ness of God. God is here, right here, all around us, among us and within us. There is nothing antique about the reality of God. When Jesus declare. I, "Ye have heard of old but I say," this indicated his faith in the Now God, the Now revelation of God's will, the Now commandment.

To me, part of the greatness of Rev. Sun Myung Moon's message is his emphasis on Now. Our age -- not just some distant past is the time in which the Kingdom can be manifested. We do not have to return to the age of Aquinas or Luther as many have said and almost no one can believe. There is no way to turn back the clock to the 13th century or the 16th. We are here, now, for good or ill. According to Rev. Moon, the present -- our present -- is important in God's timetable. The past is beyond our control; the future is beyond our grasp. For us, it's either now or never! This is all we have -- Now!

So far I have talked about Jesus' view of the kingdom of God on earth. Let me conclude with a practical application. Our brothers and sisters are going around this metropolitan area knocking on doors. They will run into problems, yes, face criticism, yes, but they will come face to face with God -- in unexpected places, in unusual people, and in our time, today. But that is what Christianity means, finding God where nobody else expects Him to show up.