

WHAT IS REAL CHRISTIANITY?

Jesus Christ lived and taught a unique way of life. This three-part series explores the process of conversion and what true Christian character is.

They called Christ's disciples "these that have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

The blunt, ruggedly honest young Teacher from Galilee revolutionized human concepts of morality in His series of verbal lightning flashes known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Most professing Christians are lulled by the familiar, pithy phrases found in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. But Christ's brief epigrams, known as the "beatitudes," or "blessings," are actually shocking, profound. And they are the very essence, the hallmark, of Christianity.

The plain truth is that the Sermon on the Mount totally inverts conventional religion—yes, even this world's so-called Christianity.

What is the precise, biblical definition of Christianity?

The Bible definition

The word *Christian* was coined in the Syrian city of Antioch only a few years after the day of Pentecost in A.D. 31 (Acts 11:26). On that Pentecost the promised Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49) descended from heaven in a brilliant display of power (Acts 2:1-4). It welded Christ's 12 disciples into the very nucleus of the Church of God.

Until then—until God actually placed the Holy Spirit within them—even the 12 disciples were not converted. Christ Himself said so (Luke 22:31-32).

Before that time, God's Spirit worked with the disciples and opened their minds to certain truths, but was not yet actively inside their minds doing a transforming work (John 14:17).

Now understand why the most specific scriptural definition of real Christianity is directly connected with this Holy Spirit:

"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Rom. 8:9).

There it is! A true Christian possesses the energizing presence of the very Spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit is not any third person of the Godhead. God's Spirit is defined in Luke 1:35 as "the power of the Highest." It is the dynamic power of God, emanating from Him like light from the sun and filling the entire universe (Ps. 139:7). It is something that can be "poured out" or "quenched" (Acts 2:17, I Thess. 5:19). It is a mighty, moving force, not a person (John 7:37-39).

God's Spirit is the active, indwelling presence of "the divine nature" (II Pet. 1:4) at work in a human mind. It fashions, molds and shapes that mind into the image of our Father in heaven (Phil. 2:5).

Now how may we receive this Spirit of God?

Peter outlined the steps in Acts 2:38. After a process of genuine change—of turning from one's carnal, selfish way to the way of outflowing love and obeying God's commandments—demonstrated by bearing "fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8), comes the baptism ceremony.

The Greek word *baptizo*, translated "baptism" in the New Testament, means total immersion in water, symbolizing the death and burial of the old self—of the old, sinful way of life (Rom. 6:1-6). At baptism the new convert makes a

statement of intent, as it were, to leave his past behind. He surrenders sovereignty over his failed, sin-filled life to God. Then comes another ceremony: the "laying on of hands" (Heb. 6:1-2). Physical representatives of Jesus Christ, men empowered to discern repentance and grant the Holy Spirit by the laying on of their hands, facilitate contact with God's Spirit (Acts 8:14-18, John 20:21-23).

How many professing Christians really understand this? Incredible as it may seem, God is calling only a tiny minority of all who ever lived to understand these truths at this time. God is not trying to save this world now. Only a few, chosen ones really respond to God in this age, repent, fight the obstacles in their paths and receive the Holy Spirit, "whom God hath given to them that obey him" (Acts 5:32).

A changed life

Now understand Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."

Some few believe God's servants. They begin to see the wretchedness and futility of the way of life they have followed. They realize they have accepted doctrines diametrically opposed to what the Bible actually teaches.

These few feel "pricked in their heart" they are sincerely and deeply sorry for the sins they have committed (Acts 2:37). They want to change their lives. After counseling with God's ministers, they resolve to

dedicate their lives to living God's way, accept the baptism covenant and receive the Holy Spirit.

What, then? Is that the end? Absolutely not! This only starts the Christian journey. The work of overcoming now begins in earnest.

Baptism signals but the first effort in a lifelong struggle to "put off the old man" (Col. 3:9-10). Self-will is still active after baptism. Though past sins are forgiven, the Christian may stumble and sin anew. The new convert must increase the Holy Spirit of power through prayer—much prayer, Bible study and fasting regularly (Luke 11:9-13). It takes sincere, mighty effort to replace the carnal, selfish, fleshly mind with the mind of Christ Himself. This is difficult, a lifelong struggle, and requires God's constant help and continual forgiveness.

But this is the very purpose for human life, the only reason God gave us this temporary, fleshly existence (I Tim. 6:12). Only by imitating Christ in every way do we prepare for an eternal life of usefulness and accomplishment in the Kingdom of God.

Now, exactly what must we do to be ready when Christ comes to straighten out this sick planet in the world tomorrow? For that is the true Christian's goal, even though almost no one understands it. How deceived this world is (Rev. 12:9)! Paul asked, "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?" (I Cor. 6:2). Revelation 5:10 says "we shall reign on the earth." In Revelation 2:26 Christ promised His followers "power over the nations."

In the Sermon on the Mount Christ gave specialized instructions to His future inner cabinet, those who would be sitting with Him on His throne (Rev. 3:21). This vital seminar for future kings and priests (Rev. 1:6) is found in Matthew 5, 6 and 7.

"And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him" (Matt. 5:1). Notice how Christ often avoided the crowds. It was time for some deep spiritual discourses that would challenge even His own disciples.

Later on, Christ explained why He taught in parables, and it was not to

make the meaning clearer! Read it: "Because it is given unto you [His disciples] to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matt. 13:11).

What a shocker! But it was true. Only the few—the small minority—earnestly seek God's way of life and make the necessary changes for an eternal life of rulership and service in the Kingdom of God.

"Blessed are . . ."

"And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:2-3).

Who, exactly, are the poor in spirit? Not those lacking in the precious, energizing Holy Spirit of God! "Poor in spirit" refers to a lack of human pride, stubborn self-will. It is humility—a yielded, submissive attitude before God.

Blessed are those who rate themselves as insignificant—who are of no great stature in their own eyes, Jesus is saying. Blessed are those who deeply feel their utter dependence upon God for anything truly worthwhile and lasting.

This is completely opposed to worldly concepts of "finding yourself," self-reliance, "I'm OK, you're OK" or tapping the hidden power of the "inner you." Here Christ demands the puncturing of vanity, pride, deceit, the stubborn selfishness rooted deep inside us (Ps. 39:5-6).

Christ loves the poor in spirit (Isa. 66:2). He brilliantly portrayed their sincere, humble attitude in His parable of the Pharisee and the publican: "And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

A contradiction? How can mourners rejoice? Yet the Teacher from Galilee skillfully planned every word. He Himself lived these words on that meaningful occasion when He revealed, through His tears, His passionate concern for His fellow human beings: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gath-

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

Christ, dynamic adversary of the money changers (John 2:13-17), was also a man of infinite compassion (Mark 6:34). No one was more concerned for others, more sensitively attuned to the pain and mortification of the pariahs of His day (Luke 5:12-13).

Compassion and warmth surcharged His ministry. He felt wrenching, stabbing pity for the agonies we inflict upon ourselves in this sin-sick world (Matt. 9:12-13). The deeply committed "man of sorrows" burned inwardly to finish His part in God's Work and bring salvation that much closer to mankind (Isa. 53:3, Luke 12:50).

Do we? Ezekiel 9:4 reveals that God is going to spare those only who "sigh and cry" for the daily atrocities perpetrated on this planet.

Meekness in action

"Blessed are the meek," Jesus continued, "for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5).

Moses (Ex. 2:11-12), one of history's outstanding leaders, was actually "very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). How come? Aren't the meek the weak?

Absolutely not! The Greek word *praus*, translated "meek" in Matthew 5:5, refers to strength under control. Moses was forceful and vigorous, yet teachable and yielded to God's direction (Num. 12:7).

Meek men can really take charge when they must. Christ did when He routed the money changers (John 2:13-17).

The meek are "peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated" (Jas. 3:17). They are easy to correct and admonish (Prov. 17:10). This willingness to listen to sound advice, to defer to authority, saves much needless trauma.

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6).

Psalms 119:172 states, "All thy commandments are righteousness." In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus emphatically clarified His devotion to the laws of God (Matt. 5:17).

Christ thundered: "Verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:18-19).

Don't be deceived: Those not striving to obey God's commandments in every aspect of their lives are simply not converted. They fear men or follow their own ideas. They have not yet surrendered to God (Prov. 29:25).

A challenging statement

Next came one of Jesus' most challenging statements: "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7).

This is an absolute measure of our conversion. Why? Because the polar opposites of mercy and forgiveness are hate, revenge, spite.

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, wrote, "He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding" (Prov. 14:29). What did he mean?

Simply this: Pardoning offenses and forgiving injustices demonstrates faith in godly principles (Prov. 19:11), our conviction that God's laws regulate this universe.

God doesn't need us to police the universe for Him by retaliating, taking revenge on our enemies. No one ever evades the consequences of breaking God's law (Isa. 57:21). The revenge-takers don't believe this.

True Christians have a special incentive for being merciful: They are deeply conscious that their personal sins caused the brutal death of the perfect and spotless Son of God (I Tim. 1:15). God forgives us only through the atoning work of "Christ our passover" (I Cor. 5:7).

God hates the unthinking hardness demonstrated by the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:28, a man who had just received merciful pardon from his master (verses 23-27). Beware of tempting God this way.

"Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God," Christ taught (Matt. 5:8).

Yet how can sinful human beings achieve purity and perfection? None can by himself or herself. (Rom. 3:10). But our attitude, our basic motive and intent, our overall life's direction can indeed please God (Jer. 29:13).

We actually become what we think about, desire, muse upon: "As he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7). So how about it? What dominates our thinking most of the time? God's Work? God's laws? Or the various secular, worldly ways we are prone to follow to please our acquaintances in the world?

Those who are truly converted and growing gradually find their attitudes, interests and goals transformed (II Cor. 4:16). They change from purposeless, contentious people into stable, optimistic "ambassadors for Christ" (II Cor. 5:20).

This world's Christianity indicted

Christ's next statement devastates the so-called Christianity of our godless society: "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus promised, "for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt. 5:9).

Christ here exposes society for what it is: Satan's organized system of *get*, appropriating the name of Jesus Christ (II Cor. 11:14)! How else can one explain the wars and hostilities, the fiendish bloodbaths, of the so-called Christian countries? How could real Christians shamelessly endorse the countless conflicts in which professing Christians of this world have been involved?

Could such hatred possibly be traced back to the Teacher who said: "Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain" (Matt. 5:39-41)?

Jesus portrayed here the inoffensive, willing attitude, the lengths to which true Christians should go to avoid and settle strife (verse 24). A contentious Christian is actually a contradiction in terms. Christ trained ambassadors of light, men of good will (I Thess. 5:5). Yet they have met bitter opposition, just as He said they would.

Why is that? Why are true Christians persecuted? Jesus explained: "I have given them thy word; and the

world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:14). James warned, "Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (Jas. 4:4).

Listen: Those who literally obey Christ's simplest precepts could end up splitting their families right down the middle (Matt. 10:35-36). When we reject this world's customs and habits, it startles and disturbs our former friends, relatives and associates (I Pet. 4:3-4). Persecution is often inevitable.

No wonder Christ concluded the beatitudes with the right mental orientation His people would need as they struggle to disengage from Satan's system: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10).

Jesus did not praise those who invite persecution, as some enjoy doing. Rather, Jesus promised tribulation to even the most inoffensive person who quietly attempts to live by the Sermon on the Mount. Shocking? Obey Christ, and you'll encounter persecution (II Tim. 3:12). Jesus Christ's simplest teachings are spiritual blockbusters far too revolutionary for those who join denominations like social clubs to improve their civic status.

For example, Jesus counseled His followers to trust Him for deliverance or, sometimes, to flee the scene altogether (Heb. 13:6, Matt. 10:23) and not to retaliate. Yet this is considered naive, impractical. Meanwhile the sins that drove Cain to murder Abel proliferate until today the mortals on this planet could be incinerated in a 25-minute nuclear holocaust.

Yet to those few who accept real Christianity, those who quietly begin the inner struggle, the spiritual battle, the crucifixion of self, Christ promises, "Great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. 5:12).

Yes, reserved in heaven, to be bestowed at Christ's return, is a literal crown, a challenging assignment in the government of God for those who, while reviled, falsely accused, savagely smeared by Satan's world, win by practicing real Christianity (II Tim. 4:8).

Are you one of them? □