

# WHAT MAKES CHRISTIANITY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER RELIGIONS?<sup>1</sup>

I Corinthians 2: 1-5

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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Today's hot question for a cold winter is this: What makes Christianity different from other religions? It's a good question, and one worth more than the few minutes I have to address it. But let's see where we can go with it in the time we have.

**The answer rests on this assertion: unlike any other religion, Christianity has at its foundation not just a philosophy or ideas or concepts; but a person, the one we know as Jesus the Christ.**

## I

To test that assertion, look at the twenty-seven "books" of the New Testament. They are quite different in style, language, emphases, and theology. They were written by Jewish and Gentile authors. They range from tiny letters (almost quickly scribbled notes) to long discourses and descriptions. Some were written very early (possibly as early as AD 50) and some were written late (around 100 AD). What holds all these writings together? The answer is astonishingly simple: it is the name of Jesus, to

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, February 6, 2011. My approach to the answer to this question is influenced by the work of Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1976) and also his *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 21-60.

whom they gave the loftiest title they could give: Christ, the Greek translation of the Hebrew *mashiach*, which means the one anointed by God.

When we leave the New Testament, look at the long centuries of Christian history. Those small first-century churches grew more numerous. Eventually Christianity moved from a minority religion to a state-supported majority religion. The underground church became a state church. Rulers became persecutors of non-Christians. Popes were crowned, wars were fought, cathedrals were built, heretics were burned, monks sang Gregorian chants, St. Francis talked to the birds, Luther reformed, Henry VIII married...and married and married, pilgrims built a city on a hill, Baptists were born, revivals were held, a Bill of Rights was passed, a Baptist church was established in Worcester, and you showed up on a snowy Sunday morning in the year 2011. What holds all of those twenty centuries together? Once again, it is astonishingly simple: Jesus the Christ.

Then, look at the great variety of theologies we encounter even in our own city, much less in the Christian world. What is the one thing common in the faith of the high church Catholic and the low church Pentecostal? What is the common thread that ties together the most liberal the most conservative? What unites the storefront church with the tall steeple church? Clearly, the answer is the same: Jesus Christ.

Other religions may recognize Jesus or even honor him, but no other religion holds Jesus Christ as the very center of the faith. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: *I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*<sup>2</sup>

## II

Christianity does share many fine attributes with other religions. Some form of “the golden rule” (*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*) is found in all the major religions. What is not found in any other religion is devotion to the person of Jesus Christ.

One reason the Lord’s Supper is so central to Christian worship is that we symbolically remember that Jesus died as a young man after an incredibly brief period of adult activity, betrayed and denied by his followers, mocked and scorned by his opponents, and left to die in the most agonizing and abominable form of execution which was reserved only for non-Roman slaves and political rebels.

His execution was not only a horrible way of death, it was embarrassing to the early church. In spite of the Apostle Paul’s language in his letters, for centuries many Christians avoided using the cross as a symbol of Christianity.

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<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 2: 2.

It was humiliating. To the educated Greek, it was absurd. To the Roman citizen, it was a scandal. To the Jew, it represented a divine curse.

So the early Christians were faced with the undeniable historical fact that their founder had been executed on an implement of torture and death reserved for the most despised of criminals. But something happened that enabled them to see the cross in an entirely different light. Something happened that transformed a sign of shame into a sign of victory. Something happened that caused them to believe that the cross was not the sign of the dishonorable death of a rebel, but the redemptive death of a Savior.

They called that “something” resurrection, and however the details of it are understood, resurrection fundamentally means that Jesus did not die into nothingness, but into the presence of a loving God. All the subsequent interpretations of the cross can be confusing, but the bottom line is that they concluded that God was not a bloodthirsty and sadistic God who could only be satisfied by human sacrifice, and that the death of Jesus was not arbitrary or meaningless.

Christians experienced a power and courage that they called the “Holy Spirit,” and they concluded that it was none other than the living Christ among them. This Holy Spirit was so powerful among them, that they centered their faith, not in a new law or a philosophical concept, but placed their faith in

Jesus Christ himself, alive and present among them. That is different from any other religion.

### III

Who could deny that truth, beauty, kindness, and courage exist in all religions? Who could deny that high ethical standards exist in all religions? But while honoring those things in all religions, let it be said clearly that a Christian is one for whom the life, death, and present spirit of Jesus Christ is decisive in knowing the way to live life.

In the same way, a Christian church is not just any group of people who gather to do good work and promote justice and peace or even meditate. Surely we all honor and support the many organizations in our world that bring hope and healing to the suffering. But a Christian church is one that consciously chooses to follow the way of Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and present spirit is ultimately decisive for them.

It is precisely this that distinguishes Christianity. Christian faith is founded, not on doctrine or a philosophical principle or a set of rules or a form of government or a style of worship; rather, it is founded and nourished by a living figure, who has stimulated two thousand years of profound thought, prompted glorious music, rallied courageous ethics, inspired beautiful architecture and art, awakened consciences, kindled great institutions of

healing and learning, literally saved lives from despair, guided lives to productive and compassionate living, and transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary.

#### IV

Christians have learned that they can trust this Christ in the worst of times and the best of times. They have discovered that his Spirit is still at work, and whenever they doubt it, they are reminded over and over that the words of Jesus in the gospel of John were right: for us, he really is *the way, the truth, and the life*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John 14: 6.