

WHAT CHRISTIANITY MEANS TO ME

by
John Painter

Introduction.

I've heard it said that if God didn't exist, man would have to invent Him. I've also heard that man carries around within him a God-shaped empty place.

To me, Christianity is not a religion. Historically, religions have been the inventions of men. Webster's definition of religion is no help in understanding Christianity. According to the Bible, Christianity functions on two levels. It is an individual relationship with Jesus and it is a corporate collection of those who have such an individual relationship. That is Jesus' definition [John 15:4-5], [John 17:21].

Relationship? What kind of relationship? If I say I'm a Christian and I've been baptized, and I go to church, isn't that enough?

Not necessarily. Anybody can say they're Christian. And, anybody can go to church. And, anybody can be baptized as a child and not have the foggiest idea what it means to be a Christian. Such was I until the age of 49. Representing oneself as Christian by claim and by taking some public actions is all external. What is necessary is internal to the bona fide Christian. And, that's where God looks.

Churches contain people who do not have a conscious, working relationship with Jesus. So do seminaries. Is this just my claim? Here's what Jesus said about it.

"Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? [23] And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." Matthew 7:22-23 (KJV)

When I first made a deliberate effort to find Jesus, back in '83, I was reading a little Bible every night when I went to bed. When I first found [Mat. 7:22-23], it scared the fool out of me, because of what it said about nominal Christianity. It said that there were people who thought they were Christian, but Jesus didn't know them. It took another year of bedtime reading before I stumbled on Jesus' answer.

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." [John 10:27].

Hear His voice? That's got to be a figure of speech, right? Can't we just read the Bible, to see what Jesus has said?

Nope. Sorry. The underlying New Testament Greek for "hear my voice" is " ... akous ema phone ..." " ... Acoustically hear my phonetic voice ... "

What this means is that for Jesus to know a Christian takes a personal relationship, based on verbal communication.

Well, we know about prayer. So, we can talk to Jesus, verbally. But, that's one-way. And, real communication is two-way. What about hearing? How can we acoustically hear His phonetic voice?

Now, this is something that we don't hear preached, except maybe by some far-out fundamentalists. We hear TV preachers who say it in code. Something like, "*He spoke to my spirit.*" But, what's that mean? Many Christians don't know Bible physiology that defines man as a three-part being, made up of spirit, soul, and body. And the soul is the rational part, where the mind is. Where language is.

The few who do preach it are looked at kind of strangely. Like, "*Oh, you hear voices, do you? The asylums are full of people who hear voices.*" And, that's true. The asylums are full of people who hear voices in their heads. But, we won't go into that, just yet.

I'm going to make the categorical statement that we all acoustically hear phonetic voices in our head.

Have you ever talked to yourself in your head?

A short example for me might be:

"OK, I've got to get a handle on this problem. Where do I start? How about starting with Force equals Mass times Acceleration? That'll work, won't it? Yeah, let's do it."

We all hear voices in our head. And, the best example is talking things over with ourselves. But, what about hearing someone besides yourself in your head? Have you ever gotten a verbal idea in your head that you wouldn't have come up with in a million years? Could you explain where that idea came from?

Testimony.

What put it together for me happened the night of August 10th, 1984. I was lying in bed, not able to go to sleep. I was worried about all the problems I was having at A&M, running a two-million dollar computer center I had built on money from alumni and the Board of Regents. I had built the place and hired the twenty or so people it took to run it, including three Profs. I had a bigger operating budget than the Department of Electrical Engineering. But things were falling apart, and I just didn't know what to do. So, I prayed, asking the Lord for help.

After prayer, I just lay there, semi-conscious, talking to myself in my head.

"Boy, you really need to go to sleep."

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, why don't you get up and read the Bible a little? You know you've done that before, and you always go to sleep afterwards."

"Yeah, well, I'm almost asleep. Maybe if I just lie here, I'll drift off."

"Why don't you get up, get your Bible, and read some Isaiah?"

"No, I really need to just lie here and go to sleep. It's already after 3:30."

"Why don't you get up, get your Bible, and read Isaiah in Chapter 57?"

I remembered that the last few chapters of Isaiah were pretty strong, but I didn't remember what, exactly, Isaiah 57 was about.

"No, I really need sleep more than I need to read the Bible."

“WHY DON’T YOU GET UP, GET YOUR BIBLE, AND READ ISAIAH, CHAPTER 57, VERSE 13!”

My eyes came wide open. My heart rate increased. It wasn’t a question. It was a command.

“Verse 13? That’s awfully specific.”

Now, I had no idea what Verse 13 held. Neither did I have any idea why the citation of Verse 13 should pop into my mind. But, I knew I had to get up and go read it. I picked the Bible up off the side table and went into the front room. I turned to Isaiah and read the following:

“When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away. But the man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain.”
Isaiah 57:13 (NIV)

Tears popped into my eyes. Because, all at once, I realized several things. First of all, the computer center I had built was just a big idol. I guess I’d known that all along. I was a teacher, not a computer center manager. That’s why I was having such a hard time with it.

But, the second realization was the biggie. The Lord had spoken to me. Personally. In rebuke. And, in sarcasm. What could be a more effective way to attract my attention. But, although it was a rebuke in sarcasm, I knew at the same time that it was out of love. Otherwise, He wouldn’t have bothered.

I received a second scripture-based warning from the Lord in September [Jer. 27:12 – NIV]. It predicted what I was going to have to do, to survive. In December, I was relieved of duty in the computer center. A year later, the Center was dismantled and gone. And, I was back to teaching, where I belonged.

The Other Side of the Coin.

Christians hear the Lord’s voice through the Holy Spirit. It is He who speaks to us from Jesus [John 16:13]. But, there is also a possibility of third parties speaking to us. That is, there are other spirits that can speak into the mind. Extreme cases may end up in the asylums or in jail, but there are spirits who work for the other side, speaking to Christians. Every day.

The Lord has provided a way for us to identify evil spirits that try to speak to us. We are instructed in [1 John 4:1] to test every spirit, to see if they are of God. And, [1 John 4:2] gives the test, which I have used many times. During thirty hours of Christian deliverance counseling by a pastor’s pastor in Houston¹, I was instructed to conclude that verbal test with the question, *“Will this answer stand as truth before the throne of Almighty God?”* Apparently, evil spirits must answer that question truthfully.

Christianity is under attack. It always has been. People are aware of the external attacks. History is full of that, from 700 A.D. to the present day. But, people are not so aware of the attacks that come from inside Christianity. It’s like Asaph said in his prophetic prayer to God in Psalm 74:3, the enemy is in the sanctuary.

¹ Liberating the Bruised, by Dr. Joe Allbright, 294 pp., <http://www.liberating-the-bruised.com/>

There are well-published “Christian” authors, whose intellectual works attack some or many of the tenets of Christianity, as they were set forth by the original apostles. I am convinced that these authors are among those who think they are Christians, but do not have the required personal relationship with Jesus. I think that what they publish comes from the other side, by way of their uncritical listening to voices in their heads. I think those authors will find out the hard way about [Mat. 7:22-23], unless they repent while there’s still time.

Afterthoughts.

What I learned in ’84 developed over the years. Through much practice I learned how to talk with the Lord, that is with Jesus (and, occasionally, the Father), through the Holy Spirit. It’s not the same in detail for everybody. He is gracious to work out a way for each individual to communicate with Him. All it takes is to approach Him in humility with a soft heart. Some of my talking to Him is done with my face in a pillow on the rug in the front room, in the early morning dark. And, some is done here, sitting at the computer, writing. But, the principle is the same. “*My sheep hear my voice ...*”

The title of this little piece is, “What Christianity Means to Me.” So, is this all there is to Christianity? No, of course not. There’s as much to Christianity as one is willing to put into the effort to find and learn and understand it. The Lord has seen to it that we’ll never get all of it here, until we cross over. And, that’s good. It means that we’ll never get bored here, finding out about Christianity. There’s always more.

When she read this, my wife asked why I hadn’t used the term, “faith,” talking about the computer center. I told her that’s because the biblical word, faith, means different things to different people. There’s one Greek bible word that is variously interpreted as either faith or belief. And, the belief is believing God. When I talk about my relationship with God, I use the word, trust. Not only do I believe God, but I trust Him, ... totally. That trust has been severely tested, but it has never failed me. That’s my faith.

So, why have I written this, now? Well, I’ve thought about writing it for years, but never had a reason to set it down. Now, it seems to me, it’s time. I think there are people out there who might benefit from it. In fact, this responds to a personal inquiry from an old friend. But, that inquiry was important enough to be shared with any others who have the same questions about Christianity.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below. Praise Him above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

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