

WHAT IS THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTIANITY?

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I do not propose to rehearse the answers that have been given to this great question, or to argue out what the answer should be, but rather to present the answer that seems to me the true one. Even if I should not altogether use familiar phrases, I trust that the meaning may be plain.

There are various lights in which Christianity may be regarded, various offices that it fills. Sometimes we think of it in view of one of these, sometimes of another, and so we often find the name ambiguous; but if we succeed in finding the essence of Christianity it will be something that accounts for them all. I call to mind three of these differing aspects of our religion.

(1) Christianity is a work of salvation, or recovery for the sinful. It is a work of love in the interest of holiness; it is wholly ethical in its quality and aim; it brings to bear upon sin the entire force of God's opposition, with intent to deliver men from its power. Expressing God's love for the sinful, it contains the actual wielding of his spiritual might in their behalf, to the end that they may be transformed from sin to holiness. The gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation, as we see in the fact that here God actually saves. Herein is the practical quality in Christianity; it brings to pass that which ought to be.

(2) Christianity is a revelation, a manifestation of eternal reality. It is a revelation from God, and of God, by means of which we know God as he is, in the character and relations in which men most need to know him. In revealing God it reveals religion as it ought to be, for it shows the right relation between God and men, the right fulfillment of which is religion at its best. Christianity

makes eternal reality known, and thus reveals man, life, duty, privilege, destiny, all in the true light. Herein is the absoluteness and finality of Christianity; it makes known that which is.

(3) Christianity is a life corresponding to the recovery and the revelation. It is a life in which men, by divine renewal and inspiration, have begun to live as men recovered and delivered, after the likeness of the God who is revealed. It is the right life, lived in the character that men ought to bear. It is morally sound and spiritually uplifting; and as God himself has been revealed in a work of usefulness, or recovery, so this life is not self-contained, but goes forth to impart a divine gift of blessing to the world. It is enthusiastically on the side of all that is good among men, and it eagerly offers men all the good it can do them. Herein is the beauty and power of Christianity; it reproduces in men the activity of the holiness and love of God.

Our inquiry for the essence of Christianity amounts to an inquiry whether it is possible to find one heart and substance for all these meanings. What is it that these various aspects of the one faith and life express? Can we answer this question? Yes. It is possible to gather all these meanings up into a single expression. There is one symbol for them all, and for all that is essential and distinctive in the religion that we call by the name of Jesus Christ.

It is no new symbol, invented or discovered by modern thought. It has been familiar for ages. It is as old in use as the church of the Catacombs, perhaps older. The early Christians followed a true spiritual instinct when they selected an emblem for their religion, and passed it on to their successors. The new faith sprang from Jesus Christ, but they did not choose a portrait of him for their symbol, nor did they select some saying of his, however, characteristic and divine. The crucifix, or the cross with the dying Christ upon it, a symbol dear to many who have borne his name, was not their choice. They chose the cross, simply the bare cross, as the symbol that should

express their faith and describe their religion. They chose wisely. The cross is the symbol of Christianity, and that which the cross expresses is the essence of Christianity.

What then does the cross mean? It has been interpreted in many ways, and discussion about its meaning has often run high, and yet deeper than all difference has been the unity of Christian faith and love in discerning its significance. To all it has been essentially the same. However divergent their forms of doctrine, Christians have felt and known in common that the cross is the symbol of service, sacrifice, the love-work of one for another. Alike in all doctrines of its efficacy, it is the sign of burden-bearing love—of burden-bearing love that stands for holiness and knows no joy like that of delivering men from evil. So the cross stands for holy, redemptive, self-sacrificing love, eager to save. And the cross is the symbol of Christianity; which means that holy, redemptive, self-sacrificing love, eager to save, is the essence of Christianity.

This meaning in the cross is that one heart and substance which we are seeking for the various meanings of our religion. It is this that constitutes the divine significance in Christianity as a salvation, Christianity as a revelation, and Christianity as a life.

(1) That Christianity as a work of salvation is a work of holy, redemptive, self-sacrificing love, needs but little comment here, for all who know Christ at all know the spirit in which he loved and died. This is that in which all Christians are one; they testify that he bore our sins in the will to save. He was the supreme expression in this world of the love-passion that will save at any cost. The weight of our burden fell upon him and was joyfully accepted. He was the burden-bearer who wrought in that self-forgetfulness of love which is the spirit of salvation. By the service and sacrifice of one in behalf of others Jesus Christ became Savior of the world. This is what Christianity affirms, that by this supreme action of vicarious service the divine will to save became effective.

Thus Christianity has at its heart a pure and holy redeeming love, utterly opposed to evil in every form, devoted to the producing of every good, and full of the divine joy of a redeeming purpose. Around this common center all theories of Christ's redeeming work have gathered, and there is no one of them that does not give sincere expression to this essential truth of Christianity. This is no news; every one knows that the cross, thus interpreted, is the true sign of the redeeming significance of Jesus Christ, and that Christianity is the religion of that significance.

(2) But the cross is more than the implement of a work; it is the instrument of a revelation. Does it tell how the love-passion mastered Jesus and made him Savior? Yes, but in telling that it tells more. Jesus is not merely himself; he does the will of the Father, and lives and dies revealing God. Christianity has learned that what Christ is, God is, and that the love-passion of Jesus is the love-passion of God. Accordingly it affirms that God is love, and such love as the cross expresses, and proclaims the cross as the true symbol of God. It was God that so loved the world; hence it was from the heart of God that the redemption proceeded and the cross of Christ came forth. The Christian revelation declares that one who would know God aright must see him in this symbol; his is the holiness, his the love, his the self-forgetful passion for saving. All this has place in his essential character and eternal being. In the cross he is truly revealed, as the God who so loves holiness and men that he will endure and endeavor to the uttermost in order that men and holiness may come together. We know the Christ of the cross, and the Christ of the cross reveals to us the God of the cross, who himself bears our sins in his eternal heart of holiness and love. This is the revelation of Christianity, that the righteous and holy God who hates all sin is also Savior, a God whose hatred of sin shines forth supremely in his desire and endeavor to put it away. It shows enthroned in the living God all the holy love-passion and self-sacrifice before which

broken hearts have bowed at the cross of Jesus. One who has learned the revelation of Christianity beholds God thus.

(3) The cross which is the implement of a work and the instrument of a revelation is also the inspiration of a life; and the life in which Christianity is embodied is aglow with that love-passion for holy service which the cross expresses. The Christian revelation of God is also a revelation of the right character and life for men, for men ought to be like God. It is no less a revelation of the right character of religion, for religion is the right relation between God and men. And the cross, since it is the center of a work of salvation and recovery from evil, is the means of initiating in men a new life of right religion in fellowship with God. Through the redeeming work of Christ there come to be Christians in the world; and what a Christian is we learn from Christ and from Christianity. To be a Christian is to be animated by that spirit of Christ and of God which is the spirit of the cross; it is to be intensely and enthusiastically on the side of all good and against all evil; it is to be possessed by the divine love-passion for men; it is to forget and sacrifice one's self in bearing the burdens of those whom one can help. A Christian is one who like Christ and like God loves men, lives for them and bears their burdens, giving himself in order to bring them out of evil into good. And Christianity, since it is a power unto salvation, has and must have its people. In the fellowship of faith with Christ, this new life is brought into existence, and Christian souls are born. The Christian people are comrades of the cross, the company of holy and helpful men, who live not unto themselves, but for the redemptive purpose of God in Christ.

In this one spirit Christianity has its heart and substance. If we call it a religion, we see what kind of religion it is. It is a doctrine of God, of Christ and of man, and the three doctrines are one. It presents the cross as the true symbol of God, of Christ, and of the human being. It thus reveals a great and noble unity, extending

from the Highest through Christ down to us and our poor life—a unity of holy saving love that acknowledges no barrier in the way of its self-sacrificing endeavor to do good. And evidently Christianity is first a life, not merely a doctrine or theory of things. It is a life within this divine-human unity. It is a life eternal in God, revealed in Christ, produced in us. It is a love eternal in God, effective in Christ for our salvation, and awakened in us, to be the daily and everlasting motive power of our being.

This definition of the essence of Christianity might be lighted up by illustration from Christian history. From that source indeed it may be proved correct. It is true that the history of Christianity shows imperfection at every stage, but it is the imperfect history of just such a power as has now been described. It is the history of a power that consists in love divine and human, working against evil by free self-sacrifice. This is a true description of Christianity in the world, however imperfect it may have been. Purity and unselfishness are just the qualities that shine forth in splendor in the early Christian life, making all things new; for Christianity was sweeter and purer far than the world around it, just because it was animated by an unspeakable tenderness of unselfish love, eager to be useful. Early Christianity was imperfect, but it was an imperfect imitation of Christ; it was incomplete, but it was an incomplete reproduction of the spirit of the cross. In so far as Christianity in succeeding ages has been true to its own type, it has always been full of purity and love, of holiness and help, of goodness and salvation, grounded in the revelation of God and the saving work of Christ. The essence of the historical Christianity is identical with that essential spirit of the cross which we find in the original Christianity, in Christ and in God.

The definition is confirmed no less by what we know of the strength and weakness of the current Christianity of the present day. That the weakness of our every-day religion lies here, we cannot doubt. The defects of the

current Christianity are defects in respect of these very qualities—purity, unselfishness, and the consciousness that the whole is grounded in divine reality. Let there now be breathed into living Christians the love of holiness and hatred of sin which the cross expresses, and the self-forgetful love of which the cross is the symbol, with living sense of the connection of all with God in Christ, and the weakness of Christianity will be past, and the day of power will have come. It is for the lack of the spirit of the cross that our modern Christianity is weak, and we run into works unworthy of our name and calling. On the other hand, it is when ardent love of goodness and self-sacrificing love for men go forth to action, impelled by sense of fellowship with the eternal life and love of God, that Christianity is itself and makes its mark upon the world. Our inmost heart and conscience, whether in penitence or in aspiration, defines the essence of Christianity just as it is here defined, as the spirit of the cross; and the judgment both of the church and of the world confirms the definition.

Under this definition we can well recognize the ideal of working Christianity, and imagine what a real Christian people would be. A people fully Christian would be joyful. The cross is associated with suffering, and the mention of it may bring sorrow to mind, but the spirit of the cross is the spirit of One who for the joy of Saviorhood that was set before him endured the suffering and despised the shame. The people of the cross will be joyful, because the whole impulse that makes them what they are is divine, and is grounded in the glorious reality of the being and character of God, revealed and brought near in Christ. They will be a glad and free-hearted people because they are a people of the eternal, who take the type of character and life not from passing things but from eternal realities. Because of this fellowship with a God who is holy, they will be a holy people; and because of this fellowship with a God who is love, they will be a people outreaching to all usefulness. Nothing that is human will be foreign to them, and noth-

ing will be foreign to them that is good. They will be helpers of mankind in every way, eager in all good and useful works, devoted to the betterment of the common lot in all possible respects. They will be consecrated to the promotion of all high ethical aims; and surely a gospel of salvation from sin will be the strongest of all reformatory forces, and inspire them to the support of every useful enterprise that man can conceive. So they will be in every sense of the word a saving people; most of all in the sense that is deepest and highest--a people devoted to the bringing of men out of their sinful heart and life into living fellowship with God. And the crowning and ever-present characteristic is that they will be a people not of theory but of practice, not of ideas alone but of life. The cross was the chariot of action and of victory, and the spirit of the cross is the spirit that will do the works of the cross in redemption. They will be companions of the Savior, workers together with God.

The definition of Christianity implies the definition of a Christian, and a true picture of what it is to be saved. We are always told that to be saved is to be so wrought upon by divine grace in Christ as to be delivered from sin and transformed into the likeness of him who saves us. This is exactly right, only it may need further defining. The sin from which we are to be saved is of many kinds, but at the heart it is the evil of selfishness and moral indifference--of indifference to sin and the harm it works, and unhelpfulness toward men. To be saved is to be delivered from the indwelling evil that prevents one from being in his own degree a savior together with Christ; it is to be so made new as to be actuated now by the spirit of the cross, and led to bear lovingly the burdens that bear men down to destruction. It is not merely to be taken care of by divine grace, and carried to heaven, safe in the arms of Jesus; it is to become a follower of Jesus in the way that he went, a soul that will do the works of love and help in free self-sacrifice, that it may be well with others.

Do we ask how many Christians there are, and whether

we are Christians? The definition is sharp and searching. Whether we are Christians or not is to be judged in part by those who know us and are able to estimate our attitude toward the world for which our Master chose to die; partly also it is to be judged by ourselves, from inward knowledge not merely of our joys and hopes but of our motives and our ruling choice. Certain it is that if we are to be Christians in the true and worthy sense we must be loyal comrades of the cross, for the cross is the essence of Christianity.