

## *Christianity is an Existential Communication*

Relatively early in his literary career, Soren Kierkegaard wrote something in his journal that the remainder of his work would become focused on:

*Christianity is no doctrine, but an existential communication...*

Kierkegaard wrote this as a reaction to the Danish Lutheran church and the caricature it made of Christianity, but the distinction is just as true for today. The prevailing conception is that a person is a Christian if he believes in the key doctrines/truths (which vary depending on denomination), and if this belief is professed to God in a prayer. Accordingly the essence of Christianity is located in these doctrines; abstract statements that give someone the ability to know who is Christian and who is not.

For example, if a respected Christian man acts selfishly in a given situation, it is never once doubted that he is a Christian. At most his action is deemed “unchristian”, but his identity as a Christian is left untouched. This line of thinking climaxed with the doctrine of eternal security, which states that once you are saved (by professing these Christian truths), you can never lose your forgiven and righteous status, no matter what you do in the future. These sentiments illuminate the fact that Christianity’s essence is now found in doctrinal statements. Belief in the ideas that “Jesus Christ rose from the dead”, “the God of Abraham is sovereign”, and “God will one day judge all of mankind” is nowadays quintessentially Christian. Accordingly, it has become generally accepted that what separates Christians from heathens is belief in these statements, and that becoming a Christian means to take on a set of beliefs or religious maxims. Any change of character following that religious conversion becomes an unnecessary recommendation.

In the intellectual world this conception of Christianity is confirmed. People argue and philosophize about various doctrines, and call it Christian philosophy. Christianity is defined today as “a religious system of beliefs that comprise a worldview.”

Existential Christianity’s fundamental assertion is that Christianity is not a system of beliefs, but rather a lifestyle expressed existentially. An “existential communication” means something that is communicated and expressed to others through our existence, the way we live and act within this world. Becoming a Christian does not involve a change of beliefs, but a change of how we live and exist inside a selfish and egoistical world. This is revealed in three ways: The existential nature of Jesus Christ, how we express Christianity to others existentially, and how we express Christianity to God existentially. Despite the association of existentialism as a godless and sorrowful philosophy, Existential Christianity is primarily concerned with the teachings of Jesus within a paradoxical and meaningless environment.

Jesus Christ is the centre of the Christian religion, if one is seeking to understand Christianity they need look no further, and if an idea proposed is in direct conflict with something Jesus had said it should not be considered a part of Christianity. An existential Christianity begins with an examination of the nature of the man himself, Jesus Christ.

In the church today there is horrible tendency to focus on Christ's birth, death, and resurrection; neglecting the rest. The preaching cycle of a usual church involves a sermon of Jesus' birth on Christmas, sermons on his death and resurrection around Easter, and every other Sunday a message on something Paul wrote (with Jesus resurrection tied in at the end for good measure). Whenever Jesus is mentioned in Christian circles it is most likely concerning how he died for our sins and not much else. Most unfortunately, the fixation on one particular part of Christ's life comes at the expense of the rest of it. This completely baffles me, since in his life we see some of the most important aspects of Jesus Christ. It was in his life that he offered and gave life eternal to many people, he taught his followers how to live righteously, and he cured people's fear of death, sense of meaninglessness, and guilt. Most importantly, in Jesus' life we see a direct revelation of the nature of God (as Jesus himself said, if you know the son, you know the father).

The misconception that Christianity is a belief system came from overlooking the reality that the New Testament is an ethical document. In the Gospels you will not find systematic theology and philosophy, rather it is filled with ethical commands and existential directives. Consider the two great commandments that Jesus had given: to love God and love thy neighbour.

It is no mere coincidence that Jesus Christ was the most influential figure in history, and yet did not write a single word. He did not come to the world in order to bring a new doctrine, a new religion, or a new theological revelation. Thus, he never lectured to the public, and you would not find his 1000-page treatises on the Jerusalem University shelves. What he imparted to his followers was his life; his very existence. He would tell people to help the poor and humble yourselves in tireless service only after he exhibited that behaviour in his own life. When Jesus taught he never compelled people to accept a new doctrine by way of proofs, he chose to tell parables that the commoner could understand and appreciate.

Indeed, when Jesus asked people to follow him he was not appealing to a change in belief, or religion, or theology, but a change of life. Jesus challenged people on an existential level, rebuked them for the way they were living, directed them to repent in the way they lived, and sent them away instructing them how to live righteously. When the lawyer approached Jesus inquiring about the way to eternal life, Jesus had no doctrine to give him, just a commandment to sell all of his possessions and follow. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus told a Jewish congregation a story where the Godly person was not the Jewish priest who was abiding by the law, but the 'heathen' Samaritan who showed mercy. At the end of the story the Samaritan never got evangelized and saved, he continued being a Samaritan, and continued to engage in the culture and practices, but he was yet Godly for the love and selflessness he showed towards the dying man. Christ's teaching was ethical and existential in nature, meaning it sought to change how a person inhabited this world, and how they treated other people. Doctrine had no place with Jesus, and when he looked at people he did not see their beliefs, just their heart.

It may be pointed out that I am neglecting the one verbal and seemingly theological statement that separated Christ's followers from the Jews, that of "Jesus Christ is Lord". This is fair, and was indeed a new addition, but it was not theological and was not centred on belief. Christ gave these disciples a radical discipleship that completely changed their mentality into one of selflessness, altruism, and spirituality. After the disciples' had literally given all in order to follow Christ, only then were they able to exclaim "Jesus Christ is Lord!" This statement is not meant to be understood intellectually, and it is entirely outside the realm of reason. How could anyone possibly proclaim that a poor and lowly Jew was the son of the omnipotent God that created the earth? Indeed, the maxim that Jesus Christ is Lord is not objectively justified. Historical inquiry can only go so far as to admit that Christ lived, died, and claimed that he was the Christ. Philosophically there is no evidence to suggest that the jump from "Jesus Christ claimed he was God" to "Jesus Christ is God" is a rational one. The statement makes no rational sense, but to the disciples there was nothing truer. The Disciple's proclamation that "Jesus Christ is Lord" came from experience, conviction, passion, and existential evidence (being changed from a sinner to a saint, for example). It was never meant to be made into a dogmatic statement or something that was proclaimed as intellectually true. It was especially reserved for those who had died to their self, it was essentially gained existentially.

For the disciples and other early followers of Christ; to be a Christian meant a radical existential discipleship to Jesus. Christ made such a spiritual impact on them that they became 'born again'. Their existence evolved into something fulfilling and transcendent, which Paul dubbed as 'the new man'. It is from this change that they exclaimed to each other, "Jesus Christ truly is the Lord!" They did not come to this conclusion from intellectual evidence or dogmatic preaching, but they came to it from the amazing change Christ made in them.

From this we see the existential nature of Jesus Christ; he was not meant to be turned into a doctrine. The fundamental mistake of modern Christianity is that they overlook the fact that Jesus Christ was the prototype; who desired to be emulated and imitated. People became his followers from imitating his good works of servitude and the new commandment. The Church today parades Jesus around as an object of worship and admiration. "Since he died and resurrected all we must do is praise his name forever with song and dance and nice frilly prayers." Jesus was the prototype, and Christians were meant to be the emulators. Jesus never once asked to be worshipped, in fact in Luke 11:27-28 you can see Jesus directing worship away from himself towards people who have heard his word and have kept it.

### *Christianity is expressed to others Existentially*

Considering Jesus primarily presented ethical directed in his ministry, his potential followers were required to make an ethical change to become his disciple. Jesus discerned whether someone was worthy to be his follower through an ethical initiation. I will not expand on this too much here, but the key to this ethical initiation

was that it differed depending on what the person valued most in his heart. Jesus told a man who wished to bury his father before following him to 'let the dead bury the dead' in Matthew 8:19-22. It was clear that his father was either the only thing that stood in the way of the man following Christ or an excuse for him to ignore Christ. In Luke 18:18-23 Jesus commanded a very rich young man to sell all of his possessions, give all the money to charity, and follow Jesus in order to attain eternal life that the young man claimed to desperately want. The man rejected Jesus for he valued his wealth too greatly. Indeed, in Luke 14:26 Christ announces that to be his disciple you must hate all worldly attachments; a verse that is seldom heard echoing from a pulpit. And finally, Jesus told the first disciples to simply "come and follow me"; asking common men to abandon not only their jobs but their way of life to follow a stranger. The point is not only that this ethical initiation attempted to remove all temporal attachments that the various people had, but that Jesus aimed at changing the persons life, not even offering a mention to anybody's beliefs, doctrine, or theology.

A significant part of why Christianity is an existential communication is the fact that Christianity is only expressed to others existentially. This means that a person's belief system should have no place in how other people perceive of us as Christians. When the disciples completed this ethical initiation, and had surrendered all value they placed on immediacy, materialism, and hedonism, Jesus said to them:

*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:35)*

The implications of what Jesus said are quite clear. These men underwent an ethical initiation aimed at revolutionising what was important to them in order to develop an unbridled Christ-like love for both God and other people. Possessing this love was the only commandment Jesus gave to his disciples, and ethical discipleship intended to create and develop this in the disciples. Now that the disciples were committed to imitating Jesus, they were told that other people would separate them from the common Jew, and know them to be followers of Jesus by this unbridled love that they now possess for each other. The only addition that Jesus gave to religion, that "Jesus Christ is Lord", had to be lived by his disciples, not believed. Christianity had begun as a way of life; an existential lifestyle that espoused the ideals that Jesus had taught (such as love, tolerance, and forgiveness). Christianity was not a philosophy or a set of beliefs, and differing philosophies had no necessary impact on this love that separated the Christian from the Jew.

As the disciples were separated from the Jews by unique love, so to does modern day Christians become separated from the world by the love they express. The difference in a Christian is fundamentally existential, as the "existential shows what you truly believe." An unloving Christian is a hypocrite, and according to Jesus there is no faith in such a man. The idea is expressed most bluntly in James 2:17, "a faith without works is dead", meaning the 'faith' they hold to is not real faith. The way that Christianity today expresses itself to others intellectually (using dogmatic truths and doctrine) is through a distorted understanding of the word "faith", neglecting the Gospels and emphasising the sometimes legalistic epistles of Paul, the merging of Christianity with neo-Platonism, and a misunderstanding of sin and how Jesus proposed salvation from it. These are the biggest mistakes that modern Protestantism has made, and it has completely changed the disciples understanding of Christianity.

The result of evangelizing a non-existential Christianity is stagnation and alienation in the society. Christianity is expressed to others existentially.

*Christianity is expressed to God existentially*

It is possible that Christianity could be expressed to others existentially, but expressed to God dogmatically. Jesus did, after all, say “believe on me and ye shall be saved.” To properly understand how Christianity is expressed to God, we must first ask how it is we please God, and how he deals judgement and forgiveness.

Modern Christianity offers a couple of suggestions on how man pleases God. The first is the act of giving praise to God, either in prayer or singing. It is quite telling that prayer has experienced the same sort of modern distortion that plagues most other Christian concepts. Prayer is given to God today in a way that resembles what humans expect everything in life to be, a give/take relationship. The person gives God praise and thanksgiving, apparently attempting to demonstrate love. And then asks God for favours, for direction in a certain situation, and even requesting the future to transpire in a certain way. The validity of vain requests notwithstanding, verbal praise is to God a frivolous triviality that neither pleases God nor demonstrates any actual love. The idea that our love for God is in any way measured in the length, volume, and prettiness of our prayers of thanksgiving is quite similar to the “vain babblings” that the Pharisees frequently engaged in, although they were looking to find favour with other men, whereas today’s Christians are looking to find favour with God (for consciously or subconsciously selfish reasons). According to Jesus, prayer and verbal statements as a whole will not please God or demonstrate love for God. They are by no means wrong, but to place any importance onto them is to disregard everything Jesus had said about what should constitute an authentic religion.

The second suggestion offered by modern Christianity on how we please God and demonstrate our love for him is obedience. Such a position possesses strong scriptural support, as from the beginning of the Old Testament the thing that God seemed to prize the most out of a person is obedience. Also, Jesus quite bluntly said to his disciples that “if ye love me, keep my commandments.” It seems quite clear that the way to please God and exhibit love to God is obedience, to obey what God has commanded us to do. However, like with most Christian terminology, the word ‘obedience’ has through the generations been stripped of its existential meaning and now defined by some abstract affirmation to ‘doctrinal commands’. This abstract obedience is aptly revealed through the common Christian attitude regarding how behaviour is related to obedience. If someone isn’t careful it is easy to ignore the existential commands of Jesus, base your Christianity on belief, and proceed to delegate obedience to the realm of sporadic decision making. What I mean by that is, obedience is often defined as living according to God’s ordained plan for your life. For example, an anxious high school student is mulling over whether to go to a secular college, bible school, or go straight into the work force (A decision that confronts every teenager). The teenager uses a psychological methodology that is ascertained from years of religious indoctrination (i.e. mental conditioning with infinite variations) in order to determine what life decision to make. Through this methodology the conclusion has been reached that Bible College is what God would want. Following that conclusion, whether the teenager decides to go to Bible College or not depends on whether he is obedient to God and “God’s will” for his life. Indeed, to further the point, Christians often perceive “God’s will” to be whatever occurs in a

given situation. With this philosophy in mind, obedience to God is living in harmony with the appointed order of things that supposedly came from God, and a reliance on esoteric techniques to ascertain what opinion the Holy Spirit has on a very specific scenario. This obedience is linked to our life only narrowly and capriciously.

Additionally, as always occurs in modern Christianity, obedience to God is linked with obedience to dogma. Say an elder in the church is widely known to be doctrinally respected and biblical, “he knows his bible like the back of his hand”, as the laypeople would often comment. If this elder happens to be holding a grudge to his brother who wronged him many years ago, and hasn’t forgiven the brother, the common analysis would be to claim that he should forgive the brother. Acknowledgment that he needs to forgive the brother is given, but the lack of obedience in this specific area of his life is not thought to hinder his love for God or how pleasing he is to God. Jesus gave grave condemnation to people who do not forgive, and yet this elder is still respected for his amazing understanding of the Bible. The misconceived link between obedience and dogma can be traced back to a misconceived Christianity. Abstract obedience to God’s overall plan for this world and an affirmation for all the significant theological claims made in the Bible is not pleasing to God and is not a way to demonstrate love to God.

The answer to how we can please God and show him our love can be found in Jesus’ statement that “if ye love me, keep my commandments.” The language is quite clear; Jesus is saying that keeping his commandments is a necessary component for loving God. This is not simply a request Jesus made to the disciples, as if it would be a nice thing to do if they can manage it in their busy cutting-edge lifestyle. It is simply telling the disciples that if they did actually love Jesus and God they would hear Jesus’ word and keep it. The only point of debate can be what comprises Jesus Christ’s commandments, but even that is easily graspable. His commandments are the various teachings he gave throughout his life that concerned exclusively on existential issues. Showing love to God is thereby achieved through following Christ’s existential commands, and nothing more. Not only does ‘abstract obedience’ receive no positive mention by Jesus, he seems to rebuke it through condemning the Pharisees for obeying Judaic law even when it directly impeded someone from doing good (such as healing on the Sabbath). It is clear that the extremely significant issues of how to please God and expressing love to God are both answered with following Christ on an existential level, and only that. Belief, doctrine, and dogma have no influential place in expressing Christianity to God.

*On what basis does God judge and forgive people?*

Following Christ and obeying his directives is not an attempt to appease a wrathful God, but rather the way to possess a relationship with God, achieve an authentic and balanced self, and indeed to be forgiven of all sins and transgressions. The universal spiritual sickness dubbed ‘sin’ is why people need Jesus, and is the cause of all fear and feelings of meaninglessness in this world. The nature of sin is not the issue in this writing, and it is debatable, but the notion of Jesus as the cure of this sickness is paramount to understand how God forgives the sin in humanity.

The cornerstone belief of fundamentalist Christianity is that an individual is saved from sin and is granted forgiveness on the basis that they accept the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, express remorse for being a sinner, and affirm that it is

Jesus blood that saved all men from their sins. This is what the church calls becoming “saved”, or “born again”. It is asserted that this is a salvation that is from faith alone. Not only is this a distortion of the word faith, but there is a lot of scriptural evidence (most especially from Jesus) that denies its truth. In defence of the modern concept of salvation the church cites Paul when he said “we are saved by grace through faith... not of works” (Ephesians 2:8) and Jesus when he said “believe on me and ye shall be saved.”

Before responding to these two verses, I would like to assert that the idea of existential redemption (being forgiven and judged by God entirely on an existential basis) is something that Jesus taught quite clearly. Firstly, Jesus considered love and forgiveness the only requirements for forgiveness of sin. In Luke 7:47 Jesus was discussing a poor woman who washed his feet with oil by saying “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.” The language is not ambiguous, and the implications of it are quite clear: love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8), and to who loves little, little is forgiven. In Matthew 6:14 Jesus very simply states “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” No other necessary conditions are mentioned by Jesus in order to attain forgiveness from God, just that if you forgive others you will receive forgiveness from your own wrongdoing. Finally, in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus gives us a picture of God sitting on a huge seat and judging all the peoples of the earth. The sheep and the goats, which were the symbols used to represent those who did and did not find favour with God, were judged based on how they treated the least of their brethren (the poor in society). God deemed that those who treated the poor well treated God well, and vice versa. This illumination of God’s judgement had nothing to do with belief or the modern understanding of the word faith. All of these verses indicate that to attain forgiveness from God you must be loving, forgiving, and merciful. Any additional requirements preached today are not from Jesus.

Furthermore, on a couple of occasions Jesus condemns people for the sole reason that they are lacking in forgiveness. Beginning with Matthew 6:15, Jesus states that “if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” It is important to note that Jesus leaves no wriggling room for those ‘respected’ Christians who know their bible. Jesus tells us why God forgives sin based on our own forgiveness of other people in a parable found in Matthew 18:23-25. In this parable there were a king and one of his servants who owed him a lot of money. When the servant was summoned before the master, he explained his dire economic situation and how he is incapable of repaying the money back to the king in time. Moved with compassion and mercy, the king then decides to forgive the man his debt and send him on his way. Following this, the forgiven servant physically threatens a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller sum of money, demanding the other servant to repay his money immediately. Once the king hears about the lack of compassion in the forgiven servant, he is summoned back to the king and then thrown into prison until his debt was repaid. Jesus likens this story to the Kingdom of God, with the servant representing a person in need of forgiveness for sin and the king as God himself. If a person is repentant, God is gracious and merciful and thus openly forgives any person who repents. However, if the forgiven person does not show the same forgiveness he received onto others, God will take back the forgiveness. It seems that God is demanding gratitude of this forgiveness shown by forgiving other people for their crimes towards you. Essentially Jesus is pointing out that without love

or forgiveness, without an existential foundation to a person's Christianity, there will be no forgiveness, and therefore Christianity without an existential foundation is not Christianity.

Considering that God grants forgiveness and deals condemnation on existential grounds, it is clear in the gospels that God relates to us based on how we relate to others. Meaning, the more loving and compassionate and forgiving we are to other people, the more compassionate and forgiving God will be toward us. "Love covers a multitude of sins" after all, and proves that Christianity is expressed to God existentially.

A very common objection to the idea that forgiveness is determined existentially is found in the Gospel of John where Jesus repeatedly asserts that having faith and believing in him will give you salvation. Modern Christianity draws on the popular definition of those terms to come to the conclusion that we are saved through faith, which means to them an intellectual affirmation of belief, and trusting in truths that cannot be seen or verified. However, when you consider what believing on Jesus meant for the disciples, the objection is abolished. As has been argued throughout the chapter, Jesus did not give the disciples any doctrinal or non-existential truths to believe in, and the statement that "Jesus Christ is Lord" is arrived at and held on purely existential levels. Accordingly, believing on Jesus did not entail belief in new religious maxims, but rather dying to the world, often times the surrender of material possessions and social commitments, living a life of self-sacrifice, and showing love to God and Jesus by following his existential commands. Believing in Jesus thus did not mean what we conceive of it today, and that is why commands of faith and belief in the New Testament do not count against the argument that the essence of Christianity is existential.

Since God forgives on an existential basis, and we show love to God existentially, it is apparent that the practical receives a much higher place in Christianity than the theoretical. The purpose of Existential Christianity, however, is not merely to privilege the practical and subordinate the theoretical. Instead, it answers the fundamental questions of life, religion, and theology in the existential level of our existence. Questions like "How do we attain forgiveness from God?", "How do show God that we love him?", "What is the important parts of Christianity and what isn't?" can all be answered with the existential both truthfully and scripturally. The essence of Christianity lies within our existence in the world, and not the intellectual contemplation within our mind. In Conclusion, Christianity is an existential communication. It is expressed to others existentially, and is expressed to God existentially. The measure of a Christian is not piety or theological understanding, but rather his imitation of Christ. The rest of this website will explore the implications of the fact that Christianity is existential.

-- By Timothy Neal