

# Christianity Is Not...

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Sometimes it helps to define something by stating what it is not. In this article, I want to list a few things that Christianity is commonly confused with, but which it is definitely not. This should give us a better, more focused picture of what biblical Christianity really is.

## Christianity Is Not Moralism

French philosopher and theologian, Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), wrote, "In the eyes of most of our contemporaries, Christianity is a morality first of all. And have not many epochs of Christian history been characterized by the church's insistence upon actions and conduct?" (Jacques Ellul, *To Will and To Do* [Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969] 201. Because I quote Ellul does not mean that I agree with all his teachings, but he is an interesting person to read, and he makes many valid points.) Truly, most non-Christians, as well as many who profess to be followers of Christ, think of Christianity as a system of morality or moralism.

The media depicts Christians as straight-laced moralists who are trying to impose their standards on others. Moralism is based on law; it is a form of legalism. The New Testament unmistakably teaches that Christianity is not legalism or moralism. Paul declared,

For I, through the law, died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me. That life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me. I don't make void the grace of God. For if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nothing!

Galatians 2:19-21

Moralism is so contrary to the Christian Gospel that it is as if its advocates are saying that Jesus' death was worthless. This is a grave matter, which is why Christians should not be toying with moralism or giving the world the impression that we stand for the law.

Christianity is not dos and don'ts and thou shalt nots. It is grace and faith and love. It is the proclamation of release from the burden of sin that the Old Testament Year of the Jubilee only pictured (Luke 4:18-

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19). So why, for example, although God gave the Ten Commandments to the Jews only under the Old Covenant, is it Christians, who are supposed to be under the New Covenant of grace and justification by faith alone, who have fought in court for the right to display the Ten Commandments in public places? Even more seriously, why are Christians formed into political action committees intent on getting various morality laws passed? By such actions, we are sending the world a message that is the reverse of, and an offense to, the Gospel.

Jesus Christ was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Matthew 11:19). He didn't try to pass more laws to stop sinners. Instead, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). It was not Christ who lay on people's shoulders heavy burdens that are grievous to be borne (Matthew 23:4), but the moralist Pharisees. Instead, Christ said, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Thus, legalism, moralism, and working to burden people with laws are contrary to the mission of Jesus; they are anti-Christ.

To again quote Jacques Ellul: "We have to recognize that Christians themselves have done all they can to create this confusion. God's revelation has nothing whatever to do with morality" (Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986] 69). Jesus came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17) and to set us free (Galatians 5:1). Christianity is not moralism and law; it is liberating grace.

(Further reading: "Christianity or Moralism, Can You Tell the Difference?") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/moralism.htm>)

### **Christianity Is Not Patriotism or Nationalism**

Speaking of both moralism and patriotism, Gene Breed, the pastor of the Grace Baptist Church in Jonesboro, Georgia, has said,

So there are many thousands of people in our day who have only been "counseled" by religion's bare, legal word, who have become more moral. It is this effect of the bare letter of the law, with only the power of rendering guilty, without the spirit of the word which renders one alive spiritually, that has brought forth the politics of morality in America today! This spiritual whorishness (the substitution

of morality for righteousness) has intoxicated the minds and souls of our population, even swaying the political scene! For moralists, supposing themselves to be Christians, cannot distinguish between the spirit of patriotism and the spirit of God!

Gene Breed, *Lessons from Luke* (Jonesboro, GA: Grace Baptist Church, no date), 41

Political leaders through the centuries have somehow successfully used Christianity to stir patriotism and nationalism. I am amazed by how easily they dupe people with this message because, when I read the Bible, I see no connection between the two. By the way, although many people try to distinguish patriotism from nationalism, there is great disagreement over what that distinction is. All I mean by them in this article is love for and devotion to one's country. Therefore, what I am saying is that love for one's country and Christianity are two distinct and unrelated things.

Aside from the nation of Israel that God established under the Old Covenant, and which ended as a nation in AD 70, nothing in the Bible supports the idea that God stands behind any particular nation. To bring about His will in history, God has caused some nations to rise and others to fall. That does not mean that those that rise do so because they are God's nations and deserve our devotion. Nations have always fought each other thinking the gods were, or God was, on their side. Even since the rise of Christianity, Christians have gone to war believing that God was on their side and they had His blessing to kill other Christians. What revolting nonsense! Where does the Bible permit Christians to kill people of any faith? Nowhere! Christianity supersedes the flea-minded aspirations of nations. Christians "conquer" through the Gospel, not the sword. The kingdom of God knows no national boundaries. Christianity has no connection to causing people to love their country. Romans 13 tells us to obey civil leaders, but this is under the limitation of Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men."

The Bible depicts nations as beasts for a good reason. They are animalistic in nature. Christians have no business supporting them in their machinations. Remember, Satan is the god of this world who "has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the Good News of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn on them" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Are we to give allegiance to nations which are under the sway of the devil? God forbid!

Rather, Scripture explains that "our citizenship is in heaven, from where we also wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). The word "citizenship" is from the Greek *politeuma*. Using the directly related word *politeuomai*, which means "behavior as a citizen," Paul writes in Philippians 1:27, "Only let your manner of life [*politeuomai*] be worthy of the Good News of Christ, that, whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your state, that you stand firm in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the Good News." We are wrongly taking on a double citizenship, a double way of life, a double spirit, and two conflicting messages when we try to blend the Good News of the kingdom of God with the carnal, earthly, and often blood-filled message of patriotism.

Christianity is not earthly patriotism or nationalism. Its message is an announcement of forgiveness and heavenly citizenship for people of all nations who trust in Christ.

### **Christianity Is Not Politics**

Closely related to patriotism, but not quite the same thing, is equating Christianity with a particular political or economic view. There are people who are convinced that conservatism, liberalism, or whatever other view they hold and Christianity are one and the same thing. Their goal is to put their candidates and platform in power, and they see this as furthering the cause of Christ. What they have done is to make their politics a religion. It is a form of idolatry.

Some aim to establish the kingdom of God in their country and, eventually, the world. Such was already the false hope of Jesus' disciples before Pentecost. Such a goal drove Judas to betray Jesus when he found out Jesus did not intend to follow this agenda. The names for this Christian political view today are kingdom now, reconstructionism, and dominion theology. These are the desire to establish God's kingdom as a kingdom of this world through political action. It is a heresy that Jesus rejected: "Jesus therefore, perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him king, withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (John 6:15). It was the carnally minded people who looked for Jesus to establish a physical kingdom. However, he told Pilate, "My Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). It took the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for Jesus' disciples to see that Jesus was establishing His kingdom in the hearts of every believer. The Great Commission is not a call to improve this world. Rather than a political

platform to outlaw evil or improve social and economic conditions, the Gospel tells people how to obtain freedom from sin through Jesus.

Politics are a part of the thorns, the cares of this world, that choke the Word so that the hearer becomes unfruitful (Matthew 13:22). Paul warned, "Be careful that you don't let anyone rob you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the elements of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

No political platform and no politician is going to establish the kingdom of God on earth. In fact, they won't even come close. Those who wield power in this world have gotten to that position because they are worldly, not godly. In covetousness, they seek to exploit Christians with deceptive words (see 2 Peter 2:1-3) that will never deliver what they promise. Only the Gospel can deliver people from the evils that enslave them in this world, and politics is a distracting false Gospel.

God calls His people out of this world as the *ekklēsia* or assembly of a heavenly government, the kingdom of God. Their commission is to preach the Gospel, and then to baptize and disciple those who believe. Those who profess Christianity but who confuse it with worldly politics are unfaithful to our Christian calling; they are apostate. Like Esau, who traded his earthly birthright for a bowl of pottage, they are exchanging their heavenly birthright in the kingdom of God for the pottage of carnal power in this world's politics and deceiving themselves into believing this defection from the faith is Christian.

Christianity is not this world's politics. It is a heavenly calling that frees us from the carnal cares of this world and graciously gives us the only hope there is.

### **Christianity Is Not Eating, Drinking, or Keeping Days**

Those of you to whom this is obvious might be surprised to learn that some of the most common criticism I receive is from people who are convinced that I am going to destruction because I don't preach abstinence from unclean meats and alcohol, and that I don't teach the keeping of a particular day as a Sabbath. While they claim to follow the Bible, they ignore or blatantly twist the Scriptures that contradict their position.

While Paul, in Romans 14, tells us we should not judge one another over these matters, the very fact that he says it is okay to eat or not eat, drink or not drink, keep a day or not keep a day, means that

there can be no food we must eat or not eat, no drink we must drink or not drink, and no day we must keep or not keep. God has given us liberty in these matters. "The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

If you died with Christ from the elements of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to ordinances, "Don't handle, nor taste, nor touch" (all of which perish with use), according to the precepts and doctrines of men? Which things indeed appear like wisdom in self-imposed worship, and humility, and severity to the body; but aren't of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.

Colossians 2:20-23

Christianity is not eating, drinking, or keeping days. Christianity is dying to all of these shadows and rising with Him to find ourselves forgiven all our trespasses (Colossians 2:13-17).

(Further reading: "The Real Poison of Biblical Dietary Laws and 'Health Secrets'")(http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/uncleanmeats.htm)

(Further reading: "What Is the Christian Sabbath?")(http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/christiansabbath.html)

### **Christianity Is Not Church Attendance**

I think we all know of pastors who seem to equate Christianity with church attendance. People who attend regularly, they refer to as "the faithful." Those who don't, they suspect of not being converted. Upon what is this based? Hebrews 10:25-27:

Not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as you see the Day approaching. For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and a fierceness of fire which will devour the adversaries.

But as I explain in "Hebrews 10:25: What Are We Not To Forsake?" (http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/hebrews1025.htm) these verses are not about church attendance at all. Then what Scriptures tell us that

we must attend church? None. The Bible has references to assemblies meeting in houses, but it never commands anyone to attend them or equates attendance with Christianity.

Christianity is not church attendance. It is undeserved grace that produces love for one another (John 13:34-35; 1 John 4:11-12).

There are today many false ideas of Christianity. But it is really very simple. Christianity is trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone as our Savior and outwardly showing our salvation in love. Whatever conflicts with that is not Christianity. Just as John said of his day that "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1), so today there are many false ideas of Christianity. I believe that we may be fast approaching a time when there will be a division between the worldly ideas of Christianity and genuine Christianity that may result in persecution of those who stand for the truth. Nevertheless, let's make sure we are on the right side and entrust ourselves to God.

*This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, even as he commanded.*

1 John 3:23