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6
CHRISTIANITY
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According to Acts 11:26, the disciples of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth were first called “Christians” at the church in Syrian Antioch. “Christianity” was something believed and even lived, if imperfectly, by these first-century Christians. The disciples at Antioch serve as an historical anchor for what has come to be called “Christianity.” They were called “Christians,” because they were followers of Jesus the “Christ,” God’s “Messiah” (the Hebrew term, meaning “specially anointed one,” that underlies the Greek term “Christ”) for Israel and thereby for the world. If we want to understand “Christians” and “Christianity,” then we must consider Jesus of Nazareth, even though Christians and Christianity have moved somewhat beyond what the earthly Jesus himself taught.

Jesus, according to Mark 1:14-15, came preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, saying: the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe (i.e., trust) in the good news. The “good news” preached by Jesus was that God’s kingdom has come near to Israel. Controversy arose with Jesus’ suggestion that God’s kingdom has come near *in himself, Jesus*. Accordingly, Jesus announces: “If, by the finger of God, I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Lk. 11:20; cf. Matt. 12:28). So, Jesus thought of himself as integral to the coming of God’s kingdom to Israel. New Testament scholars debate the ways in which Jesus deemed himself integral, but some features identified below seem clear. The more we understand

Jesus, in any case, the better we understand the heart of Christianity. Indeed, understanding Jesus is necessary for understanding Christianity. He is its founder and sustainer.

Jesus and Christianity

Jesus tells a man that the way to get everlasting life is to follow him (Mk.10:17-22). He suggests that the man's obedience to the Mosaic Law lacks the kind of self-giving commitment to God found in following Jesus. Jesus thus remarks that acceptance (or rejection) of him amounts to acceptance (or rejection) of God (Matt.10:40; cf. Mk. 9:37; Jn. 13:20). Jesus also claims authority to forgive sins apart from God's temple (Mk. 2:1-12) and to arrange for the final judgment as God's king (Lk. 22:29-30; cf. Matt. 7:21-22; Mk. 14:62). Likewise, Jesus symbolically presents himself as king of Israel, after Zech. 9:9, in his humble entry into Jerusalem on a colt (Mk 11:1-10; cf. Jn. 12:12-19), and he suggests that he is even King David's Lord (Mk. 12:35-37).

Jesus claims to be greater than King Solomon and even than God's temple (Lk 11:31; Matt. 12:6). In reply to a question from John the Baptist (Lk.7:18-23), he alludes to Isa. 61:1-2 and 35:5-6 to suggest that he is God's Messiah. This adds credibility to Mk. 14:61-64, where before the chief priests Jesus makes astonishing claims about his status in relation to God. These claims elicit the charge that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy (slandering God's name). Indeed, in all four gospels Jesus elicits the charge of blasphemy from his critics.

In the parable of the wicked tenants (Mk. 12:1-12), Jesus suggests that he is God's beloved son who, though rejected by humans, is heir to the things of God. He finds support for the lesson of this parable in Ps. 118:22-23. In addition, at his Last Supper, Jesus claims that his

impending death will supply the blood of the (new) covenant poured out for many people (Mk. 14:24; cf. Jn. 6:53; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). He thus suggests that his death has special redemptive significance for others. Some ancient Jewish literature acknowledges that suffering can atone for the sins of others (4 Macc. 6:27-30, 9:23-25). The surprise, however, is that Jesus regarded his death, the death of a Galilean outcast, as the means of God's new *covenant* of redemption, quite aside from the temple establishment in Jerusalem. The Last Supper is thus crucial to understanding Jesus and Christianity.

Given Jesus' striking remarks and actions concerning himself, E.P. Sanders has concluded that Jesus "shared the evangelists' view that he fulfilled the hopes of the prophets," and that "Jesus' actual claim may have been . . . not only spokesman for, but viceroy of, God; and not just in a political kingdom but in the kingdom of God" (Sanders 1993: 168, 242; cf. Sanders 1985: 319-27). The previous summary of Jesus' actions and remarks suggests that Jesus regarded himself as God's unique Priest, Judge, King, Messiah, Son, and Redeemer, as the one sent by God to fulfill the hopes of Israel and thus of all other nations as well. No other human could make such authoritative claims with plausibility. Jesus transcends the bounds of human authority. He is either insane or God's unique son and viceroy, and, despite Mk. 3:21, no evidence of his insanity is forthcoming. As Sanders observes, "He was not a madman" (1992, 78). People sensitive to personal and moral excellence can come to see that Jesus was not insane.

Just as God is the perfect personal manifestation of wisdom, Jesus is the perfect human manifestation of God's wisdom. Jesus spoke of himself as the representative of God's wisdom (Matt. 11:16-19; cf. Matt. 23:34-36). If we acknowledge the authority of Jesus as God's son and viceroy, the fact that Jesus was fully committed to God as righteously loving Father offers us a good reason to follow suit, volitionally and intellectually.

In one of the most revealing passages in the gospels, Jesus prays:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things [regarding his person and ministry] from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Lk 10:21-22, NRSV; cf. Matt. 11:25-27; Jn. 3:35).

Jesus claims in this prayer that he is the unique son and sole revealer of God and therefore has unequaled authority among humans (“all things have been given to him,” *the* Son, by his Father). Jesus is speaking of a kind of knowledge different from mere justified true belief that God exists. He is speaking of knowing God *as authoritative Father*. Knowing God as First Cause, Designer, or Ground of Being does not amount to, or even serve as a prerequisite for, knowing God as the Lord who is my righteously gracious Father. Consumed by the latter kind of knowing, Jesus addressed God as “Abba,” best translated as “Father.” The retention of the Aramaic term in the Greek New Testament (cf. Mk. 14:36; Gal. 4:5; Rom. 8:15) offers warrant for treating “Abba” as a term from Jesus himself.

The basis of proper knowledge of God, according to Jesus, is consciousness of one’s standing in a child-parent, or *filial*, relationship to God as a righteously gracious Father. This theme is widely neglected by contemporary philosophy of religion, including Christian approaches to knowledge of God. The relevant kind of knowledge cannot be reduced to justified true belief that God exists. It includes the yielding of one’s will to God as supreme Father. Jesus’s experience of knowing God as Father finds manifestation in his prayers (cf. Mk 14:36; Matt. 11:25-27, 26:42; Lk. 23:34,46; Jn. 11:41). Indeed, Jesus seems to have regarded prayer as an ideal avenue to filial knowledge of God.

Distinctively Christian knowledge of God depends on a filial relationship of the sort exemplified by Jesus. It thus relies on a trusting personal relationship with God as Father.

Accordingly, Jesus used children to illustrate the humble attitude of trust suitable to entering God's kingdom (Mk. 10:13-16). Our properly knowing the Jewish-Christian God is thus not a matter of passive observation or even rigorous argument. Knowing God properly requires our entering into an active personal relationship with God as Father. God as righteously gracious Father promotes active loving relationships, not mere knowledge that he exists. We come to know God by a kind of personal interaction whereby we yield our will to God. By way of analogy, you could not recognize the genuineness of your parents' love for you if you avoided a sincere personal relationship with them. Filial knowledge of God is thus not just knowledge that another object in the universe exists. Enlightenment conceptions of knowledge as a kind of spectator's observation do not apply here. They are foreign to Jesus's conception of personal knowledge of God as Father, whereby one knows God not as a mere object but as the supreme subject who is Lord of all, including oneself.

Good news about Jesus

Christianity marks a dramatic shift between the time of the earthly Jesus and the time after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Somehow Jesus as the preacher of the good news about God became *the object of focus* in the preaching of the good news. The preacher became the preached. In one of the earliest statements of the good news in the New Testament, Paul writes: "... what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve" (1 Cor. 15:3-5, NIV). The good news of Christianity is that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead. Why the new focus on Jesus?

As foreshadowed at the Last Supper, Jesus became, in his crucifixion and resurrection, the one who atones for sin and reconciles sinners to God. This changed everything, and it is the heart of the good news of Christianity. At the Last Supper, Jesus announced that he will die “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). The atoning sacrifice of Jesus as God’s sinless offering for humans is at the center of God’s redemptive work. It sets Jesus apart from Abraham, Moses, Confucius, Krishna, Gautama the Buddha, Muhammad, the Dalai Lama, and every other religious leader. Only Jesus offers himself as God’s atoning sacrifice for humans. Only Jesus, therefore, figures in the center of the good news of Christianity needed by humans.

Many people share the apostle Peter’s initial denial that the death of Jesus is central to God’s plan of reconciliation for humans (Mk. 8:31-32). They doubt that the crucifixion of the Son of God is compatible with God’s merciful love. The apostle Paul faced similar doubts about the cross of Jesus among Christians in Corinth. His response: “... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ *and him crucified*” (1 Cor. 2:2). The obedient death of Jesus is no less important than his resurrection. We need to see why to understand Christianity.

The crucifixion seems to brand Jesus as a dismal failure, even as one “cursed” before God (Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23). Nonetheless, the cross of Jesus is the place of God’s atoning sacrifice and turnaround victory. Out of the apparent defeat of Jesus, God brings proof of His love and forgiveness toward humans, His enemies. The crucifixion of Jesus is God’s grand reversal of the darkest human tragedy. As Paul says:

the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength (1 Cor. 1:18,22-25, NIV).

The power of God's self-giving love is demonstrated in the crucified Jesus, whom God approvingly raised from his death on the cross. The invincible power of divine merciful love overcomes even death, thereby surpassing any human power. The resurrection of Jesus is God's indelible signature of approval on His obedient, crucified Son, His atoning sacrifice. The resurrection gets significance from the cross, where Jesus gave full obedience to his Father to reconcile us to his Father. In his full obedience, Jesus proves his Father's worthiness and preeminence. The Son, Jesus, ratifies his Father with full, life-giving obedience.

God sent His Son, Jesus, to live and to die for a definite purpose: to demonstrate God's merciful love for all people, even His enemies (Rom. 5:6-8). Jesus came to identify with us humans in our weakness and trouble, while he represented his Father in faithful, self-giving love. He thus represents, and serves as a bridge between, God *and* humans, by seeking to reconcile humans to his Father via his gift of merciful love. His obedient death on the cross shows how far he and his Father will go, even to gruesome death, to try to bring humans to God. Jesus gives us all he has, out of his and his Father's love, to demonstrate that God loves us without limit and offers us the gift of unearned membership in God's everlasting family (cf. Jn. 3:16-17; Rom. 8:31-2).

God uses the cross of Jesus as the place where our selfish rebellion against God is mercifully judged and forgiven by God. This does not mean that God Himself punished Jesus. The New Testament writers do not teach this, contrary to some theologians. God sent Jesus into our troubled, rebellious world to undergo suffering and death that God would deem adequate for dealing justly, under divine righteousness, with our rebellion against God. Jesus thus pays the price on our behalf for righteous divine reconciliation of sinners, and thereby removes any need for fear, condemnation, shame, guilt, and punishment among us in relation to God (Rom. 8:1).

Jesus, in dying “for our sins,” reconciles us to his righteous Father as he becomes our Lord and Redeemer. This message of atonement as reconciliation through Jesus defines New Testament Christianity. If we omit it, we have no good news and hence no Christianity. The cross of Jesus is the indispensable focal point of divine-human reconciliation. It is the very heart of the good news of God’s amazing gift of gracious love (see 1 Cor. 2:2). The self-giving, crucified Jesus is the manifest power and mirror-image of the all-loving God. The atoning sacrifice of the cross, in all its gruesome horror, is essential to understanding Jesus and Christianity.

The ultimate motive for the crucifixion of Jesus is his Father’s *holy, righteous love* for humans, identified by Paul as follows:

now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26, NIV).

The talk of “justice” here is talk of God’s “righteousness”; the two terms are synonymous. Paul links God’s justice/righteousness with His love: “God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath [of God]! . . . [W]hen we were enemies [of God], we were reconciled to Him through the death of his Son . . .” (Rom. 5:8-10). God thus takes the initiative and the crucial means, through Jesus, in divine-human reconciliation. God offers the needed unmerited gift in Jesus, “by grace.” We are to receive the gracious gift via trust, or faith, in God and Jesus. The needed gift could never be earned by human “works.”

The living God of perfect love, the Father of Jesus, is also a God of *righteous wrath and judgment* (Rom. 1:18). *Because* God loves all sinners, He has wrath and judgment toward sin, which leads to death rather than life. God seeks to reconcile us to relationship with Himself in a way that exceeds mere forgiveness and satisfies His holy standard of righteous love. Through the loving self-sacrifice of Jesus, *God* meets this standard *for us*, when we could not, would not, and did not. Through Jesus, God welcomes us to Himself as our righteous loving Father. As Paul says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,” not counting our sins against us (2 Cor. 5:19). This is the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ and Christianity. This is God’s scandalous holy love. It should shake us to our core. We typically hold a different, less demanding standard of love, and we thereby domesticate God and the good news of Jesus. In exalting our preferred standard over God’s, we pretend to be God. God meets our selfish pretension with scandalous love that is righteous and merciful. The image of a suffering self-giving God is scandalous, a stumbling-block to prideful humans. God’s self-giving love in Jesus, as an alternative to coercive power, makes no sense to us in the terms we ordinarily use to understand ourselves and the world.

The heart of the cross *for Jesus* is his perfectly loving obedience to his Father on our behalf, and not his physical suffering. Jesus expresses the central place of obedience in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:35-36). Likewise, Paul vividly identifies the crucial role of Jesus’ obedience. He refers to “Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8; cf. Rom. 5:19). Jesus can be and is our “Passover lamb” (1 Cor. 5:7), our “sacrifice of atonement” (Rom. 3:25), because he is perfectly

obedient, fully righteous, in the eyes of his holy Father. He became “a curse for us” to save us from the law’s curse on our disobedience to God (Gal. 3:13). Jesus’ perfectly obedient life toward God is an acceptable sacrifice to God for us. Gethsemane and the Last Supper manifest these crucial lessons. Gethsemane shows Jesus passionately resolving to put his Father’s will first even in the face of death, and the Last Supper shows Jesus portraying, with the bread and the wine as his body and his blood, the ultimate self-sacrifice pleasing to his Father on our behalf.

Given God’s righteousness and our sin, we desperately need a perfect atoning sacrifice. Only the perfectly obedient Jesus can and does provide the needed sacrifice for us, at the command of his Father. God’s unique power of sacrificial love is made perfect in Jesus’ obedient weakness on the cross (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9). Without Jesus, we have no reconciler to bring us to the holy God. Jesus alone voluntarily pays the price of our selfish rebellion against God by obediently meeting God’s standard of righteous, sacrificial love. Jesus alone, then, is Lord and Savior who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29; cf. 1 Jn. 2:2). This message about Jesus is central to the good news of Christianity.

The Spirit of God and Jesus

At the heart of the good news of Jesus, we find a recurring theme: Jesus is the one who would dispatch the very Spirit of God to humans (Mk. 1:8). In John’s Gospel (1:29-33), Jesus as God’s atoning sacrifice is identified directly with the one who would pour out God’s Spirit on people. The outpouring of God’s Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), then, is central to the good news of Jesus and Christianity. God’s atonement in Jesus includes the means of realizing this atonement in humans: the sending of God’s Spirit through Jesus to enable people to commune and live with a holy God. This echoes the prophecy of Ezek. 36:26-27: “I will give you a new heart and put a

new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (NIV). The cross and resurrection of Jesus provide the avenue for a holy God to impart His very Spirit to people unable on their own to commune with God, given that they are unable to love as God loves. God’s Spirit enables people to enter into the redemption and communion provided by God Himself in Jesus. This is an integral part of the good news of Christianity.

Let’s consider the evidence for the good news. Jesus himself, as the human image of God, serves as distinctive evidence of God’s reality. He is a living demonstration of God’s reality, including God’s unsurpassable love. We need to look for the right kind of evidence of God as supplied by God Himself. So, we must set aside our misleading preconceptions of such evidence.

The evidence of the good news is supplied and ratified by God’s Holy Spirit, whom Paul identifies with the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9-11). In John’s Gospel, Jesus identifies the cognitive and moral role of God’s Spirit:

When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.... [W]hen he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you (Jn. 16: 8,13-14, NIV).

God’s Spirit has the cognitive role of making things known regarding Jesus. Jesus is God’s unique revealer (Matt. 11:25-27). He calls us (a) to receive God’s Spirit of redemption through trust (that is, faith) in God and (b) thereby to live as God’s dependent children. This theme emerges at various places in the New Testament, including 1 Cor. 2:11-12 and Rom. 8:14-16; cf. Matt. 16:16-17. It has important, widely neglected cognitive implications.

God's Spirit seeks to "lead" people to Jesus and his Father as their Lord and their God. This experience of "being led" is cognitively significant. It includes the authoritative call to relinquish our selfish willfulness for God's unselfish will exemplified in Jesus. This call works through conscience (see Forsyth 1912), and it comes with moral challenge and conviction, even if we are inclined to dismiss it. Human failure to hear this call is typically the result of our not wanting to hear it on God's terms of unselfish love. We prefer not to have to forgive or to love our enemies in the way God does. It seems preferable to ignore God's call for us to live as dependent children of God who reflect their holy Father.

Skeptics will object that evidence from the presence of God's Spirit does not include an argument for God's reality. This, however, is no real problem, because the reality of evidence does not depend on an argument. Most of our evidence, including evidence from sensory and perceptual experience, does not rely on any argument; this applies, too, to our evidence regarding our psychological states. Likewise, God can have His Spirit call people to turn to Himself without His providing them with an argument for God's existence.

Paul writes: "[Christian] hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Rom. 5:5, NIV). He is making a cognitive point, regarding evidence from God's Spirit, but he does not identify any role for an argument. Paul characterizes the Spirit further: "...those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "*Abba, Father.*" The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom. 8:14-16, NIV; cf. 1 Cor. 2:10-14). Paul thus agrees with the aforementioned quotation from John's Gospel: God's Spirit has cognitive significance, but no argument is needed. In particular, people can receive testimony directly

from God's Spirit that they are God's children. Paul thus comments: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:20-21, NIV). God provides His own means for humans to know Him: the good news of Jesus coupled with the ratifying testimony of God's own Spirit.

Any assessment of evidence for the good news of Christianity must attend to the cognitive role of God's Spirit (Moser 2002, 2003, 2007). Philosophers of religion, including Christian philosophers, have overlooked this important message. As a result, the distinctive evidence underlying Christianity has been widely neglected. We now see that Christianity is no abstract philosophical system. It is rather good news from God that is intended to save us from death and bring us into everlasting life with God as our holy, all-loving Father, through the sacrificial life of Jesus. As Paul says: "[Jesus] died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him" (1 Thess. 5:10). The heart of Christianity, then, is: living together with God, thanks to Jesus the Christ.

See also Comparing Rival Religious Systems (Chapter 19), Inclusivism and Exclusivism (Chapter 21), Hiddenness (Chapter 29), Incarnation (Chapter 51), Resurrection (Chapter 52), Sin and Salvation (Chapter 53), Faith, Hope, and Doubt (Chapter 56), Prayer (Chapter 57).

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Recommended Reading

- Copan, Paul, and Paul K. Moser, eds. (2003), *The Rationality of Theism*, London: Routledge. (Presents a wide range of evidence for Christian theism.)
- Hunter, A.M. (1967) *The Gospel according to St. Paul*, Philadelphia: Westminster. (Shows that the good news from Jesus and the good news from Paul are at heart the same.)
- Johnson, Luke T. (1999) *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*, San Francisco: Harper. (Identifies the cruciform pattern set by Jesus as the core of the good news.)
- Minear, Paul S. (2002) *The Bible and the Historian*, Nashville: Abingdon. (Makes a case for restoring the reality of God to the study of the Bible.)
- Moser, Paul K. (2002) "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding," in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 120-48. (Presents the kind of evidence to be expected of the Jewish-Christian God.)
- Taylor, John V. (1972) *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, London: SCM. (Identifies the workings of the Holy Spirit in the expansion of Christianity.)