

## **What Makes Christianity Unique?**

Few months ago I received a phone call from an Indian gentleman, who happened to be a neighbor of my friend Mr. Paul. Probably, Paul might have told him that I was an Indian Buddhist who became Christian. So, the Indian gentleman wanted to know why I had rejected a religion like Buddhism which promotes peace and tranquility in the world, and embrace Christianity, which according to him, was historically associated with crusades, imperialism, war, exploitation, slavery, high divorce rate, individualism, and feminism. I discovered that he had a different definition for Christianity. We will be surprised how Christianity is perceived by our friends from other religions in our neighborhood. Their ignorance is understandable.

However, it is bewildering to know that even the Christians who supposed to know the Bible perceive Christianity differently. For some Christians, Christianity is all about charisma, healing, and miracle. For others it is speaking in a strange tongue. And still for others it is a way to material blessings and security. For some it is denominational segregation, purity, and setting apart of the sheep from the goats. For others it is all about wining the souls of the pagan and increasing the membership of their Church.

What is Christianity? I know a Church, which has a four-fold mission statement—Worship the Savior, Win the Lost, Disciple the Won, and Care for the fellowship, I wish I could tell them that a mission statement without understanding the true Christianity may become an activism. Even if they accomplish all that are mentioned in their mission statement, they would be surprised to find that they still fail to understand the true essence of Christianity.

Christianity is not about doing things and carrying out the project. If Christianity is about worshipping, we will never be able to outdo the Muslims, who offer their prayers five times a day and the millions of them go to circle around the black stone in Mecca every year. If Christianity is about caring for the fellowship, we will never be able to outdo Muslims again who are willing to give their lives for their community. Think about the Hezbollah members who have great reputation for loving and caring in Lebanon, who were recently seen on the TV distributing \$10,000 to each family after their houses were destroyed in the Israeli attacks. If Christianity was about conversion, we are much less enthusiastic than the members

of the Jehovah Witness, or the Church of the Latter Day Saints, who persistently and repeatedly knock our doors.

It seems Christianity is generally defined by the obsessions of Christian's engagement into all kinds of external activities, but very rarely by the fundamentals of what the Christianity is all about.

What makes Christianity unique in the world? What is the true essence of Christianity?

The best place to look for the answer is the Bible. How does the word Christian began? We read in Acts 11:26 that the disciples of Jesus Christ were called Christians. In other words, Christians are those who are the disciples or the followers of the historic person Jesus, who came as the *christus*, the anointed one (Greek), the messiah (Hebrew).

In other words, external Christian traditions, practices, doctrinal teachings, mission activities, and other Christian engagements are not the actual place for finding the true definition of Christianity, but the life of Jesus Christ and his teachings. The external Christian activities are good as long as they truly represent the inner reality of the Christians who imitate Christ in his being. To state more explicitly, Christianity finds identity in the being of a true Christian, the follower of the historic person of Jesus Christ.

That takes us to the question: how do you follow Jesus Christ? Should we follow like the Protestants, Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutheran, Methodists, etc. and etc.

Who else can answer that question other than Jesus himself?

There are two accounts in the Bible which describe what Jesus requires from us in order to follow him. First one is Mtt 8:19-22 and the second one is Luke 9:57-62. For our meditation, we will consider the second one.

Let us examine the text in its literary context. If you notice the broader context, you will see that Dr. Luke places a series of events before this passage in order to help us understand the event in its context.

In chapter nine, Dr. Luke places several glamorous events before this small gloomy and difficult passage. First, he informs us about Jesus performing the miracle to feed the five thousand. The public miracle of multiplying the bread and fish to a surplus for five thousands is not an event to be undermined and forgotten. Who would not like to follow such a miracle performer? Obviously, Jesus had a crowd following him with wrong expectations. They did not recognize Jesus' true identity.

Therefore, Jesus asks his disciple, "Who do you think I am?" As you know, Peter was the only among them, who seems to have understood Jesus partly, as the anointed one of God. Jesus was indeed the anointed one of God but that was not his full identity. With such incomplete information one may still follow Christ with wrong expectations. So did Peter! As we know, he could not stand the fear of life and denied Christ three times.

Next, Dr. Luke narrates the story of a mountain top experience of the three disciples. The disciples saw the glorious transfiguration of Jesus. They saw Moses and Elijah, and they heard the divine prophecy about the future of the city of Jerusalem. They were surrounded by the glorious splendor. It was the greatest moment in their life. Peter wanted to enjoy the mountain top experience longer, so he offered Jesus a magnificent building plan that would sustain his mountain top experience. But the voice from the heaven said, "Listen to him!" In other words, "Peter! Its not about glorious experience, its about listening to Jesus and obeying Him."

Then, Dr. Luke narrates a story of a father coming to Jesus pleading him to heal his son who is possessed by the evil spirit. He tells us that Jesus is not very happy about the spiritual state of the people around them who looks for him only for their physical wellbeing. Jesus calls them "Unbelieving and perverse generation"(verse 41). Anyway Jesus heals the boy and everybody was amazed by the miracle (verse 43). The text says everybody marveled "at all that Jesus did". They were attracted to miracles of Jesus, but not the very person of Jesus. They missed the point.

Next, Dr. Luke informs us about the argument among the disciples for the hierarchy—which of them is superior? They expected Jesus to be the future king of Israel. It was very important for them to settle who among them was the greatest. If Jesus is going to be the president of Israel it important to know who

would deserve to be nominated as the prime minister of Israel. Do you see what assumption they have about Jesus?

Finally, he tells us about James and John, who wanted to bring fire from the heaven to destroy the Samaritan, who were opposing their ministry. And finally, James and John wanted to exercise their power—they wanted to bring down the fire. It was a chance for them to show who they were. Don't you know that we are the follower of Jesus Christ, the anointed one? It reminds me of the Bruce Almighty, who was excited about his new found power, "I've got the power."

In other words, Dr. Luke highlights the serious misunderstanding of the disciples concerning Jesus identity and the mission. If you do not know who Jesus is then how are you going to become his disciple? How can you imitate him?

According to Dr. Luke, Christianity is not about performing miracle, have mountain top experience, be on the top of the hierarchy and exercise power. The quintessence of Christianity lies in fulfilling the requirements that Jesus places on those who wants to follow him.

Let us read Luke 9:57-62.

In verse 57, the man said that he wanted to follow Jesus wherever he would go. Jesus in his divinity perceives his failure to understand what it means to follow Jesus Christ. The man wanted to become Christian but he had wrong expectations.

Jesus replied to him, "*Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."*

We know that Jesus was not a street beggar or a homeless person. He certainly had a home and a family. Even if he didn't have one, could he not build a house for himself? Surely, he could. If he can multiply bread and fishes, he can also build a palace for himself. Then what does he actually say in this sentence—Jesus replied, "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."*

Foxes holes, nests, shelter, a place to lay our head are the symbols that connote safety, security, comfort, and rest. In other words, if you want to follow me

expecting that I would be giving you any one of these then I want you to know that is not the priority of my company. Please do not join me with these expectations. By the way, this is Bill Gates' company, not the Donald Trump' casino! You want to play casino, go somewhere else. You need safety, security, comfort as your priority; Christ is not the one you would choose to follow.

With wrong expectation this man cannot go all the way that Jesus was planning to go. Dr Luke, in fact, reminds the readers twice Jesus' primary mission. The Son of man came to suffer and be rejected (see verse 21 and 44). And if we want to follow Jesus we must come with such readiness.

In verse 59, Dr. Luke informs us about the second person who is not a volunteer. But Jesus invites him to become his follower. He said, "*Follow me.*"

I can safely speculate that this man must be greatly fascinated by Jesus and he must have already been following Jesus for sometime. As Jesus saw him, he gives him the opportunity to make the commitment to become his true follower. It is also possible that Jesus is aware of his dilemma and lack of absolute commitment to Him. So he picks him up as an example to assert the cost one should consider before following him. Not just follow him because of the fascination and glamour but also consider what it means to follow. So Jesus invited him, "*Follow me*"

But the man replied, "*Lord, first let me go and bury my father.*"

Probably, he was the only son in the family. He was conscious of the custom and tradition, which obligates him to give priority to his father. Custom and tradition are formulated on the basis of the natural law and the ability of what men and women can do. It does not take consideration the metaphysics and the supernatural law. The thinking within this frame is earthly and the priorities are often earthly bound. Within such realm of mindset, we fail to understand the priority of God.

So Jesus said to him, "*Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.*"

Was Jesus against his social responsibility toward his father? No. There are two lessons that is being taught here. First, it was a matter of shifting his trust from his own ability to fulfill the social requirement to Jesus who had fed the five thousand.

It is one thing to see somebody walk on a rope over the Niagara fall and get fascinated, but it is another thing to walk that rope yourself. A true disciple must have an absolute confidence in the ability of the one who he wants to follow. Can I take Jesus by His word and obey Him?

Secondly, it is a lesson for understanding the absolute priority of the Kingdom God. Jesus came preaching, "*Repent! Kingdom of God is here.*" This was his mission. This is why he came. This is why he died on the cross and gave the great commission to the Church to Go and disciple the nations. If we want to follow Jesus, we cannot afford to have time for wishy-washy mission commitments, potluck lunches, Christmas tree decoration. Jesus said either you were with me or against me. There is no place for half hearted following in Christianity. Such following produces mediocre Christians only not a true and genuine Christian.

This reminds me a story of a staff worker and her family who chose to give priority to the kingdom of God. This happened several years ago. I was preaching in a discipleship camp. At the end of the sermon, a girl came with tears in her eyes. She told me that she wanted to be a missionary. However, at her home she has a mother suffering with stomach cancer. She is the only daughter and her brothers are young. Her father is the only earning member so he has to go to work daily. How could she go to mission field leaving her mother and the family when they need her so much at home? What should I do? I could sense in her a clear sense of calling from God and a crushing burden to directly engage in mission. It was a serious matter. I shared the situation with one of our graduate friend, who was the Director of Education in that state, who also joined us in praying. We prayed for four days. After the camp was over, we decided to go and meet the parents of the girl. We came to know that her parents were also a good Christian. We explained the situation to the parent. In a simple statement, I requested the family to help her daughter decide who should she give priority to? Whom should she love the most? Her parent began to cry and pray. At the end of the prayer they consecrated their daughter for missions. Today after, several years, the family is doing well. God has blessed the family and her mother takes care of the home. In fact, other persons in the neighborhood who were healthy died but her mother is still enjoying good health.

In following Christ, it is all about how much we can trust Him. Can his business be our priority?

In verse 61, there is still another person who wants to follow Jesus, but he also wants to first go to his family and say good-bye. In other words, he is still emotionally attached to his family. His desire to follow Jesus is still divided. In the list of priority, family takes precedence over following Jesus.

Later Jesus said more explicitly in Luke 14:26-27, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."*

Our love for God and our passion for his kingdom must surpass all other love and passion in our lives. The question is where is our first love?

From this passage it becomes clear that Jesus demands from his followers an unwavering absolute trust and an untainted supreme love. Without these two we cannot be a genuine Christian. But these things can happen only if we are absolutely detached from our natural selves and be attached to Jesus entirely.

In one sense it is state of denial—not the annihilistic denial, like the self-denial of suicide bomber—but a purposeful holy denial for a common and eternal good. Unless a kernel of wheat falls on the ground and dies in the soil it cannot multiply.

In verse 23-24, Jesus said it clearly, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."*

Jesus lived out this life of self-denial and went to the cross so that through his death he may give life to many. Our denial may not be as vicarious as Christ, but he calls us to follow his path so that many may see the self-less Christ in us.

Put differently, Christianity is state of having Christ like mental attitude that governs our life, our ethics, our business, our family, our value system, and our world. It is a state of mind in which we are detached from ourselves, but attached to Christ alone. We do possess things but we are not obsessed with it. We consider ourselves God's steward. We do not crave for it. Our only craving desire is to seek His Kingdom and his righteousness above all. We chose to trust in the ability and the power of God on daily basis for all our needs. Our only obsession is to please

God and do his kingdoms work on this earth. For this we are willing to suffer and make sacrifices because we know this is why we exist primarily in this world.

*Jesus! Jesus! Jesus in the morning, Jesus in the noon time, Jesus when the sun goes down.*

Is Jesus the first trust the first love, and the first priority in our lives?

Paul wrote in Col 3:1-10

*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. <sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

It may seem to be very difficult proposition, but not so. Scripture testifies that men and women of God who went ahead of us were able to live the life that Jesus demanded from them.

God gives the grace to those who wants to follow him and live a life worthy of His call.

He give us the sanctifying grace of God, the empowering grace of God, and the enabling grace of God. Not by might but by His Spirit and his power, we can live a Christian life that brings glory to his Name.

For this reason Paul said in Romans 8:37-39, *“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*



May the good Lord enable us to love Jesus with all our heart, mind, and soul! May He enable us to be a true disciples of Jesus Christ. May we seek His kingdom and his righteous the first and foremost! That people might see Jesus in us.

Let us pause for a moment, reflect what we have heard, and then commit ourselves in prayer, seeking His sanctifying, enabling, empowering grace of God in our lives.

Amen