

What Is Christianity?

J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

THE Question, "What is Christianity?" has within recent years become one of the questions of popular interest of the day; it has actually attained a place upon the front pages of the newspapers and in the popular magazines. To many persons, indeed, the raising of the question seems to be a colossal piece of impertinence; the Christian Church, they insist, is a great organization carrying on a useful service to mankind, why should we interfere with its efficiency by asking divisive and embarrassing questions as to what it is all for? But with such persons we cannot possibly bring ourselves to agree. Efficiency, after all, simply means doing things; and it does seem to be important to ask whether the things that are being done by our boasted ecclesiastical efficiency are good or bad. It is not enough to ask whether the Church is moving smoothly, one must also ask the question whether it is moving in the right direction.

The raising of that question, in the past history of the Church, has often been the precursor of great spiritual advance. It has always, indeed, caused disturbance, as in the great upheaval of the Reformation, but without it there would be death. Sad is the condition of the Church when "controversy" is discouraged and men refuse to look beneath the surface in order to discover what, at bottom, the Church is in the world to do. Let us not be afraid, therefore, of the basic question, the question what Christianity really is.

How shall we obtain the answer to that question? The method should surely be quite plain. If we are going to tell what Christianity is, surely we must take a look at Christianity as it has actually existed in the world. To say that Christianity *is* this or that is very different from saying that it *ought* to have been this or that, or that the ideal religion, whatever its name, *would* be this or that. Christianity is an historical phenomenon like the State of Pennsylvania or the United States of America or the Kingdom of Prussia or the Roman Empire, and it must be investigated by historical means. It may turn out to be a good thing or it may turn out to be a bad thing that is another question—but if we are to tell what it is, we must take a look at it as it has actually existed in the world.

No doubt we cannot tell all that it is by any such merely historical method as that, we cannot tell all that it is by looking at it merely from the outside. In order that we should tell all that it is, we must ourselves be Christians; we must know Christianity in our own inner lives. But the Christian religion has never been an esoteric type of mysticism, it has always presented itself in the open air; and there are some things about it which should appear to

friend and foe alike.

But how shall we take a look at it? It has existed through some nineteen centuries and in a thousand different forms; how can we possibly obtain a common view of it, so as to include in our definition of it what it is and exclude from our definition what it is not? To what point in the long history of Christianity should we turn in order to discover what it really is? Surely the answer to that question is perfectly plain. If we are going to determine what any great movement is, surely we must turn to the beginnings of the movement. So it is with Christianity. We are not asserting at this point in our argument that the founders of the Christian movement had a right to legislate for all subsequent generations. That is a matter for further investigation. But what we are asserting now is that the founders of the Christian movement, whoever they were, did have an inalienable right to legislate for all those subsequent generations that should choose to bear the name "Christian." Conceivably we may change their program; but if we do change their program, let us use a new name. It is misleading to use the old name to designate a new thing. That is just a matter of common sense. If, therefore, we are going to tell what Christianity at bottom is, we must take a look at the beginnings of Christianity.

Now the beginnings of Christianity constitute a fairly definite historical phenomenon, about which there is a certain measure of agreement even between historians that are themselves Christian and historians that are not. Christianity is a great movement that originated a few days after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. If some one should say that it originated at an earlier time, when Jesus first gathered His disciples about Him in Galilee, we should not be inclined to quarrel with him; indeed, we might even say that in a sense Christianity originated still farther back, in Old Testament times, when the promise was first given concerning a salvation to come. But if Christianity existed before the death of Jesus, it existed only in a preliminary form. So at least the matter appears to the secular historian, from his superficial and external point of view. Clearly there was a strange new beginning among the disciples of Jesus soon after Jesus' death; and at that time is to be put the beginning of the great world movement which is commonly called Christianity.

What then was Christianity at that time when it began? We can answer the question with more intelligence, perhaps, if we approach it with the fashionable modern answer to it in our mind and ask whether that answer is right or wrong. Christianity, according to that fashionable modern answer, is a life and not a doctrine, it is a life or an experience that has doctrine merely as its symbolic intellectual expression, so that while the life abides the doctrine must necessarily change from age to age.

That answer, of course, involves the most bottomless skepticism that could possibly be conceived; for if everything that we say about God or about Christ or about the future life has value merely for this generation, and if something contradictory to It may have equal value in some future generation, then the thing that we are saying is not true even here and now. A thing that is useful

now may cease to be useful in some future generation, but a thing that is true now remains true beyond the end of time. To say, therefore, that doctrine is the necessarily changing expression of religious experience or religious life is simply to give up the search for truth altogether.

Was Christianity at the beginning in that sense a life as distinguished from a doctrine? At this point we desire to be perfectly clear. Christianity at the beginning certainly was a life, about that there can be no manner of doubt. The first Christians led lives very different from the lives of the people about them, and everything that did not conform to that peculiarly Christian type of life was rigidly excluded from the early Church. Let us be perfectly plain about that.

But how was that Christian type of life produced? There we come to the crux of the whole question. If one thing is clear to the historian it is that that type of life was not produced merely by exhortation or merely by the magic of personal contacts; if one thing is clear to the historian it is that earliest Christian missionaries did *not* go around the world saying, "We have been living in contact with a wonderful person, Jesus; contact with Him has changed our lives; and we call upon you our hearers, without asking puzzling questions, without settling the meaning of His death, without asking whether He rose from the dead, simply to submit yourselves to the contagion of that wonderful personality." That is, perhaps, what many modern men might have expected the first Christian missionaries to say, but to the historian it is clear that as a matter of fact they said nothing of the kind.

What they did say is summed up in a few words in the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, where, as is admitted even by historians of the most skeptical kind, Paul is giving nothing less than a summary of what he "received" from the very first disciples of Jesus in the primitive Jerusalem Church. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures- He was buried; He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures"--there we have in brief compass what the first Christian missionaries said.

But what is that utterance that we have just quoted? Is it not an account of facts? "Christ died, He was buried, He rose again"--that is a setting forth of things that happened; it is not an exhortation but a rehearsal of events, a piece of news.

The facts that are rehearsed are not, indeed, bare facts, but facts with the meaning of the facts. "Christ died" is a fact; but to know merely that fact never did good to anyone; it never did anyone any good to know that a Jew, who was called Christ, died on a cross in the first century of our era. But it is not in that jejune [lifeless] way that the fact was rehearsed by the primitive Jerusalem Church; the primitive message was not merely that Christ died, but that Christ *died for our sins*. That tells not merely that Christ died, but why He died, what He accomplished when He died, but why He died, what He accomplished when He died, it gives not merely the fact but the meaning of the fact.

But when you say "fact with the meaning of the fact" you have said "doctrine." We have already arrived, then, at the answer to our question. Christianity at the beginning, we have discovered, was not a life as distinguished from a doctrine or a life that had doctrine as its changing intellectual expression, but--just the other way around--it was a life founded upon a doctrine.

If that be so, if the Christian religion is founded upon historical facts, then there is something in the Christian message which can never possibly change. There is one good thing about facts--they stay put. If a thing really happened, the passage of years can never possibly make it into a thing that did not happen. If the body of Jesus really emerged from the tomb on the first Easter morning, then no possible advance of science can change the fact one whit. The advance of science may conceivably show that the alleged fact was never a fact at all; it may conceivably show that the earliest Christians were wrong when they said that Christ rose from the dead the third day. But to say that that statement of fact was true in the first century, but that because of the advance of science it is no longer true--that is to say what is plainly absurd. The Christian religion is founded squarely upon a message that sets forth facts; if that message is false, then the religion that is founded on it must of course be abandoned; but if it is true, then the Christian Church must still deliver the message faithfully as it did on the morning of the first Easter Day.

For our part, we adopt the latter alternative. But it is a mistake to think of us merely as "conservatives"; It is a mistake to think of us as though we were holding desperately to something that is old merely because it is old and were inhospitable to what is new. As a matter of fact, we are looking not merely to a continuance of conditions that now prevail, but to a burst of new power. The Spirit of God will in God's good time again enable men to see clear, and when they see clear they will be convinced that the Christian message is true. We long for the coming of that time. Now that the Christian message is so generally disbelieved or forgotten, the human race is sinking gradually into bondage; the advance in material things, extraordinary though it is, is being dearly purchased by a widespread loss of human freedom. But when the gospel is brought to light again, there will again be life and liberty for mankind.

First delivered as an address before the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland on May 30, 1927.
Reprinted in a 2004 volume by Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing.



ReformedLiterature.com