

WHAT CHRISTIANS IDEALLY BELIEVE AND PRACTICE:

A SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

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Christian churches began as an effort to foster Christian unity by returning to scripture alone for the operation of the body of Christ and by setting aside items that have crept into Christendom from outside the New Testament. The conviction has been that division arose in part from such extras. But creating unity requires more than getting rid of what causes division; it also requires what Christ's people must stand for. Below are characteristic beliefs and practices associated with these churches generally, though certainly not with them only.

Scripture

Scripture alone provides the basis for Christian unity. That conviction sets aside tradition, creeds, continued special revelation, and additional normative writings beyond the thirty-nine Old Testament writings and twenty-seven New Testament books accepted everywhere (catholicity) as written by apostles and extensions of their office (apostolicity) and proclaiming a common message (orthodoxy). God has preserved scripture adequately for faith and good works relative to his expectancy.

Deity

The God of the Bible is unique and personal with interpersonal characteristics: love (1 John 4:8), grace, holiness (Leviticus 11:44, *etc.*), self-consistency (immutability; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17), and perfection (Isaiah 40:28). His natural characteristics make him self-existent (aseity; Exodus 3:13-15), sovereign, eternal (Psalm 106:48), spiritual (John 4:24), unperceivable (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16), able to do everything consistent with his nature and purpose (omnipotent; Psalm 115:3), all-knowing (omniscient; Psalm 147:5), and omnipresent (at least by virtue of omniscience; Psalm 139:1-123).

In the Christian understanding, deity consists of Father-Son-Spirit only, uniquely, equally, and always. "They" are one interpersonally, "corporately" and in nature, unity, distinctness, and purpose with an internal order in which the Father sends the Son and the Spirit. They are distinguishable before, during, and after time sufficiently for the Son to be with the Father before time (John 1:1; 17:24, *etc.*); for the Son to pray to the Father, the Father to send the Spirit, and the Spirit to be another Comforter from the Son during time (John 14:16); and for the Son to sit on the right hand of the Father after incarnation. Messiah is called deity (Hebrews 1:3, 8; John 1:1, *etc.*) and the Spirit appears with the Father and Son in "trinitarian passages" like Matthew 28:19.

Creation

God spoke the universe into existence from nothing. Distinct from its creator, it exists for his purposes till he replaces it with something even better (Matthew 24:29-31; 2 Peter 3:10-13). He built it to be self-perpetuating with limitations that preserve his sovereignty over it.

Mankind

God created mankind in his own image for fellowship with him and to bear responsibility for the place in creation where humans reside (Genesis 1:26-28). He did so, not out of need (Acts 17:25), but out of delight and that on whom he could bestow himself. The image clusters abilities that comprise the interpersonal capacity unique in this creation. He created one man and one woman for lifelong relationship in marriage, instituted the home as the context for multiplying and populating the earth, and gave men final responsibility to God for the home and his people.

Evil and Sin

Out of consideration for human need, God has built a world appropriate to the human condition. He constituted mankind and his environment with features that take into account the capacity for sin. That ability derives from the interpersonal capacity of mind activated by will, which can choose contrary to divine intent, especially given each person's viewpoint of consciousness and the presence of social temptation directed at pervertible psychological desires and physical drives.

Before the foundation of the world, God foreknew that eventuation and made provision for dealing with it: (1) he established the limitation of death and those things that lead to and accompany it, planned (2) periodic future intervention to redirect errant history, and (e) pre-arranged the possibility of redemption from alienation through the work of the Son (Ephesians 1:3-14; 1 Peter 1:17-20). God created natural “evil” to keep mankind from assuming autonomy, and temporarily allows limited social evil, which enables people to develop a higher degree and kind of goodness than could exist in an ideal world without restraints and no temptation to resist.

Christ

Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the Messianic prediction in the Jewish scriptures. He was born of a virgin, proclaimed with miraculous confirmation the coming of the Messianic kingdom, the church; was crucified under Pontius Pilate; resurrected the third day as paramount proof of his Messiahship, and bodily ascended to the Father after appearing to many disciples following his empty-tomb resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-15 and elsewhere).

The Son pre-existed his incarnation, the time when he “emptied” himself of the free exercise of his prerogatives as deity (Philippians 2:5-8). He ever lives now to intercede for his people (Hebrews 7:25) so that they need nothing more for establishing and maintaining eternal salvation. At the appropriate time, he will personally return at the Father’s behest with angels in concert to gather from the whole world those who have owned him as Lord and Savior.

Salvation

All salvation is figured relative only to Jesus Christ regardless of dispensation: patriarchal (1 Peter 3:18-22; 4:6), Mosaic (Hebrews 9:15), or Christian (Acts 4:12). So, Christianity is an exclusive religion as a total worldview regardless of what individual truths other religions may also contain. By personal identification with Christ (being “in Christ”), God regards people as righteous like Christ and so in fellowship with him and other Christians. That salvation is open to everyone, because God does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Salvation is reconciliation from the alienation caused by personal sin (Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Ephesians 2:14-18; Colossians 1:19-23). Alienation is personal because guilt is personal (Ezekiel 18:19-20) and sin is an act personally done. God does not consider people guilty to lostness because of the sin of others, including our first parents. As a result, both the nature of mankind and the nature of salvation operate the same for us as for them.

None can save themselves because the perfection standard, once broken, cannot be re-achieved. Furthermore, salvation is reconciliation between God and estranged persons. The grace to restore relationship always rests with the one sinned against. People are reconciled by faith, that is, by trusting that the Other will forgive through Christ as that basis for us as righteous who have committed ourselves to him. People must respond to God, but their response does not save them (cause); it meets the condition for his saving them—for considering them righteous unto renewed fellowship with him. The essence of their response is identification with Christ, the Righteous One.

Baptism is believers’ immersion, an act by which a person makes a statement (performative act) that expresses willingness to identify with Christ as savior and Lord totally, permanently, and exclusively—to enter “into Christ.” Based on that identity with Christ, God forgives sin, gives the “indwelling” presence of his Spirit, and counts a person part of the body of Christ (Acts 2:38). So baptism pertains to the salvation process, not as an effectual work, but as an act of trust and commitment; it is more than a testimony to others or a rite for becoming a member of the institutional church.

In maintaining commitment to him, his disciples trust that he continues to be Savior from occasional sin (1 John 1:6-10) and Lord of daily living. Salvation as reconciliation by grace creates an ongoing relationship that appropriate attitude and motives do not presume upon lest they bring renewed alienation on themselves (Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:37-39, and similar warnings).

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord's Supper is part of regular Christian worship on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 11:20 + 16:2). It is an ordinance of remembrance in which unleavened bread and grape juice serve as emblems of the Lord's body and blood. They represent a reality beyond themselves rather than become that referent in whole or in part (impanation). They call to mind Christ's culminating act of ministry to mankind in expression of obedience to the Father. In that remembrance his people commit to do likewise.

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is a person of deity present with God's people in Christ (John 16:7), real but not perceptible (1 Timothy 6:16). In his normal mode of operation, he guides, empowers, intercedes, and unites indirectly through the word, circumstance, and other Christians, as well as "directly" by an awareness of his real, imperceptible presence (1 Timothy 6:16; cp. Ephesians 3:17; Judges 16:20).

While believing in God's supernatural intervention into history and in answered prayer, Christians do not typically expect current miraculous manifestation. Claims to that effect call for applying tests (1 John 4:1-4) according to the ancient formula (Deuteronomy 18:20-23); Galatians 1:6-10). Consequently, churches do not believe in speaking in languages as a typical or necessary manifestation of acceptance by God although they would not make it a test of fellowship unless practitioners become disorderly and divisive with it or make it a required sign of genuine conversion. Languages are real languages (xenoglossia) rather than non-language expression (glossolalia) or ecstatic utterance. Healing is understood as granted through prayer according to God's choosing; hence, miraculous healing through an individual's supernatural gifting is considered unlikely. Lest he "speak presumptuously," the claimant himself must be able to distinguish special divine revelation from ideas that typically come into people's minds as natural experiences.

Covenants

Christians live under the New Covenant that Jeremiah 31:31-34 prophesied and Hebrews 8 discusses. As such, it is another covenant from the Mosaic covenant and a new kind of covenant, one that operates from within through the heart. Christians, then, follow only by those directives for worship, service, and Christian living that appear in New Testament writings that address the body of Christ. Matters whereon they do not speak are matters of freedom in living and worship as long as they do not contradict express command, apostolic precedent, or necessary inference.

Church

As part of the "free church" tradition, churches believe the church was established on the next Pentecost after Christ's ascension and continues to exist in general society separate from national governments; the kingdom no longer has a national component as it did during the Mosaic dispensation. It is an interpersonal system that is not located here or there (Luke 17:20-

21) but exists between people defined and held together by loving, godly behavior rather than by geography, race, nationality, societal or marital status (1 Corinthians 7:20), or characterized by irrelevant non-interpersonal variants like dress or diet (1 Corinthians 8:8; 11:16; Galatians 3:28).

Christians believe that the organization of the church in the New Testament was meant to be permanent; hence, the general authoritative offices consist of the Lord himself and the original apostles (without successors); general, non-authoritative work of evangelists; and the local authoritative office of elder-bishop-pastor-teacher (Titus 1:5 + 7; Acts 20:17 + 28; cp. Ephesians 4:11), assisted by non-authoritative deacons. Additional elements of local organization are matters of judgment as guided by propriety and expediency or can be considered aspects of the deacons' role. No territorial slots of organization exist between the local congregation and the original universal apostles as represented today through their written testimony in the New Testament only. Evangelists continue to serve at large by godly influence, not legal authority, and can do so in local settings—as “ministers”—at the pleasure of the local church. As a result, churches practice local autonomy, operating as much as possible by the influence of love under the ordering responsibility of multiple elders.

The church proclaims God's grace rather than authoritatively channels it. Since the grace of salvation and blessing are interpersonal matters, it flows directly from God to each person, and each person by prayer has direct access to the Father in the name of Christ, the only mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). Likewise, the church proclaims the message it has received rather than assumes the right to add to, change, or demand adherence to it. The minimal organization among believers exists only for good order in fulfilling responsibility in corporate worship, fellowship, and outreach.

Evangelism

The body of Christ consists of people in personal relationship with God through Christ alone—the safe and saved. Since salvation is reconciliation, it comes about by interpersonal means—grace by him who reconciles and faith by those reconciled. So the church spreads by interpersonal means as expressed in the Great Commission.

Christ's Commission calls for influencing through teaching about reconciliation. By its very nature, reconciliation cannot come by force or the authority of third parties. The Commission is not a military mandate or a legal operation, because the process of inclusion must fit with the nature and purpose of what it advances: it must be interpersonal (proclamation) to bring about interpersonal consequence (reconciliation). So, to the church God has assigned the responsibility for teaching how people should relate to each other under God. To human government he has assigned the restrictive responsibility of protecting people from those who would harm others (Romans 13:1-7).

Matters of Discretion

Inasmuch as all Christians are compassed about by infirmity, they are subject to “blessed inconsistency” and human frailty. Consequently, patience addressed toward right attitudes and

motives becomes a starting point for relationship, working outward from a center of love and faithfulness to the person of Christ. All things equally true are not equally important. Church organization and eschatological understandings, say, are not as central as salvation and Christian living. The desire to develop as much common ground as possible leads toward the whole of sound doctrine and the maturity of godly living (Philippians 3:12-16).

In light of that mentality, Christ's followers extend respect and encouragement to each other even on some of the matters enumerated above, while aspiring to teach and learn the way of the Lord perfectly (Acts 18:26).

For purposes of Christian unity, churches try to stand above age-long theological controversies about matters without behavioral correlates (what does not affect Christian living and mission), all the while affirming in principle the truthfulness of all matters whereof scripture speaks. That approach is especially important in regard to matters of mystery (beyond human ability to understand) or matters of partial revelation (those addressed only in general terms).

Among such issues stand a precise understanding of the trinity beyond the fact that Father-Son-Spirit are one in interpersonal nature and eternal purpose while sufficiently distinguishable to allow for personal interaction (John 14:16).

Similarly, the precise understanding of the creation accounts in Genesis calls for flexibility, especially beyond the fact that the universe is not eternal, that it is distinct from God who created it from nothing, and that it is destined to destruction from fervent heat as meant in 2 Peter 3:10-13.

Christians encourage fellow Christians to hold in abeyance expectancies about the predicted end-time events lest they be as inaccurate about them as many Jews were about Messiah's first coming and the nature of his work and kingdom. While affirming the personal, visible, universal return of the Lord at an unknowable future time (Matthew 24:36), they consider somewhat unclear the nature and relative timing of "the rapture," the great tribulation, a millennium, the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, and the nature of the conscious eternal state of the lost. Prophecy is understood as given to engender hope more than to write history ahead of time.

The same goes for theories of the atonement beyond the fact that all salvation is figured relative to Jesus Messiah alone. Identity with him gives access to whatever way the Father views Christ's nature and work for considering people righteous unto renewed fellowship with him and each other.

Theories of inspiration are considered matters of personal persuasion as long as the examples of revelation in scripture can be affirmed and as long as the resulting revelation and its preservation suffice to thoroughly furnish God's people for God's expectancies: dictation of words (Exodus 31:18), revelation of ideas (Galatians 1:11-12; 2 Corinthians 12:1-8); bestowed abilities (1 Kings 3:4-15; John 14:26); planted events (Acts 10:1-34-35-48), and special granting of office (2 Samuel 7:1-3, 4-17).

The theories of sin have not been made a test of fellowship even though a noticeable feature of churches has been to affirm behavioral depravity without resorting to natural depravity

to explain universal sin and the human inability to save ourselves. The idea of a biologically inherited “fallen nature” from our first parents is considered unnecessary conceptually, without warrant biblically, and leading to unacceptable conclusions systematically—regarding, for example, divine sovereignty in accounting for the variance between God desire to save all and his decision to save some (2 Peter 3:9).

People from Christian background strive for flexibility and mutual respect in how far to suppose implied cultural limitation in New Testament interpretation. The concept applies to matters like veil-wearing, table fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:11), wearing jewelry and cosmetics (1 Peter 3:3), hair length, dietary observances (Romans 14:13-23), men-women relationship in general ministry. Such matters in themselves seem non-interpersonal, whose meanings are more culturally informed (custom) than inherently determined (morality). “Culturally informed” indicates that people groups invest them with meanings not necessary to them. The issues are interpersonal only insofar as people have invested them with such values rather than being so by the nature of divine intent. People are advised to look beyond overt acts to the motives and attitudes of the heart behind them while considering the impact of such acts on other people (Romans 14:20-21).

In Conclusion

The features of the Christian faith summarized above combines faithfulness to Christ with freedom in Christ in the process of fulfilling his Commission to bring the whole world under the one loving, holy God who creates and redeems *“to the praise of his glorious grace”* (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14).