

Why Bother with Christianity?

Many paths lead people into relationship with God. If I grew up in India, I'd probably be a Hindu; Saudi Arabia...Muslim; Israel...Jew. But I wasn't. I was born into a Christian family so my exploration of faith has been within the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, as I've progressively committed more of my life to Christian discipleship, I've experienced a transformation that leads me to believe that "the way" taught and modeled by Jesus is a pure reflection of God's intentional will for humankind. I am not saying that Jesus is the only person who taught this way of living, which transcends life as we experience it now. Indeed, mystics within all of the major religions have taught that we only achieve true life by relinquishing our self-centered focus and embarking on a journey based on love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, peace, and service to others. My focus here is on Jesus, because my journey has been through the Christian tradition.

At the time of Jesus' arrival there were four basic factions within Judaism. The aristocratic Sadducees capitulated to Hellenistic culture and Roman rule. The Essenes withdrew from what they perceived as a corrupt society, forming isolated pious communities. The Zealots supported forceful revolt against Roman rule and periodically staged violent acts of resistance. Finally, there were the Pharisees who sought God's favor through faithful observance of Mosaic Law. Jesus arrives on the scene with his subversive message that God has no interest in earthly power and is not pleased by purity rituals and holiness codes that create artificial social barriers. Jesus proclaims that Yahweh is love and compassion, and anything that interferes with this compassion is unacceptable. Concentration of wealth among the few, at the expense of others, is unacceptable. Purity codes that segregate people into clean and unclean are unacceptable. Social mores that ostracize the sick or poor, and those of questionable character are unacceptable. Acts of violent retaliation are unacceptable.

With compassion, Jesus entered the lives of people and transformed them in a way that the more stringent Pharisees, with their focus on holiness and rituals, couldn't. He broke down social barriers that divided people into worthy and unworthy. He relieved suffering and despair. He offered unconditional love and acceptance. He restored people and reconnected them with their God. We should take notice that Jesus' message was not entirely unique. Mosaic law instructed that special consideration be given to strangers, widows, and orphans (Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29). Compassion was central to the teaching of the Hebrew prophets. Compassion was central to the teachings of some rabbis, including the distinguished Pharisee Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus. However, many other Pharisees, such as Hillel's rival Shammai were very strict in requiring adherence to holiness codes and rituals (in the same way that some Christians today demand strict adherence to specific beliefs about God and Jesus). Jesus renewed the image of God as love and compassion, a God more interested in forgiveness than judgment. Not only did Jesus teach these principles, but he lived them perfectly. He taught and modeled the pathway to living life as it is experienced when God reigns in the hearts of humankind, a state of existence that he calls "the kingdom of God".

According to Luke, Jesus opens his ministry by reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah in a synagogue in Nazareth:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He gives of the scroll back to the synagogue attendant and then proclaims, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus clearly sees himself as an anointed prophet, one who will bring this good news of social justice into the world. Throughout his ministry, he speaks with an authority that is perceived to be above and beyond prior Hebrew prophets. People experience the divine through him. He forgives sins, an attribute only given to God. Miracles attributed to him exceed those of other charismatic mystics. Scholars and theologians differ as to whether Jesus truly viewed himself as divine prior to his death. This may sound faintly heretical, but the nature of Jesus' divinity was widely debated throughout the first three centuries after his death and resurrection, with an orthodox position finally being established during the first Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. The earliest gospel, Mark, portrays Jesus as teacher, healer, and prophet. There is very little emphasis on his divinity. By the end of the first century, however, we see a very different Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of John. Jesus appears to affirm his divinity with statements such as, "I and the Father are one" and "I have the authority to speak for the Father; I have the power to act for the Father." Certainly Jesus lived in communion with God, and in the words of Marcus Borg "experienced God as his central reality".

If the disciples didn't perceive him as divine prior to his crucifixion, then they certainly did after his resurrection. Both the Gospels and outside sources indicate that people believed that Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected. The *Gospels* and *Acts of the Apostles* portray Jesus appearing to the disciples after his resurrection. Upon Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, the disciples scattered and hid for fear of their own lives. After Jesus appeared to them, the disciples boldly preached his message without fear, knowing in all likelihood it would result in their death. The experience of Jesus' resurrection convinced them of life after death, or that living life as God intended (as taught by Jesus) superseded death itself. One can debate the accuracy of the Gospel (and Acts of the Apostles) accounts as they relate to Jesus. The Gospels contain a mixture of history and metaphorical narrative. I would suggest, however, that debating the accuracy of the Gospel accounts is irrelevant. They were not written as history texts. They were written for the purpose of conveying God's truth as revealed through the life and teachings of Jesus.

There are tremendous implications to the divine nature of Jesus. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether you believe Jesus himself was divine, God incarnate, or whether you believe that Jesus was a man with a mystical connectedness to God who purely reflected God's presence through his actions and teachings. Christianity postulates that God's grace, his unconditional love and forgiveness, is manifest through God's humanity, represented in Jesus. If Jesus represents God's will for humankind, we can directly observe God's nature through Jesus and model our behavior after him. His teachings become more than just good ideas. They become revelations from God himself. He becomes God's example of how we should live our lives.

Beauty resides in the fact that we can be transformed and restored in the same way people were 2000 years ago, if we commit to the same life of discipleship. When Jesus' words on how to live become authoritative in our life and we model ourselves after him and his teachings, life can be lived as God intended. I have seen this in others, and occasionally in myself. Joy in my life does not emerge from the house I bought or the possessions I own, but rather from the times I allow God's love to flow through me to others. On Saturdays, I spend time with impoverished youth in Philadelphia. I experience incredible joy when I see how these children are restored by a little love and compassion. This was the first time in my life that I truly understood Jesus' instruction, "whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it." Many of Jesus' teachings have this paradoxical quality. They often run contrary to conventional wisdom. Perhaps that is why we hesitate before following him. When we do, however, he promises us that we will live life with abundance. I have been a disciple long enough to know that this is true.