

All Saints Anglican Church of Southern Arizona, Inc.

Sermon for Trinity 12 Sunday on 2017-09-03

GOD's Only Version of "Christian" **by Fr Reed K. Merino**

Originally, becoming a Christian was rather simple, as a process. The world was honestly pagan, worshiping all kinds of gods, or (for some) mocking all the gods. There was no contrast between those religions and "the world": they were one and the same. There was no such thing back then as a "Christian society" or a society founded upon "Judeo-Christian values" (and there never HAS been since then!).

And, with regard to Christianity, at that time, no matter where you lived, there was only one movement of Christian churches, each teaching the same thing and walking in the same way of life: the teaching and way established by Jesus and His apostles. Of course, even back then, there were individuals who worked to win Christians to their own peculiar ideas and practices; but they were a distinct minority and were rather easily recognized as creating something different than what had been handed down.

So, because of their integrity and what they required of you, just by joining virtually ANY of the churches and by being a faithful participant, it was quite likely that you were a genuine Christian – the kind that JESUS and His apostles will recognize as a Christian. Back then, you were a Christian not just because YOU said you were one, but also because the CHURCH said you were one: and that was not an arrogant assertion. At THAT time, it just happened to be true (some churches still make that claim, but without the same integrity, continuity and anointing).

Contrast that condition with what is available to us today. Today we are surrounded by many THOUSANDS of groups that call themselves "churches," that promise (or assume) that if you faithfully participate in their group then you are a "Christian." A few also say that you are only a Christian in God's eyes if you are a member of only THEIR group, and some even teach (or approve) the idea that EVERYone is going to be saved in the end. And we used to think that Howard Johnson's "32 flavors of ice cream" was quite a selection!

And the differences between these groups can be astounding! They can differ profoundly in what they teach and practice:

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- with regard to the nature of the nation around them,
- with regard to whether you can kill unborn children,
- whether you can kill ANYone at all,
- with regard to how to teach and deal with divorce and remarriage,
- with regard to whether the Pentecostal experience is available and required for our day,
- with regard to the kind of authority that the New Testament has in our personal and church lives.

Some groups absolutely REQUIRE assent to teachings that are not spelled out in the New Testament (e.g., doctrines about Mary).

Some groups absolutely FORBID assent to teachings and practices unless they are explicitly spelled out in the New Testament: yet even among those groups, there can be very different interpretations about what those teachings and practices are.

The bottom line is that everyone now can decide for him / her self whether they are a "Christian." And after you have made up your mind about what being a Christian means, you can just find a "church" that agrees with you, and all is settled: instant personal security that all is fine between you and God. Heck, even Crocodile Dundee could say "Me and God, we be mates!"

The trouble, however, is now there are DOZENS, if not hundreds, of different definitions of what "Christian" means. Consequently, that "instant personal security" logically dissolves into uncertainty: if anyone gets to define whether they are a Christian, how do I know whether GOD thinks I am a Christian? Certainly He has HIS own definition and requirement, does He not?

The Catholic, Orthodox and other [so-called] ancient forms of Christianity [supposedly] solved that problem by teaching that their church, and ONLY their church is guaranteed by God to be the same church that Jesus brought into being. So [supposedly] you can call yourself a Christian if THEY say you are one. Of course, the fact that Rome and Orthodoxy excommunicated each other centuries ago does tend to muddy the waters of their claims, don't you think? If each of THEM thinks that the other excommunicated side is cut off from God (the meaning of "excommunication"), maybe BOTH of them are cut off from God, no?

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On the other hand, the Protestant groups [supposedly] solved that problem in the early 1900's by creating a list of "fundamentals" (the origin of the term "Fundamentalist"). As long as you and your church believed and taught those "fundamentals" you were allowed to call yourself a "Christian". Logically, of course, it means that you are free to ignore the rest of the New Testament, or to interpret it anyway you choose, and still call yourself a "Christian."

Given this fragmented and "menu-version" of Christendom, I would like to suggest a different approach for you. I cannot address the issue of how to change the nature of the disunity, differences and integrity of all these "churches." I have addressed that issue at some length on my web site, WayOfJesusRestored.org. But restoring authentic Christianity is ultimately GOD's project. I just want to talk to you as an individual, a person who is caught up in this tragedy.

Imagine that at about 30 A.D. you were a Jew living in Roman-occupied Israel. Jesus has come to your village for several weeks, teaching in your synagogue and visiting with your family and with you privately.

I watch how He deals with friendly and unfriendly people, the proud and the down-trodden, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the "average Joe". I watch the courage with which He defends His teachings and His person in the presence of people who had the power of life and death over others. I watch Him heal people I have known from childhood. I watch Him force demons out into the open and drive them away from people I have known, demons that I had only HEARD about before He came. Now I KNOW they are real!

I hear Him make some astounding claims about Himself: claims like how seeing Him was the same as seeing God, how He was sent from heaven by God, how He and God were one. I hear these astounding claims and I marvel. He speaks and acts like no other person I have ever seen or read about, including Moses himself! He HAS to be either insane, demonic or MUCH higher than human! How could He be demonic? -- He seems so GOOD! And when He looks into me personally He not only searches ME out. He also allows me to search HIM out, and I see no signs of dishonesty or mixture!

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I hear Him make promises about the wonderful future for those who trust Him and submit themselves to His authority: like, how I can someday actually experience God Himself come into me in the way it happened to Him at His baptism; like how I will never experience death in the same way those do who are not united to Him; like how I will enter into the same divinizing glory that is HIS destiny.

I hear Him teach things like what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount: how, if I want to enter His heavenly kingdom, I must turn my life upside-down and inside out: give generously to those who need, love and forgive people who hate and hurt me, become sexually pure, recover the childlike instincts toward Him that I used to have toward my mom and dad as a little child... I get shaken up by His insistence on my violating my own common sense: refusing to defend myself or my country with violence, being generous toward my beloved country's conquerors, refusing to enter into HIS definition of adulterous marriages, and so on. His teaching include generalizations I have heard before, like "love one another", but they are also PAINFULLY specific.

Seeing and hearing all of this from Him, I realize that I have to make a very clear, even painful, choice between Him and my deepest instincts, between Him and my deepest loyalties. He has taught me that entering into His Father's Kingdom and escaping the destiny reserved for Satan and his countless human victims requires that I become what HE means by "disciple": that I surrender to His God-given authority over me without conditions or qualifications, that I submit to no other authority that competes with His, that I surrender to teachings and attitudes that do not feel at all natural to me, and that I make it a PUBLIC surrender by being immersed in water "in His name."

Because He is the REAL Jesus, not like the sweetheart Jesus we are used to hearing preached, I am FORCED to wrestle with His claims, teachings and commands. But, it all depends upon whether what He says about Himself is TRUE! "What RIGHT does He have to say and require what He does?" THAT is what I have to wrestle with: "Is He REALLY sent by God, so that God Himself is going to judge me by what Jesus says and requires?" "If I DO trust Him, will He make those wonderful promises all come true for me, as impossible as it seems?"

Whew! That was what becoming a Christian meant even BEFORE He died and then conquered death. That is what becoming a Christian has ALWAYS meant. And that is what it STILL means today! There is NO other form of authentic Christianity.

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When you read the Gospels today, the Holy Spirit creates the same challenges and confidence within you that He did when Jesus was in front of you in 30 A.D. If your heart is not receptive to Him today, it would not have been receptive to Him back in 30 A.D. The Word + the Holy Spirit today = Jesus in the flesh in 30 A.D. They did not have a "better shot" at it back in 30 A.D. than you do today.

- The nature of all nations is still unchanged!
- His promises are still unchanged!
- His teachings are still unchanged!
- His warnings are still unchanged!
- Your decision is still unchanged!

Please, PLEASE make that decision and become what HE defines as "Christian" and "disciple"!