

THE MEANING OF CHRISTIANITY

Rev. Dr. Tim Dissmeyer

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Christianity offers a basic affirmation of life based upon a two-thousand year religious tradition that comes from two ancient taproots. One taproot is the Jewish tradition, with its first Century social groupings of Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Essenes and Zealots. The other taproot is the classical Roman Empire with its political, social and especially religious diversity, a diversity that mixed together ancient Greek and Roman ideals and over time added in the influences of the many mystery religions of the time. The resultant life affirmation became summarized in various creeds, saying: Jesus Christ is Lord. This creed basically affirms that there is one God over and throughout all of human life and that this one God is fully understood and served only by accepting as a gift the presence and power and dominion of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Messiah, as one's Lord and Savior. Thus true and real human living is possible only by accepting in the Christian Scriptures what they say about the teachings, miracles, life, death and resurrection of this Jesus as the Christ. The resulting life of every believer becomes one of service to others after Jesus' own model and prioritizes above all other values the importance of giving up one's life to serve others. As Karl Rahner put it, the basic Christian truth claim is: to die is to live, or put another way, to serve one's neighbor is to find real life.

This basic and essential truth claim is evident when one looks at three things: the message of Jesus, the message of Paul, and the ongoing struggle of the historical church in trying to celebrate and symbolize this one Christian message in its daily life and belief system.

What is the message of Jesus?

- 1. The Law of Moses must be kept.**
- 2. This Law is not enough, since real religion is in the heart.**
- 3. This Law exists for humanity, to enable real living, humanity doesn't exist solely to uphold this Law.**
- 4. Jesus condemns the "unwritten or oral Law" taught by the scribes and Pharisees.**
- 5. Jesus rejects also their addition to the Law of Moses of the rules about unclean foods, the Kashrut.**
- 6. Jesus affirms God as not only Creator, Lord and judge, but also as "Our Father", indeed as "Abba", or "Dad."**
- 7. The Law of Moses is kept fully by loving God and our fellow human beings as our ever-present neighbors.**
- 8. Jesus' own teachings and miracles inaugurated a new era among us, called the Kingdom or Reign of God.**
- 9. Jesus also opposed the Sadducees in affirming that the soul lives on after death, so there will be a resurrection of the body.**

- 10. One day Jesus promises to return to bring the present age to a close and to herald the complete triumph of God's reign over all evil and suffering.**

What is the message of Paul?

- 1. All persons are sinners and are in need of redemption by God's saving action. This includes both Jews and Gentiles and everybody else: because of Adam's sin all must suffer death and judgment for sin.**
- 2. Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of all humankind by his own dying on the Cross and his own coming forth in resurrection from the tomb.**
- 3. To become a Christian one must participate in Jesus' death, resurrection and thereby accept His free gift of eternal life.**

What is the historical message of the church?

- 1. The Christian life is a community life, not foremost a solitary life.**
- 2. Christians by accepting the message of Jesus and how Paul translated Jesus' message symbolically die to their sinfulness and are reborn into a life of service to God and neighbor. So the Christian life is a life of service, of mission to others.**
- 3. This truth is ritualized by baptism and sharing in what became the Eucharist, or rehearsing the Lord's Supper (and later emphasized by the addition of other sacraments).**
- 4. The church is a whole and integrated unit called upon by God to minister to all of humanity and to preserve the basic Creeds of Christian faith until Jesus returns again at the end of time.**
- 5. A special and essential task of the church is to transmit the above message through preserving the Christian scriptures and raising up of new generations of disciples to sustain these truths until the Second Coming of Christ.**
- 6. There is a historically conditioned yet Apostolically authorized institution which is charged with maintaining the above message until the Second Coming.**
- 7. This essential message is celebrated and theologized in two basic Christian teachings: first, as an affirmation of Jesus Christ being fully human and fully divine, and second, as an affirmation that there is only one God who operates as three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.**