

WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?
By Dr. George A. Anderson

II Corinthians 5: 14-21

Soren Kierkegaard, who lived in Denmark something like 150 years ago, was so greatly disturbed because Christians lived exactly like the non-Christians and because Christians were so different from New Testament models that he decided that the organized Church was really the enemy of true Christianity. Kierkegaard was troubled because Church members in his day lived in luxurious enjoyment, in selfish indulgence and in conformity to the standards and ideals of the world. He courageously said to his generation: "you're playing Christianity the way children play soldier."

We may not agree with all of Kierkegaard's conclusions, but should it not disturb us that Christianity makes so little difference in the lives of most Christians? (Professor Glover lived in Oxford, then South America and then in our country and very kindly he said, "Nowhere in the world are there so many churches which have so little influence.")

Should it concern us that nine out of ten adults in our country answer the question "What is your religion" with the word "Christian" and that at the same time we are almost as materialistic as any group of Communists you can find and that we are as genuinely children of culture--conformed to the world--as the citizens of any non-Christian land on earth?

When we talk this way about the church we are certainly mindful of hospitals and missions built by the Church, of the hungry who have been fed, the ignorant who have been taught, the sick who have been ministered unto and of the unloved who have been welcomed into the family of God.

And we are mindful that the Church held aloft the light of learning across the centuries--of 182 Colleges founded before 1860 which still operate, 163 were Church-sponsored--and 49 of them were Presbyterian.

We are also mindful that the idea of the dignity and worth of man, of all men, and the resultant democratic ideals have their tap root in Christianity.

But we are concerned that so many people belong to the Church in some way or other and that the Church has so little influence upon their thinking, so little claim upon their time and talents, so little to do with the way they spend their money and that the Lordship of Christ plays such a secondary part in their basic decisions, that there is so little consciousness of sin, of grace and of forgiveness.

If this sounds like an overstatement to anyone,

remember that 9 out of ten claim to be Christians and then look at the statistics about the percentage who drink, who cheat and steal, who are immoral and lawless and who actually go to church.

Is it not a very real part of the problem that we need to define Christianity? When nine out of ten claim to be Christians--98% in Mexico--what do they mean?

Let me suggest that it is possible that we have a great many definitions of the word "Christian" which are peripheral, which really do not get to the heart of the matter?

For example, someone might say that an American is a person who eats hotdogs. Yes this is often true, but this is not the heart of the matter at all. An American is basically one who has a commitment to the United States as opposed to some king, or other country.

Or someone else might say that a democrat is a person who drives a Ford and votes. But of course no one should propose such a definition seriously, but there is a great deal of truth to it. Something like one-third of Democrats drive Fords and they win elections by voting. But that has nothing to do with the heart of the matter--A Democrat is a person who has a commitment to the Democratic party and platform.

So it is immediately clear that we must define what we mean. It is foolish to make statements like "A Communist is a man who eats rice," or "A wife is a woman who makes pumpkin pies."

Yet this kind of thing is done in the Church and it doesn't seem to concern anybody at all. And it seems to me that this is one of the basic problems of the Church, that we have so many peripheral, partial, incomplete definitions of Christianity. Many are not entirely wrong, but most do not hit the nail on the head.

Now let me illustrate this by offering some incomplete, yet commonly found definitions of Christianity:

I. We have the idea that a Christian is a constant (chronic) Good Samaritan, always engaged in works of charity and mercy, a perpetual "do-gooder." Yes, of course, A Christian is to do good, to be kind, to love his neighbor (Moses said so, as well as Jesus, Paul, James) but constant activity in the Church may be a symptom of restlessness and it may spring from selfish motives of one kind or the other.

For example the Pharisees were busy doing good so that they could be seen. And Paul suggests that it is possible to give all of you goods to feed the poor and to give your body to be burned and to have no love. And Jesus says there will be

those who have done many mighty works and yet will be cast out. Al Capone was generous and kind. He fed and clothed hungry and cold people in the winter in Chicago. The Apostle James says faith without works is dead; of course Christianity includes good works, but Paul insists that works alone are not sufficient-- Ephesians 2:8f.

II. Again we have the idea that a Christian is an apostle of social and cultural change. Recently The Friendship Press material for the joint season of witness pictures the Christian as the advocate of the Great Society--he joins the marches, he sponsors Operation Headstart, he supports the guaranteed minimum wage and large expenditures for public housing; he is enthusiastic about retraining programs for the unemployed, urban renewal and a host of other projects. Now some of these may be quite good--retraining the man who lost his job because of automation can be very helpful to the individual, to his family, to business and to country, but isn't Christianity something more than the great Society?

Again, there is considerable truth in the proposition that the Christian is the man concerned about social and cultural change. Amos called for people and society to change. The Apostles in Acts turned the world upside down and the greatest changes in culture in the past centuries have often come as a response to the Christian gospel. Roman gladiatorial fights were discontinued largely because of Christian respect for life.

But many non-Christians are agents of social change. Some of the things that the Soviets have done are good...But not all motion is progress and not all agitation for social change is Christian.

III. Then, at the opposite extreme, there are always those who tell us that a Christian is the champion of the status quo, who thinks that all change is evil and that a Christian is primarily a custodian of tradition and a prophet of the "good old days."

And again, there is some truth here--when Israel was rushing headlong toward captivity, the prophets called men to ask for the old paths where the good way was (Jeremiah 6:16).

But the church has made some serious mistakes over the years in following the traditions of men. For example, as the Church has sought to preserve its heritage in years gone by, it has often bitterly opposed those people who came up with the novel idea that the world was round; it has opposed everything from baby carriages to flannel graph boards.

It is possible to worship the past and to glory in the present and to miss the future. Isaac was by temperament this kind of person--He dug again the wells that his father had dug. The ancient Chinese were champions of the status quo and never heard of the Christian gospel. Christianity based on history,

must necessarily appreciate its heritage and tradition, but Christianity is much more than fond recollections of a past that is now gone and courageous attempts to preserve it.

IV. We have the idea that Christianity is a matter of smiling all the while no matter where we are, that the Christian is an extrovert who goes around singing, "It's bubbling, it's bubbling, it's bubbling in my soul."

And again, there is a measure of truth here, for the Christian has much in which to rejoice. Paul uses joy, rejoice or synonyms some sixteen times in Philipians. But putting on a frozen smile like an overcoat may be much more akin to the Stoic procedure of "grin and bear it" than to Christianity.

Of course there are Christians who smile, who sing and who are happy, but can you picture Amos smiling at Bethel, or Hosea, or Kierkegaard? It is said of Jesus that for the joy set before him he endured the cross. Yes, but he also was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and Christianity is far more a matter of finding peace with God in the heart than of finding ways to wear a smile.

V. A Christian is a person who adopts the philosophy of the day and calls it Christianity. This has been going on through the centuries. Israel adopted the religions of the day including the gods of Moabites and Ammonites. The church of the second century adopted Gnosticism (though this was opposed by Ignatius and Irenaeus). Today a large portion of the church has adopted existentialism and yet they insist on calling it Christianity. But certainly Christianity ought to have something to do with God's revelation to man, the Bible.

VI. A Christian is one who appreciates the good and the lovely, who appreciates good music, art, architecture, who approves of the excellent in all areas of life.

Now there is some truth here. Paul wanted the Philipians to think about that which was excellent and of good report, but many heathen have loved the lovely and approved of the excellent...the builders of Petra and the architects of the Greek temples... Parthenon replica in Centennial Park up street from Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Paul had culture long before he became a Christian.

VII. A Christian is a person who subscribes to a Christian creed (or believes the Bible from Kiver to Kiver)

Some dictionaries seem to give this as a possible definition of the word "Christian"...the idea is wide-spread that if you subscribe to the Apostles Creed, Nicene Creed and believe in the existence of God you are a Christian.

Now there is great deal of truth here, for faith does

begin with a confession of Christ or creed and there is no possibility of Christianity without some knowledge without some creed, but faith and Christianity are much more than academic, intellectual, cognitional.

People say they believe in Christ when they believe in his existence and approve of him...Faith speaks of volition, choice, response, commitment...James says devils believe and tremble. Close akin to this is the idea that the Christian is one who understands, whose behavior is molded by the social sciences, that a Christian is a person of insight with patience and tolerance, and there is helpful truth here. It is a wise parent who understand teenagers and a wise husband who understands why his wife is always late.

And again, such understandings and insight can be most helpful, it is the kind of thing the Christian should seek, but Christianity is more than Psychology, Sociology, and knowing facts. Paul tells us that not many of the Corinthian Christians were numbered among the "wise and prudent".

VIII. Finally, there is the wide-spread idea that a Christian is a person who has performed the required cultic procedure...been baptized, joined Church, taken the sacraments, shaken hands with the preacher, gone to counseling room, attended communicants class, participated in activities of the Church...and these are all good.

The OT and NT talk about the necessity of institutional forms of religion. Jesus suggested that there is a need for new wine skins or forms of religion to be used in the expression of faith.

But Christianity is much more than the observance of forms old or new. The Pharisees were long on cultic procedure (they had good procedures for prayer, worship, fasting) but they were short on sincere faith. Jesus said: "Unless your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.."

Cultic procedures have no particular significance unless they spring from the heart (worship in Spirit and in truth) and express faith within.

Now I haven't done any courting since back before the atomic age began and before TV was anything more than a theory, but it is my understanding that when the boy is serious, he wants the girl to say YES. But if all you want is for her to pronounce the syllable, what you need is a parrot, not a wife. Is it not true that there are many people who have pronounced the right words and gone through the best procedure but have no real commitment to the Kingdom of God?

Now, all we have said so far has been negative. We

have suggested that these inadequate definitions all contain some partial understanding of the nature of Christianity. BUT WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY? Hear the Apostle Paul as he answers in II Corinthians 5:17: "THEREFORE IF ANY MAN BE IN CHRIST, HE IS A NEW CREATURE: OLD THINGS ARE PASSED AWAY. BEHOLD ALL THINGS ARE BECOME NEW."

A Christian is man with a new nature, new heart, new life given by God. He has a new Master, a new Destiny, new goal, new hope, new frame of reference, new values, new freedom from guilt, new power to resist sin. Luther and Wesley remembered the joy which came to them upon realization of their new relationship to God...no longer servants but sons!

This Newness which makes everything new is a gift of God to those who have faith and commitment. Most of all it involves surrender of the will and heart, and the entrustment of one's life to God. This involves repentance and turning from the idols of the world.

This relationship of faith begins with an understanding of gospel, our need and God's grace.

A partial, tentative, peripheral, superficial commitment is dangerous...in education...in marriage...in business...in life...in the Church or Kingdom.

Just across the Main River in Germany and a little ways from Aschaffenburg is the little village of Schweinheim where the company of which I was a member encountered a unit of Hungarian Calvary. Their officers were Presbyterian Elders; they had been forced by Hitler to fight Nazis. They were trained as soldiers, equipped as soldiers, and going through the motions of soldiers. They had boxes of ammo and plenty of equipment yet they later explained to us, "We were very careful to aim over your heads and not injure any of you."

To Hitler they weren't worth their salt; they were not worth a phenning per hundred BECAUSE THEY HAD NO COMMITMENT TO HITLER AND HIS KINGDOM.

I HAVE THE CONVICTION THAT THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE IN AMERICAN CHURCHES WHO ARE ON CHRIST'S SIDE THE WAY HUNGARIANS WERE FIGHTING FOR HITLER. TO BE A CHRISTIAN MEANS TO RESPOND TO THE GOSPEL BY OWNING CHRIST AS PROPHET, PRIEST AND KING.

"THEREFORE IF ANY MAN BE IN CHRIST, HE IS A NEW CREATURE: OLD THINGS ARE PASSED AWAY. BEHOLD ALL THINGS ARE BECOME NEW."