

The Heart of Christianity [Hint: It's Not What You Think]

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What is the heart of Christianity?

Many Christians today would say that the gospel is all about “Jesus is my personal Lord and Saviour because he died for my sins.”

Let me say right at the beginning that I disavow this understanding of Christian faith. The view that Jesus was important because of his death completely misses the point of his life and teaching. While Jesus’ death is important, I think his whole life and the faith he taught was even more important.

The notion that Jesus “died for my sins” is problematic. First of all, it is too individualistic. Only in North America could we make “my sins” the single most important facet of what Jesus’ death really means. Secondly, this understanding of what happened on the cross only showed up in its full form about the year 1100, a full millennium after the event, when Anselm of Canterbury published it. He lived in the time of feudalism, and his argument treats God as a feudal lord whose honour must be satisfied.

Nevertheless, evangelical preachers and televangelists continue to proclaim loudly that this theory is the heart of Christian faith, even though the church managed to live without it for 1100 years.

I take my cue from the words of Jesus himself, who preached this gospel: “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand (or among you).” (Mark 1:15) We can understand the last part of that verse in both ways: God’s kingdom is at hand, or God’s kingdom is already among us.

In Jesus’ words, we can discern the heart of Christian faith. Full stop.

Notice that Jesus says nothing about his death. He says nothing about payment for sin. He says nothing about Jesus being our personal Lord and Saviour.

For Jesus, and for the earliest church, the gospel is all about God. He proclaimed the good news (which is what “gospel” means) that the kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven, as Matthew puts it) can be experienced today by anyone who wants to learn to follow Jesus.

Jesus talks about the kingdom regularly. Jesus introduces most of his parables with this phrase: “To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is like ...” And then he tells a story about a man who finds a treasure in a field, or someone who searches for precious pearls, or a woman who loses a coin, or a rich fool who dies in the night, or a shepherd who seeks for sheep, or a man who has two sons, or a traveler on the road who was attacked by bandits and helped by an outcast, and so on.

The rest of the New Testament tells the same story. The book of Acts begins, “After his suffering [Jesus] presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” The kingdom of God was Jesus’ whole theme.

Later, Acts describes Paul as the one who “has gone among you preaching the kingdom of God.” (Acts 20:25) Again, “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.” (Acts 19:8)

In his own, authentic letters, Paul also taught the same gospel about the kingdom of God. “The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power.” (1 Corinthians 4:20) “The kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 14:17)

Repeatedly throughout the New Testament, from Jesus through Paul to other writers, the consistent theme is the kingdom of God. It's not about Jesus dying for me. It's not about Jesus paying the price for my sin. It's not about Jesus being my personal Lord and Saviour.

It's all about living in the way of God.

The heart of Christianity is found in a powerful ethic, a healthy and life-giving way of living with one another. The earliest followers of Jesus called it the Way. It is a way of life marked by love and compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness, inclusion and acceptance, peace and nonviolence, generosity and justice.

I love the way a new translation of the New Testament from the perspective of First Nations peoples puts it. The First Nations Version translates Mark 1:15 this way: "'The time has now come!' Creator Sets Free (Jesus) said to the people. 'Creator's good road is right in front of you. It is time to return to the right ways of thinking and doing! Put your trust in this good story I am bringing to you.'"

This way of life, this kingdom of God, this life-giving, loving compassionate ethic is Creator's good road.

In other words, the heart of Christianity is not about what Jesus does for me. The gospel is about God, God's loving purposes in the world, God's passion for justice, peace, compassion, and love.

This is how I interpret Jesus' words in John 10: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Last week, I wrote that salvation is intensely communal. Abundant life is the same. Our lives cannot be abundant if we discount or exclude other people. Abundant life cannot exist without compassion, love, generosity, justice, hope, or peace.

When followers of Jesus seek to live with this ethic, this way of life, then that is what makes Christianity good. Without it, however, Christians can become rigid and intolerant, self-righteous and condemning, hate-filled and violent, selfish and unjust.

Do you know any who are like that? Unfortunately, the world, the air waves, and social media abound with so-called Christians who spew hate speech and infect our world with their hateful actions. When that happens, when we live without the ethic of Jesus, Christians can represent the worst humanity has to offer.