

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY

A Disturbing Question: "Do I know what Biblical Christianity is?"

It is very possible for an earnest Christian to be so poorly taught and to so misunderstand the truths of Christianity that he is unable to adequately practice the Christian life.

One of the major sources of weakness, disappointment, and frustration in the life of the Christian stems from failure to understand the nature of Biblical Christianity. What we do not know we cannot practice or enjoy. True worship is governed by truth and the truth must be learned.

Those who work with the laws of physics must know their field. They must learn the nature and characteristics of the laws which pertain to their area of specialization. It is not sufficient to guess. There is no substitute for knowledge in the life of the engineer, the physicist, the mathematician, or the physician. Nor is it enough for the young man to have a desire to build a bridge. He must learn the laws which govern bridge-building and how to put these laws into practice.

The Christian, likewise, must have more than a desire to live successfully. The desire, no matter how great, is not enough. Like the engineer, he must learn the truths of Christianity and how to put them into practice. Only then will he have the conditions which will enable him to live successfully.

One important factor which has led to a misunderstanding of Christianity is the failure to distinguish between Biblical principle and "Christian" practice. What Christians and

churches practice is not necessarily the Truth. One must learn to evaluate even the proclamation of Christians and churches by the principles and truths of the Bible. Many Christians and non-Christians have been confused by poor teaching and poor practice.

It is well to ask the question, "Do I know what Biblical Christianity is?" There are many who are not willing to ask such a question and there are many more who cannot give an adequate answer.

Any hesitancy in this area can only lead to failure.

A Basic Assumption: Christianity is Based on Divine Revelation.

Christianity has not been given to us as a lump of clay which may be molded into innumerable shapes. God has revealed Himself to us in and through Jesus Christ. This revelation forms the foundation, the structure, and the content of genuine Christianity. It comes to us as final authority.

Since genuine Christianity is the result of an authoritative revelation, it is evident that any tampering with, or any faulty interpretation of, its basic message can only result in the production of a false Christianity. It is obvious, as one looks about the religious world today, that this is exactly what has happened.

The importance of this assumption can hardly be over-emphasized. The authority for belief and practice is divine revelation. This authority, therefore, does not reside in the church, nor in religious experience, whether it be personal or corporate. God is Truth and He has made Himself and His will known. This revelation has been authoritatively recorded in the Scriptures.

To be a genuine Christian and to live a successful Christian life, we must begin, like an engineer, with the acceptance of a final authority. We must bow in complete submission before God and His revelation. No engineer may select only the laws which meet his approval and reject the rest. To be successful he must accept all the laws and their authoritative demands. And so it is with the Christian.

Untold damage has resulted due to the negligence of engineers, physicians, men and women in similar professions. Far greater damage is to be found in the spiritual realm. Men and women have based their lives and destinies on false interpretations of the Bible. Life, talent, time and money have been wasted. Freedom, power and progress follow the knowledge and practice of the Truth. When Truth is not known and ignorance is practiced, only harm can follow.

God has made Himself known to us in Jesus Christ, through history, as recorded in the Scripture. This is where we must start. We must be willing to go to this final authority and to test our belief and practice.

As portrayed in diagram 1, God has revealed Himself in two ways: General Revelation and Special Revelation. By general

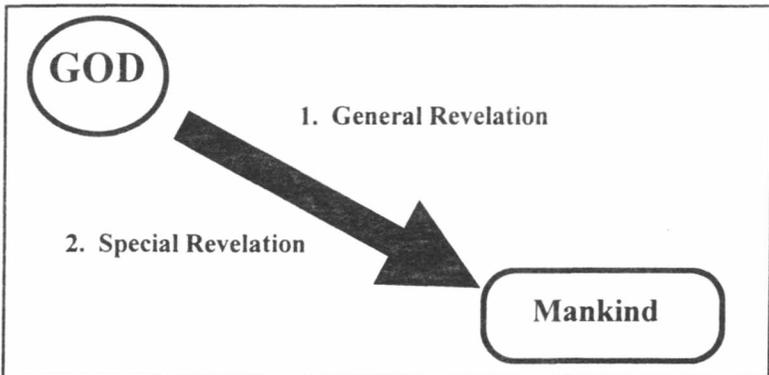


Diagram 1: God Reveals Himself to Man In Two Ways

revelation we mean those evidences within the creation such as design, stability of law, human values, and conscience which point to the Creator, (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20; 2:14,15.) God has revealed Himself in His work.

By special revelation we refer to the many communications of divine truths whereby God has revealed Himself as the Redeemer of His people. this process of special revelation culminated in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the Living Word, and the completion of the written Word, the Bible, Hebrews 1:1-3; I Corinthians 15:1-4. Unless otherwise stated, the term revelation is used in these lessons to indicate special revelation.

The Key To Success: Accept And Obey The Revelation Of God As Final Authority.

An Important Perspective: Christianity Revolves Around a Person, Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament days it was the pre-incarnate Christ who said to Abraham, "*...I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward*" (Genesis 15:1). He said to Moses, "*certainly I will be there with thee...*" (Exodus 3:12). He spoke to Israel by Hosea and said, "*... in Me is thy help*" (Hosea 13:9). Through Jeremiah He spoke to Judah and said, "*...they have forsaken Me the fountain of living water ...*" (Jeremiah 2:13).

The message of the New Testament is the same. The Lord Jesus Christ said to Peter and Andrew, "*...follow Me...*" (Matthew 4:19). He said, "*Come unto Me...and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28). He also said, "*... I am the light of the world...*" (John 8:12); "*... I am the resurrection and the life ...*" (John 11:25); "*... I am the way, the truth, and the life ...*" (John 14:6); "*... without Me ye can do nothing*" (John 15:5).

The same emphasis is found in the Apostolic interpretation of Christianity. John said, "*But as many as received Him to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them*

that believe on His name" (John 1:12). It was Peter who said, *"According as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him ... "* (II Peter 1:3). Paul taught that God has blessed us with all spiritual blessings *"... in Christ"* (Ephesians 1:3), and he prayed that the Christians might be illuminated and grow, *"... in the knowledge of Him"* (Ephesians 1:17). Of his own spiritual life Paul said, *"... Christ liveth in me ... "* (Galatians 2:20); *"For to me to live is Christ ... "* (Philippians 1:21); and *"That I may know Him... "* (Philippians 3:10).

The identical message is proclaimed in the doctrinal explanation of Christianity. Jesus Christ is the object of faith (Acts 16:31); the source of all wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3); the Savior of mankind (I John 4:14); the Head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22); the believer's peace (Ephesians 2:14); his wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (I Corinthians 1:30); his power (I Corinthians 1:24); and the One in Whom all believers are complete (Colossians 2:10).

Christianity is surely a belief, a group of doctrines, a relationship, an ethic, a way of life, a form of service, a living hope, a demanding imperative, and a transforming deliverance, but all of these are rooted in and revolve around the Person of Jesus Christ the Son of god. Christianity is first of all Jesus Christ.

Christianity is first of all the Person of Jesus Christ. All areas of life must revolve around Him. As demonstrated in Diagram 2, Jesus Christ is to have preeminence in all things, Colossians 1:18.

The Key To Success: Accept And Obey The Will Of God.

A Serious Warning: Christianity is Often Perverted.

Religious perversions are not produced by agnostics or atheists but by well-meaning Christians. In the attempt to cure some failure in practice, one facet of Biblical Christianity has often

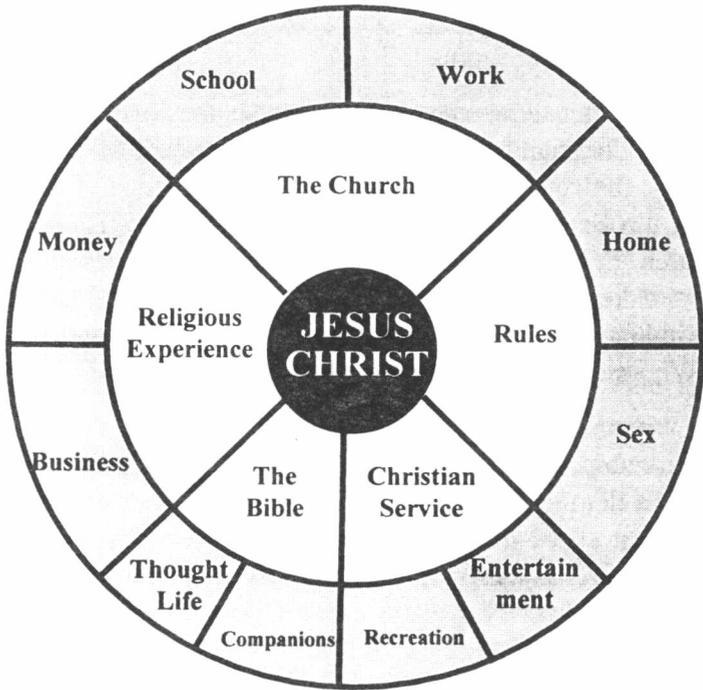


Diagram 2: Jesus Christ is Preeminent in All Areas of Life

been overemphasized. When this facet is made the central factor in Christianity, a perversion results. There are at least four common perversions taught in the church today.

(1) One of the most common perversions is the misconception that Christianity revolves around the church. Though even a casual reading of the New Testament will indicate the importance of this divine institution, God did not bring the church into existence to be the center of our lives. That place must be reserved for and filled by Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church. There are many today who have given the place of Christ to the church. In misplaced zeal these have taken that which is secondary and made it first.

When the church is made the central factor in Christianity it is utilized in at least three ways. The church is used as a source of spirituality, as the means whereby spirituality is maintained, and as the basis of measuring spirituality. In reply to the question, "How can I become a spiritual person and then maintain my spirituality?" the answer is given, "Attend church regularly."

Spirituality is not the automatic by-product of church attendance. Nor is it, in itself, the measuring rod for distinguishing between those who are spiritual and those who are not. The church has its divinely ordained place of importance. It is not, however, a panacea. One may be constantly in church and yet miss Him who is the Head of the Church.

Please keep in mind the importance of the Church. It has been designed by God to minister His Word to us, and lead us into fellowship with Himself. Every true Christian will honor the Church and be a willing participant in its ministry. My point here is simply that we must not give to the Church the place we should give only to Jesus Christ.

(2) A second popular perversion of Christianity is legalism. In this zealous misinterpretation of the Bible, rules are placed at the center of Christianity and all must revolve around certain practices of life. The "don'ts" of this type

of "Christian" life receive undue emphasis. The Christian is one who has stopped doing certain things!

The key to spirituality, for this way of thinking, is the whole-hearted acceptance of certain rules as absolutes. Obedience to these ruled is a guarantee as well as the mark of spirituality.

There is no question about the emphasis of the Bible upon obedience. And there are many commandments in the Scripture which the Christian must obey. However, these commandments are not an end in themselves. They have been given to us as the means whereby we obey God. The Christian is not to obey the commandment alone. He is to obey God - by keeping the commandment. This is the reason why love and obedience are inseparably related in the Bible (John 14: 15, 21, 23; 15:10; I John 2:5; 5:3; II John 6).

The legalist is almost never content to stop with the commandments of the Scripture. New rules must be invented which are somehow twisted into becoming the application of Biblical principles. God, love, and personal freedom are soon eclipsed. It is frightfully easy to obey all the rules of the legalist and even the commandments of the Bible and yet not give first place to one's Lord.

(3) A third perversion of Christianity may be called emotionalism or the overemphasis on religious experience. A certain type of experience may be proclaimed as the secret of spirituality and as the distinguishing mark of spiritual people. In this way a personal subjective authority is substituted for the authority of divine revelation. To have an inner feeling of spirituality and to be able to produce at will some manifestation of religious zeal may be a great comfort to some people but it is not described in the Bible as being of the essence of Christianity.

Religious experiences and emotional feelings are surely a part of Biblical Christianity. These, however, are the results and not the causes of the work of grace. A person is not necessarily right with God simply because his emotion so

testifies. Non-Christians have been known to produce elaborate and sustained religious experiences.

When Christianity is made to revolve around emotionalism or religious experience, and not around the Person of Jesus Christ, there is the ever present danger of shifting the standard of authority from God and His revelation to ourselves and our experiences. One may be so preoccupied with his experience that he may bypass Christ, the believer's sanctification (I Corinthians 1:30).

(4) A fourth illustration of how Christianity may suffer from perversion is the over emphasis on Christian service. A certain type or types of service may be placed at the center of Christianity. Here Christian service becomes the source of spirituality and the manner whereby it is maintained. The spiritual people are those who perform a stereotyped service which usually revolves around the church.

There is no question but that the Scriptures pronounce a commission over every Christian. To be a Christian is to be a worker. However, what was said above about obeying God may be said here. Christian service is not an end in itself. This is only one way whereby God is loved, worshipped and obeyed --in practice. it is all too easy to be intensely engaged in service and yet not be serving God. Many times it is the church which is being served, or the pastor, or even our own conscience.

Christianity does not revolve around a form of service; it revolves around the Person of Jesus Christ. It is possible to be taken up with a great variety of Christian services and yet not be committed to the Lord of the Harvest Field.

As Christians we must take a very firm stand against ourselves and against the perversions of Christianity. It is sinfully easy to transfer our love and devotion from God to something associated with God. When this happens we are more in love with religion than with God! Only He may be the object of our affection. See Diagram 3

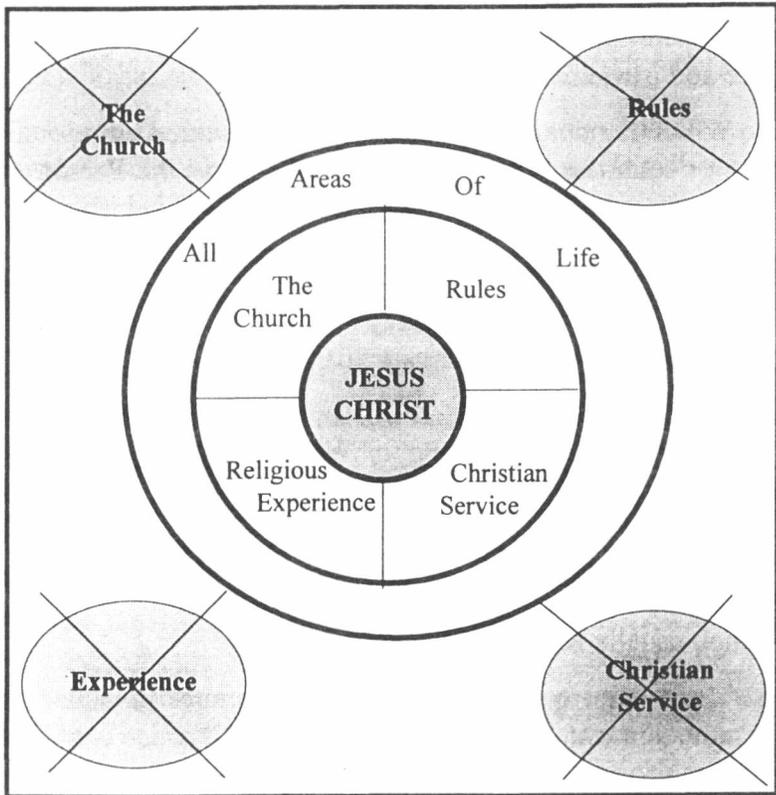


Diagram 3: Only Jesus Christ is to be Central

The church may not be at the center of life in that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, Ephesians 1:22.

Rules may not be at the center of life in that Jesus Christ is our Lord, Luke 6:46.

Religious experience may not be at the center of life in that Jesus Christ is our Sanctification, I Corinthians 1:30.

Christian service may not be at the center of life in that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Harvest Field, Matthew 9:38.

The Key To Success: Give Jesus Christ His Rightful Place,
Romans 12:1,2.