

## **Christianity and Society**

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### **Introduction**

Christianity in its beginning was a dynamic and spontaneous spiritual movement that was certainly not part of the established social order. It was not an established institution during Jesus' ministry and the ministry of the early church. Jesus was a revolutionary – to be sure, one of a different sort than many in his time and than many we have known – but a revolutionary nonetheless.

He had come to initiate the Kingdom of God, in which injustices would be set right and peace would reign on the earth. Jesus was to lift the hand of oppression which was upon the poor and disadvantaged (Luke 1:68-79). He was to give freedom and hope and eternal life.

#### *From Movement to Institution*

Yet after the movement became popular and better organized, an orthodoxy developed and the church as a whole became more homogeneous. From the 300s AD, through the meeting of councils, Christianity became defined more closely.

Certain elements were weeded out as not being true Christianity, and the mold became more rigid. Christianity became more strictly defined and less individualistic, less dynamic in some ways. Much of the spontaneity and vitality was lost, as is so in any movement as it becomes organized and defined.

The church gained a position of power and control. In the Middle Ages in Europe, the official Church began to administer the very injustices from which Jesus had come to save his people. Force was used to keep everyone in subjection.

Great atrocities such as the Crusades were perpetrated in the name of holiness, as distinction had faded between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. Intellectual beliefs became more important than righting social wrongs. Regimentation was the order of the day.

#### *Jesus and the Establishment*

Jesus refused to be identified with – if you please – the establishment. He was a separatist. His message was confident and focused. Paul the apostle said for the Christian not to be conformed to the world. The Christian was to be different. The Christian was to be transformed by having the Spirit of God renewed within him in such a way that he stood above the need to identify with the society about him.

And yet after our society becomes predominately Christian, we condemn or at least discourage individuals from being different, from being unchristian, from going against the established way of doing things. Everybody joins the church. Christianity becomes a part of the establishment, and much of the original fervor, the vitality and the idealism of its individualism are lost. Then Christianity becomes a shield for the inequities and the injustices, rather than a movement against injustice, as it first started with Jesus.

Christianity, then, evolved from an out-group of society, a minority movement, into an in-group in many cases, an accepted part of the established society.

### **Christianity and the Out-groups of Society**

Christianity, then, was originally a movement of religious protest against a worldly way of living – a way of life characterized by intolerance, persecution, hate, and injustice. Jesus was to be the *Prince of Peace*, he was to bring the deliverance long awaited by Israel. He was to rule the World in righteousness and justice.

He was bringing a better kingdom. He was to deliver them from their enemies and oppressors. And then after Christianity developed an imperial structure, it came to be an establishment and in turn enslaved people in a system, a legalism, a regimentation. What, then, is the relationship between Christianity and the “out-groups,” or fringe groups of society?

#### *Flower Power*

Do you recall the 1960s? Most of us know of the people called *hippies*. They emphasized love, peace and goodwill. They wondered why there had to be hate and why everyone was always trying to get to one another, why we were always at one another's throat. They separated themselves from the *status quo* in which they saw so much injustice and hypocrisy.

The flower people of “the love generation” saw the church as part of the system of injustices in our society. And there were injustices in the church, too, as well as society. The church had become part of the establishment. And the church was at fault to a great extent, because church people have used the church at times as a cloak for their own benefit, gain or privilege. The flower people had seen those in the church who did not live as they claimed to believe, and they rejected the whole church as being this way.

#### *Responsible Living*

We are challenged as Christians to take upon ourselves a personal responsibility to live fully the ideals of Christianity. The personal vitality of the Christian movement has been lost to a great degree in its organizational structure and institutional character. But the individual vitality can still be there in our lives as individual Christians, in living the *meaning of the gospel of Jesus*.

The dissatisfaction with the injustices of our society and our Christianity has been expressed in many songs. Roy Clark had a song out called “Do You Believe This Town?” One verse of it says:

Deacon Jones preaches love every Sunday  
And forecloses loans on widows' homes every Monday.  
But the smart guys say it's the only way to keep the economy sound.  
Do you believe this town?

Perhaps too many of us are like Deacon Jones; we don't live the things we say we believe. We don't have a personal concern for our fellow men. But this is at *the center of Jesus' teachings*. The Kingdom of God was a spiritual community.

Another song protests the hypocrisy of so many of us: “This Generation Shall Not Pass.” One verse of that song says:

A man prays for peace in our troubled land  
Then raises his arm and closes his hand  
To strike the face of the woman he wed.  
Children, the number one prophet said:  
This generation shall not pass  
Till all these things are fulfilled.

Many such songs emphasize the need for love and peace and honesty which characterize Jesus' teachings, and that song was based on *the words of Jesus himself*.

Another song, called “The Games People Play,” expresses the attitude many have toward the church:

People walkin' up to ya,  
Singin' glory hallelujah.  
Then they try to sock it to ya  
In the name of the Lord.

#### *Perverting the Faith*

Maybe this is what we do a lot of times. We use Christianity as an instrument for our own wishes rather

than follow Christian faith in the pattern it sets for our life. We use Christianity to maintain the system in which we are the privileged ones.

Christianity is by its very nature revolutionary – against any power which hinders man from being fully free. Christian faith focuses us to authentically relate to others. Faith is a revolutionary force against any force that would limit our freedom to know truth and seek for greater truths, even if progressing to the greater truth necessitates great changes in the established order.

#### *Truth and Integrity*

Those people called hippies were seeking truth and integrity. They did not know where to find it. They did not find truth and love in the church as they knew it, in the representatives of Christianity in the parts of the country where they live. Christianity must dissociate itself from the social system which harbors injustice and prejudice if it expects to retain the vitality and power of Christ and the gospel he preached.

Where is the church's prophetic voice? In the 1900s and 2000s, we have seen a movement in the church around the world to reclaim its biblical role of prophetic declaration to its society. This is a healthy beginning at recovery.

The church has to present *the Good News* of deliverance from the powers of evil – it cannot do this if it identifies with the system incorporating them. Christianity as in Christ is revolutionary against the injustices of society, against tyranny of the mind and soul. Or perhaps *progressive* ("prophetic") is a better word than revolutionary, because it expresses a more positive quality, more representative of the general attitude of Jesus' teachings.

#### *Dissatisfaction*

It's no wonder that there is so much dissatisfaction with Christianity in our country (the USA in the 1960s). Christianity has become a part of the structure of social evils. Often the church was simply passive, closing its eyes to prejudice, dishonesty and war.

The hippies were searching for real love and personal concern for other people. They rejected the present society in their search. Another song I liked from the 1960s, sung by Lee Hazlewood, tells about a person much like this, "Troublemaker:"

I could tell the minute that I saw him  
He was nothin' but the trouble-makin' kind.  
His hair was much too long, and his motley group of friends  
Had nothin' but rebellion on their minds.

He's rejected the establishment completely,  
And I know for sure he doesn't have a job.  
He just goes from place to place, stirring up the young folks,  
Till they're nothin' but a disrespectful mob.

And I know he never tried to join the army,  
To serve his country like he oughta done.  
He'd rather wear his sandals and his flowers,  
While others wage the war that must be won.

They arrested him last week and found him guilty.  
They sentenced him to die – that's no great loss.  
Tomorrow they'll take him to a place called Calvary,  
And hang that troublemaker to a cross.

#### *Jesus and Society*

It may be rather shocking to some to see Jesus portrayed this way. But who they would like Jesus to be

does not match his portrayal in the Gospels. Jesus was viewed as a troublemaker by the religious leaders of his age. He was not a part of the social system at that time. And this portrayal of him is more like he really was than many of our conceptions of him.

I wondered what Jesus thought of the war in Viet Nam or the war in the Middle East. Or would he condone the Crusades if he had been living at that time? I think Jesus really felt that the principles of love and peace were to be so practically applied that he could not condone war at all.

This is not to say, however, that because of the limitations of society as a whole, war is not sometimes necessary. We sometimes find ourselves with limited human options. But in principle war is evil. Who can *like war*?

Christianity, in order to be Christian, must retain its integrity. It will lose itself if it becomes part of the established world order. The Church, the Christian community, the followers of Christ, must be an "out-group" of society, working to spread love and peace in the world. Our marching orders do not come from the society.

### **The Faith of Christianity**

The faith of Christianity must be a practical faith – it must be lived if it is to be real. Our theology must be existential, i.e., our beliefs must be the kind that make a difference in the world. Jesus was called the Prince of Peace; he was to rule in righteousness and justice. And yet many Christians are against those who work justice. Some so-called Christians oppose those who foster Christian virtue and brotherhood in the world.

Many Christians condemned Martin Luther King for being a preacher involved in activities outside the church. And yet he was promoting *the principles of the gospel in a real way*, in a way that made a difference. What is Christianity, anyway? Just what does it mean – “peace on earth”? We must live the gospel if it is to free us.

#### *The Jesus Life*

Jesus discusses the character of life in the Kingdom of God, Matthew 5:3-11. There must be something different about the kind of life Jesus was talking about. Do we know what it is? Do we have that difference? **Not** if we feel that we are better than others. **Not** if we are prejudiced against people of another color, another social status or of less education.

We do not have that Christian difference if we are not humble, for it is to the humble that the kingdom of heaven belongs; or if we do not comfort others and try to be a peacemaker and be pure in heart. For these are the qualities of a member of the kingdom of God, according to Jesus. Without these positive attributes in our lives we cannot know the truth that is to set us free – that truth which Jesus promised to his disciples.

As long as we have negative qualities in our lives, we are not free. To the degree to which we are still afflicted with such attitudes, we are bound and living at less than our potential as Christians. We cannot truly become ourselves – if this expression can be meaningful for you in this context – unless we can transcend those fetters. Where is the holiness Jesus calls for in our lives?

And we can do this only by *finding our security*, not in tangible things such as our social positions or privileges or material possessions, but **in faith**, trust in an unseen power. Security in freedom is found in that Spirit which is as close as a prayer and yet which we keep so far away by our negative attitudes.

#### *The Real Stuff*

We can talk about drinking, smoking and dancing, committing adultery, and such sins all day and never get down to the heart of Christianity. Most of us are probably not bothered by many of these things, anyway, so it's easy to talk about them in other people. But we ought to be discussing our *prejudices*, our

*intolerance, our unconcern, our hypocrisy.*

Jesus tells us that sin is in the attitude of our hearts. It is what comes out of our mouths that defiles us. We should be examining ourselves to accentuate the positive qualities and overcome the negative. We should be discussing the care of the poor and the sick and needy (James 1:27 - 2:9). *Let Grace cleanse our lives!*

The prophet Amos lists with adultery the sins of exploiting the poor, turning aside from the afflicted who need help, and social injustice (Amos 2:6ff). These matters were of primary concern to the prophets and were central in Jesus' portrayal of the Kingdom of God. Christianity is a vital spirit, but it loses a good bit of its vitality in becoming organized. It changes its character when it becomes established.

Christianity cannot be an instrument for sustaining the *status quo*. If it is, it is not the Christianity of Christ. The faith of our religion must remain personal, vibrant and practical. It must be a faith which makes a difference in life. The vitality of Christianity is in the individual and his faith. What, then, is the relationship between Christianity and the *Status Quo*?

### **Christianity and the *Status Quo***

In the society where I grew up it appeared that the Middle Class used Christianity as a means for maintaining the *status quo*. To keep their privileged position at the expense of others. By teaching others that they should have an attitude of love and tolerance and then exploiting them when they do show such an attitude.

We are very interested in keeping peace in our land, so we use force to put down protests and uprisings from the poor and the disadvantaged in our nation. The privileges that many of us enjoy are attained and continued through injustices in society. But we are more interested in *keeping peace* than in seeing *social justice done*. We use force to maintain a false peace woven of the very fabric of injustice which causes the unrest and dissatisfaction.

#### *The Calling*

But if a Christian is to live a life like Christ, he will have to value justice above privilege, and above a peace kept at others' expense, which is a false peace. Some so-called Christian people have considered their privileged positions more valuable than the needs of others.

#### *Sentimentalize*

We too often sentimentalize and intellectualize Christianity; we lose its vitality and ruggedness. We lose its idealism; and in its idealism lies its power, its faith, and its hope for men. If the effect of institutionalization on Christianity is to decrease its integrity and its potential, the answer lies with the individual Christian to live the calling of the faith, thus increasing the total power of the church as a whole to present the gospel to the world. The Christian must maintain a separate identity from society at large, living a redemptive life, working against injustices, hatred and oppression, rather than maintaining a privileged position at the expense of others.

### **Conclusion**

In considering the revolutionary nature of Christianity, we should not forget the Christian perspective of love in our own attitudes. We should not be so vehemently opposed to injustice and un-Christian attitudes that we in turn mistreat and hate those who do not show love. *We must respect people* as individuals; we cannot force people to do what we want them to, even if we feel they are not acting from love. To try to force someone to have a loving and peaceful attitude is a contradiction.

We must have benevolent, compassionate attitudes. Martin Luther King, in trying to spread the liberty of the kingdom of God in a real sense emphasized the need for non-violence and continued to submit to authorities, being jailed on many unjust or trumped-up charges at times. The kingdom man, the person in

God's family, must be an example of the tolerance and love he wishes to see in others.

#### *The Good News*

This is precisely what we mean by living the gospel and living a life that makes a difference in the world. Jesus said to overcome evil **with** good; and Paul the apostle says that in so doing we will heap coals of fire on our enemies. We must give a little, be flexible and compassionate, allowing for other people's weaknesses. In this way we can stand independent of the crowd. We can be the unique forces we need to be for justice and righteousness.

To be saved, to have eternal life, is to participate in a **covenant** – a covenant made in eternity extending to the ends of the earth, a covenant of Christ's blood and body. To participate in this covenant is to live by its principles, to serve and Lord God, to spread the good news to man.

#### *Self-Giving Love*

To live by the principles of the covenant is to stand for righteousness, justice, love, peace, and brotherhood – not in some theoretical or wholly idealistic sense, but in a real, practical sense. Peace that makes a difference in the world; justice that makes a difference in humans relations; love that overcomes hatred and builds trust and assurance. To experience the self-giving love of God is to share that love and the fellowship of the covenant with others.

The love of the covenant is not a mushy, sentimental feeling which makes sissies out of us, but rather the opposite. God's covenant love makes us, like Jesus the Christ, so truly concerned for society and the individuals who make it up that we dare to be the revolutionary and redeeming forces that the world must have – even if we must give up our privileged positions in the *status quo* – even if we have to die that others may truly live.

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