

Christianity 101

It was not so long ago that the idea of trying to explain Christianity to people in Europe or America would have seemed ridiculous. However, times have changed. There are several different groups of people that have different perspectives on Christianity.

1. Those that hate Christianity and will attack, ridicule, and bully at every opportunity.
2. Those that think Christianity is superstitious and its followers simple minded.
3. The largest group are those that have no interest whatsoever.
4. Those that are somewhat curious.
5. Those that have inherited a Christian tradition but do not really understand it.
6. Those that are finding difficulty with the Christianity they are trying.

It is for the last three groups that this is written.

1. God

There are two basic ways to consider how we came to exist. Either we were created by God or nothing existed and then it blew up and became everything by organizing itself into increasing complexity. Christianity is based on the first assumption. Christianity does not need to proceed on an assumption only. We have the bible which we consider the word of God

God made a choice when he created people. He could have made us all obedient to his will and we would function as sort of robots. Instead he made us with free will, even knowing that we would most likely go our own way and rebel against him.

Most of the trouble in the world is a result of acting apart from and often in opposition to the will of God. However, God anticipated our rebellion and made a plan for being able to recover some. This plan involved selecting a people to be a nation of priests by which the whole world could be made aware of the plan God had to reconcile us to himself.

2. Israel

The first part of the bible is called the Old Testament. The word “testament” means contract and refers to the agreement God made with the nation of Israel to follow his laws and be available to represent him to the world. Instead, the people of Israel and their leaders followed after false gods. Many of the books in the Old Testament describe the words and deeds of prophets that God sent to the nation to warn them that they would suffer for abandoning their agreement.

Some of the prophets spoke of a new covenant (contract) that God would make with the nation of Israel. This would be a time when a king would be given to the nation to rule the kingdom of Israel. Jesus was born to be that king. The word “messiah” in Hebrew is “Christos” in Greek and means “anointed”. The name Jesus is a form of the name Joshua.

When Jesus began to proclaim that the kingdom of God was at hand, he was offering the nation of Israel an opportunity to make the new covenant (testament or contract). Many were interested,

but the nation as a whole was uninterested and the nations leaders were hostile and had Jesus put to death. Some in Christian circles feel that it was at this point when God would start working with the Christian church instead of Israel.

3. Jesus (Christ)

Of course Christianity is about Christ. However, it is helpful to establish a context to understand what he was doing and why he said the things he did. Jesus was born in fulfillment of prophecy. One of the things that establishes the truth of Christianity is that there have been prophecies that have already been fulfilled as well as many for the future that have not.

Daniel prophesied approximately when the Messiah would be born. This was probably why the three wise men came to Israel from the East when they did. In reading the first four books of the New Testament (the gospels), one can find out about what Jesus said, what he did, where he went, and even some about why.

Jesus, and his herald John the Baptist, proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand. This announcement was received in various ways. Most ignored it. Others had an expectation that the kingdom would be a restoration of the glory of the reign of King David (1000 year earlier). Others thought of relief from Roman occupation.

Hardly anyone saw the connection between the promised new covenant (testament) and the establishment of the promised kingdom. Many thought that a kingdom would be somehow established and they would be part of it. Most did not consider that since the first covenant was established by an agreement of the entire nation with God, that the new covenant would also require the agreement by the nation.

Since the nation was dominated by power groups (Herodians, Sadducees, Pharisees, and priests and scribes), and what Jesus taught threatened their positions, it was unlikely that the nation would be motivated to accept what Jesus offered.

Even after Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, the nation of Israel was not responsive. Supernatural gifts (healing, miracles, the ability to speak other languages, etc.) were temporarily given to Messianic believers that gave them a “taste of the power of the age to come” and even this was insufficient to induce the nation to believe.

As a result of a forty year failure to accept the offer of the kingdom, The nation of Israel was invaded and defeated by the armies of Rome and the temple destroyed in 70 AD. The last book of the bible (Revelation) describes horrific conditions that arise in the future that motivate a remnant of Israel to receive the kingdom. Through this, the prophecies about Israel yet to be fulfilled, will come to pass.

4. Paul

There was a young Pharisee named Saul (later changed to Paul) who was zealous in seeking to carry out the wishes of the Jewish leadership to persecute those who believed in Jesus as

Messiah. As he was traveling to Damascus to carry out the persecution, Jesus appeared to Paul and told him that he was going to serve him by declaring him to Israel, Gentiles, and kings.

While Paul would declare the kingdom gospel (good news) to Jewish audiences, at some point he was given another gospel, one of grace. The difference between these was that the kingdom gospel was only for the nation of Israel and continued the law that gave hope of a resurrection of the just unto eternal life. This was decidedly works oriented.

The gospel of grace was a gospel for individuals that eternal life was available now and required only trusting (faith) in Jesus. Such faith would immerse (baptize) one into what is called “the body of Christ”. Paul referred to this gospel as the gospel to the uncircumcision (Gentiles). However, salvation by grace was also offered to the individuals in Israel as well.

5. Churches

The word “church” is a translation of the Greek word “ecclesia” which meant assembly. The Greek world revolved around the polis (city) and occasionally people would be called out to discuss some issue of concern. The group that was called out was called an ecclesia.

Paul uses the word “ecclesia” (translated as church) to describe groups of Christians (those who believe in Jesus as Messiah or Christos). In his letters to Corinth and Rome these believers were very likely mostly Jewish. In his letter to the Galatians, these were mostly Gentile.

In reading the letters of Paul it can occasionally be confusing in the use of pronouns. For example, when he uses the word “we”, a question arises if he is referring to those with him, those of Israel, or all believers. In addition, there can be confusion between the gospel of the kingdom for the nation of Israel and the individual gospel of grace.

In the first few centuries of the church age when faced with occasional persecution and heresies, organizational systems were developed that would hinder Christianity for over a thousand years.

1. A ruling elite formed.
2. A system of works was introduced.
3. Ritualism was introduced.
4. Doctrinal bullet points and creeds replaced growing in the knowledge of the Lord.
5. Political and worldly interests were pursued.
6. A prideful intellectualism diverted many to a path of secularism.
7. An organizational bureaucracy was built.

The Protestant reformation made a small dent in the abuses of what had become a monolithic church. However, many denominations sprung up each offering a “brand” of Christianity that often were hostile to others and still carried a large imprint of an organizational systems approach to Christianity.

6. The current state.

Considering the various Christian traditions that are inherited and advocated, it is no wonder that there is so much confusion about Christianity. Confusion contributes to uncertainty and when uncertainty increases, there is little reason to follow a Christian tradition. One pastor remarked that his church lost 85% of their youth to the world (secular beliefs and practices).

Many churches attempt to appeal to youth with contemporary music and showmanship. Others attempt to appeal to the self-righteousness at the heart of social and political activism. Still others try to capitalize on the Phariseical self-righteousness of rule following.

Today most churches are dying. Some seek to expand using marketing techniques to capture some with customer services and build brand loyalty. Here and there are smaller churches where the people still try to live real Christian lives. They may still carry the legacy of a denomination, but sometimes their Christian testimony is sufficient to resonate with those seeking truth.

7. Truth

Philosophers for centuries have struggled to define truth. One definition might be that which is absolute and unchangeable. The bible defines itself, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as truth. Jesus said that all who were of the truth would hear his voice. There has to be that within a person which resonates with truth such that they are drawn to Jesus who is truth.

There are a number of expressions that describe the search for truth like, “Cutting through the baloney”, “Don’t BS me”, and “I’m putting my cards on the table”. When people seek out that which is true even in the face of difficulty, they begin to be “of the truth”.

There are a number of reasons why we might seek to avoid truth. Truth can be uncomfortable. Truth might reveal our deficiencies, delusions, or ignorance. The bible tells us that light came into the world and people hated the light because their deeds were evil.

That which is true is that upon which one can trust. Faith (which is trusting) is something we integrate into our lives frequently. Every time we turn the key in the ignition or even sit in a chair we are expressing our faith.

8. Faith

The way one becomes a Christian is to have faith (trust) in what Jesus did (died for our sins and was raised from the dead). This is more than what we often consider to be “believe”. In English belief is more an acknowledgment and faith has the component of trust.

The bible makes a comparison to the faith of a child. One can picture a child jumping into his father’s arms with no hesitation. This is because the child trusts that his father will catch him. Many Christians see their faith as something they have done like being baptized, joining a particular denomination, or performing an act like repenting. When works are added, we tend to have faith in ourselves rather than Jesus.

Faith is more related to truth. Truth is the ultimate reality. Trusting in truth is trusting in Jesus who is truth and the ultimate reality. Our faith can grow as we come to understand that Jesus is the one who created everything and maintains it.

Martin Luther declared “Here I stand”. He might not have had an accurate understanding, but he did have faith. He did have enough knowledge of truth upon which to place his trust. Faith is the bridge to truth upon which we can be reconciled to God.

9. Being saved - Heaven

Many consider the goal of Christianity is to enter heaven and escape hell. There are some cartoon images such as floating on a cloud and playing a harp that define heaven for many as well as flames and being poked with a pitch fork by the devil defining hell. Because of the influence of these cartoon images, it can be difficult to accept what the bible describes.

The nation of Israel looked forward to a resurrection after death that would be good news for the righteous (everlasting life) and bad news (everlasting contempt) for the unrighteous. After Jesus ascended to heaven a time came when both Israel and gentiles were offered the opportunity to have everlasting life immediately by faith in Jesus.

Christians are placed into what is called “the body of Christ” when we believe. This is the point where Christians receive eternal life. We are told that we will always be with the Lord. After Jesus returns, the resurrection of the righteous of Israel, and the judgment of the lost, is an age called the eternal state.

We do not have much information about what is called the eternal state. We are told that we will always be with the Lord. We do know that the light from the sun and moon will no longer be needed as we will have light from God. We are also told that the former things will not be remembered and that every tear will be wiped away.

10. Being lost - Hell

Most of Christianity holds to the view that those who reject Christianity suffer in torment eternally. This may not be accurate as the Greek word usually translated “eternal” simply means a period of time that can be as short as a lifetime or as long and an “age”.

Often the word “hell” is a translation of Sheol from Hebrew or of Hades from Greek. Both mean where the souls of the dead reside. We are told that at the end of the age those who are not written in the book of life (presumably also those not in the body of Christ) will stand before Jesus to be judged according to their works. No mention of punishment or even reward is mentioned for this group.

Death, Hell, and those not written in the book of life are said to be thrown into the lake of fire. That this is called the “second death” indicates that the torment of the lost may not continue eternally.

We are told that at some point everyone will bend the knee and confess that Christ is Lord. We are also told that there are those who “resist the truth”. It may be that the lost in Hades suffer torment in proportion to how much they resist truth. This is conjecture but it could explain how the intransigent come to acknowledge Jesus.

11. The Holy Spirit

There are many Christians today that attempt to duplicate the miracles described in the New Testament of the early believers. Sometimes they confuse what might be called ecstatic speech with talking in other languages. In Hebrews it is revealed that they were allowed to “taste” the power of the age to come (the kingdom when Jesus rules on earth). This temporary demonstration was perhaps to induce the nation of Israel to accept the offered kingdom.

It is understandable how confusion can exist. Some of this confusion is a result of translators not translating the Greek word “baptizo” as immersion and instead simply transliterating it as “baptize”. Many attempting to demonstrate supernatural gifts refer to it as the “baptism” of the Holy Spirit. This may be because many of Israel in the early church had the Holy spirit fall on them and demonstrated miraculous powers as proof.

When considering the writings of Paul to gentiles, mention is made of the Holy Spirit “baptizing” (immersing) a new believer into the body of Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit in a believers life in this day and age and mentioned in Galatians is more of character improvement qualities than miraculous powers.

12. The Trinity

One aspect of Christianity that causes many to be reluctant to look into it is the doctrine of the trinity (what is often called the three Gods). This is because Jesus Christ is declared equal to God (who Jesus called “the father”) and the Holy Spirit (who proceeds from both Jesus and the father). While described as separate persons, there is a unity that is difficult for us to understand.

Since we are not told very much about how this works, it may be that we are unable to understand it. It should not be surprising if the thing created is limited in understanding its creator. Sadly, this has been a point of contention in Christian circles periodically over the centuries. Rather than accepting that we cannot fully know some things, some have been contentious.

13. Satan

The name Satan means accuser and is used of an angel that rebelled against God and took a third of the angels with him. He was responsible for getting the first humans (Adam and Eve) to disobey God’s one instruction for them. As a result, they lost dominion over the earth, were spiritually disconnected from God, and began the process of physical death.

It is difficult to try to figure out what rationale Satan follows as he is cut off from God (who is the source of wisdom). He has ambitions, lies, manipulates, and seeks those he can “devour”.

One can see his handiwork through human history bringing us to a point of collectivism where he might finally be able to step in and try to run the world.

The technological tools he needed to attempt to control the world required some social stability to develop so he made use of a Christian culture. Now that this stability is no longer needed, he is having Christian cultures destroy themselves.

Some Christians are fearful of Satan and his demon assistants. Others attempt to control or rebuke him. In general Christians do not need to worry about Satan because we have the Holy Spirit of God in us and Satan has no access. However, we do have to live in the world that Satan increasingly controls.

14. The Bible

Most of the bible was written for the nation of Israel to help each generation learn of God's promises and expectations for them. It spans several thousand years. Some Christians can cause confusion if they take what God meant for Israel and attempt to apply it to themselves or the modern church.

The bible is the word of God and has a supernatural aspect that is not often understood. God uses his word to accomplish what he wants. It is probably for this reason that Satan has allocated some of his resources to undermine and attack it. Perhaps the single greatest attack has been the so-called science of evolution which refutes the account of creation. The idea that the universe created itself and then increased in complexity until it created people is so widespread that many Christians have come to see the bible as unreliable.

Some have even attacked the bible as fiction created by the Israel priestly class. This seems unlikely because most ancient fiction is written by people to make themselves look good. The bible records an almost endless series of examples of people falling short.

15. The World

Everything outside of Christianity is called "the world". It usually entails the governmental, economic, and belief systems that connect everyone together. It is usually driven by greed, vanity, and various lusts. It is also directed by Satan (for now) and invariably entices people to pursue their ambitions and become woven into the fabric of self-seeking.

The core of Christianity is supposed to be the pursuit of Christ-likeness which is love which is selflessness. One can see how this is at odds with the world which is built on the pursuit of selfishness. The bible describes those who are even just "friendly" with the world as enemies of God.

Sadly over the centuries and even today various attempts to administer Christianity as a system have resulted in Christianity being "worldly". A worldly Christianity seems to offer those in the world no specific difference or advantage and subsequently no reason to consider investigating Christianity.

The attraction of the world might be summed up as “fast (immediate fulfillment of desire), cheap (having lots of things) , and easy (comfort without effort)”. Christianity offers truth (which is often uncomfortable), selflessness (treasure in heaven), and wisdom (frequently isolation resulting from having discernment and understanding).

Christianity Today

Most people come to Christianity through a religious tradition of their family. One pastor estimated that they lost 85% of the children raised in this religious tradition to the secular world. Some come to Christianity due to a personal crisis like prison, health, or family tragedy. A few look into Christianity seeking after truth. These often encounter the claims of various denominations which can add more confusion than clarity.

When Christianity was in social ascendancy, many false Christians saw an opportunity for business or social standing to participate in a Christian tradition. However, now that Christianity is increasingly seen in an unfavorable light, many are abandoning it altogether.

Many see religion in general as a crutch that those who are unable to cope with the world can use get by or make themselves feel better. This can be true even of Christianity. However, Christianity claims truth and that those who are of the truth will resonate with and be attracted to real Christianity. The bible is the only book that has predicted the future and been proven right. In spite of the centuries of distortion and misrepresentation, Christianity still offers at the core, access to truth.