

Part Three:

WHAT IS TRUE CHRISTIANITY

Conrad Grebel and Martin Luther were searching for much the same thing. They both desired a peaceful and fulfilling personal relationship with God. They both wanted to be true Christians. By true we mean real, living, committed Christians, not just in name, but in actual living. Luther was a Catholic monk, but he wasn't sure he was a true Christian. Conrad Grebel was a devoted disciple of Ulrich Zwingli and vociferously endorsed Zwingli's Zurich reformation yet, as time passed, he wasn't so sure that he was a true Christian.

Many Christians of all times and places have found themselves searching out the narrow paths of God's ways just like Luther and Grebel. They have wanted to be more than just nominal Christians. They have also desired a peaceful and fulfilling personal relationship with God. They have searched for the essence of true Christianity.

Now that we have examined the historical background of Swiss Anabaptism and the doctrinal components of Swiss Anabaptism and confessional Lutheranism, it is time to determine if either of the two found the answer to this most important question, "What is true Christianity?"

Since the act of trusting, or believing, is a personal matter, and yet by its very nature also a corporate enterprise as it evidences itself in ministering to the needs of others, it is probably true that there will always be a certain tension between the privacy of its communion with God and its necessary social activities in conjunction with other believers. If we had no sinful nature to contend with, this wouldn't be a problem; unfortunately, the Old Adam is constantly harassing us and often we give way to a sinful pride that creates hypocrisy and suspicion. We seek proof for the faith of others as the ticket for admittance into either a private or public fellowship. Now this is all good and proper relative to the need for public confession as an indicator of correct understandings of Scripture prior to establishing fellowship with individuals or denominations, but I am speaking primarily here of the tendency we often have to create a sort of spiritual caste system in our midst, a system which is obviously based on a hypocritical pride that has 20/20 vision in spotting the weaknesses of others, but is legally blind when conducting a self-examination. Sin creates this tension. If there were no sin, our private meditations with God would express themselves beautifully in a perfect harmony and commonality of purpose with the church at large.

Related to this difficulty is the private uncertainty, and even terror, that may beset the individual who examines his life for evidence of a true faith and, not finding sufficient proof to satisfy a demanding conscience, gives way to a certain amount of despair and questioning relative to whether or not he really even is a believer. Think of the anguish Luther endured for this very reason.

It might not be inappropriate to call this tension, whether directed toward others or inwardly, a confusion or inversion of justification and sanctification. We may seek to justify our standing as Christians through an observance of sanctified living or incorrectly assume a mature sanctity exists because of our justification. The end result for the prideful may be a legalistic brand of Christianity that yields individuals and churches who tend to ethical and religious snobbery. It tends to produce a self-assured Christian who begins to supplement God's grace with moral purity as the means by which forgiveness and salvation are acquired.

On the other hand, those who point to their justification by faith as an assurance of correct living, as if the mere pronouncement of forgiveness of sins also absolves from all accountability or effort in spiritual progress, may find themselves either still suffering from uncertainty as they struggle without adequate success to find ample proof of their salvation, or sinking into a spiritual smugness which becomes cold and lifeless. The former may cling with all their hearts to the wonderful pronouncement of justification through faith alone but, due to an inadequate understanding of sanctification, are left holding the bag and asking, "Well, what's next?" It's like being led to the verge of something really exciting, building up to a climax of fulfillment that never comes.

This sense of unfilled expectations in the quest for a true Christianity can often end in spiritual decay and an austere, decidedly mechanical brand of faith. All the doctrinal positions are in place and locked in the safe, but somehow they never actually get involved in the daily routine. It's akin to receiving a fine, expensive piece of jewelry as a gift, but never wearing it for fear of losing it. You hoard it and never share its beauty with others. In the same way, faith can be the treasure we bury in the ground and never invest to reap great spiritual profit for ourselves and for others. The faith itself can actually become the object of worship. We are not to give all praise, honor, and glory to the doctrine of justification by faith. That is nothing more than another type of idolatry! We worship God. The truths we learn about Him are manifestations of His graciousness and mercy toward we sinful people, but we must take supreme care that we do not emphasize one of these manifestations to the exclusion of the other. What results if that happens is a stilted, cock-eyed Christianity that is not true Christianity, but a hybridized kind of doctrinally-correct cult.

I see Grebel, Hubmaier, and the Swiss Brethren as tending toward the legalistic Christianity. Without fail, all of the doctrinal positions we examined incorporated two heretical components. First, the door is always left ajar for supplements to the God's undeserved act of grace as the efficient cause of our salvation. Without original sin, for example, there is no spiritual impotency, no total depravity, only an inclination toward evil which can be subdued

through correct behavior and submission to the church. Secondly, the Swiss Brethren viewed themselves, and themselves alone, as the only true extension of the holy Christian church reaching back to apostolic times. Their eagerness in ignoring the Biblical concept of an invisible church enabled them to claim that only in an Anabaptist congregation could true Christians be found. If you were not a member of their *Gemeinde*, you were simply not a Christian. Even though we may admire their zeal and courage in the face of brutal persecution, we must unequivocally condemn their incorrect doctrines regarding original sin, justification, the sacraments, and the church.

The Anabaptists felt that the great Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith alone frequently led to less than exemplary conduct on the part of its adherents. The Swiss Anabaptists agreed with Luther that man is saved only by the grace of God, but they rejected his notion of an enslaved will. Instead, they continually stressed that a justified person had to bring forth good works to make good his salvation. As a result, the confessional Lutherans branded the Anabaptists as a Romanist sect. Nevertheless, Luther himself had to admit that the moral behavior of some of his followers was in stark contrast to the outward conduct of many Anabaptists, with the Anabaptists coming out on top.

Luther was not blind to the practical applications of Christian faith in daily life. As early as 1521, he wrote to the Wittenbergers that it was necessary to live according to one's faith and not only to talk about it.¹ In a sermon on September 14, 1538, Luther preached "Believe me, Christ did not come that you might remain in your sins and damnation; for you will not be saved if you do not stop sinning. To be sure, sins are forgiven; but you must stop being a miser, an adulterer, or a fornicator."² Shortly before his death, Luther declared that it is impossible to reach heaven without having seriously striven for sanctification here on earth.³ A good case could be made that all of Luther's works were directed to the practical application of Christianity. The Small Catechism can be seen as nothing less than a sourcebook describing in explicit detail how to think, act, and talk like a Christian. Luther was against "works" only insofar as they minimized the grace of God in winning man's salvation from sin.

Luther taught that good works do not make a person good. "The opposite is true; a person must be good before he can do good works. Hence, where justification is concerned, works are altogether out of place. There faith alone reigns."⁴ According to Luther, Christian ethics has two basic marks. First, it finds its norm in the will of God expressed in the structure of life and in Scripture. Second, no compulsive action can please the unconditional demand of the divine will. Instead, the right love must spring freely and joyfully from the heart. Luther's ethics is an ethics of love and freedom.⁵

This differs somewhat from the Anabaptist idea of believer's baptism. They would say that good works proves that a person is good and thus ready to enter into a relationship with the holy and righteous God. Similarly, Luther's right love that springs freely from the heart is replaced with a covenantal idea whereby the believer commits himself to the discipline of God and of the church. Even though this covenant theology (which was discussed in the section on the Lord's Supper early in the paper) was not intended to be a repressive, dictatorial aspect of the Anabaptist church, it certainly has the appearance of a much more structured and austere Christian life. It seems somehow foreign to Luther's stress on the sanctified life arising simply from joy and thanksgiving and being freely offered. It has the appearance of being almost forced.

We must always remember that Luther's main concern was with establishing a right relationship between a believer and God. Yet, he also stressed that once a right relationship was established, good works would or should follow. For Luther the doctrine of justification by faith alone was of such importance that not to accept it was to deny the Christian faith. Consequently, the Swiss Brethren's emphasis on outward piety was, in the Lutheran's opinion, missing the center point of Christianity. Justification by faith alone and the subsequent changes in the believer's life that must naturally follow would be Luther's definition of true Christianity. Good works and the sanctified life – yes, but only after justification solely by God's grace.

In Article XX of the Augsburg Confession we are told that faith is “believing that our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.”⁶ What exactly does this mean and what should be the ramifications for our life? If a person believes that Christ forgave his sins, should a change in that person’s conduct and behavior be evidenced? Of course! Look at Luther and the great things he accomplished after the Holy Spirit enlightened him to see what the Catholic Church had kept hidden for so long. Look at what faith did to the apostles. Faith is not merely belief in a pronouncement of salvation, but it is acceptance of a new way of life. When we are justified by faith in Christ, God throws open the door of our prison cell. We were previously held captive by sin, death, and the devil, but now their hold on us has been severed and before us lies the narrow road of living the Christian life in a wicked, unbelieving world.

Can a person truly have faith if, after the “not guilty” verdict is announced and the door creaks open, he merely stands in the shadows and loiters in God’s grace? This is for God alone to decide; however, it is possible to assume that the old adage, “nothing ventured, nothing gained,” would be an appropriate appellation for such a situation. Such a person is certainly not gaining in Christian maturity. Such a faith must surely be weak. It would seem that, after the cell door opens, a step out onto the path is a requirement of true Christian discipleship. This is sanctification, a necessary outgrowth of justification. According to the differing measures of God’s grace, a few may run, others jog, many will walk, and some will barely totter along, but true Christianity requires that all take the first step. Justification without sanctification is as dead as faith without works.

Now since faith is primarily a personal sin/grace relationship with God, it is impossible to designate a specific group or church body as the possessors of the true Christianity. We may certainly examine confessional statements and doctrinal positions to ascertain which denominations have true doctrine, but we can hardly use this same technique to find the practitioners of true Christianity. This would entail, of course, a confusion of the visible and invisible church. Only God can look into the heart to seek out motivations and desires. Only God knows who the true Christians are.

As Martin Luther said, "It is dangerous to play with the Word of God by which conscience and faith are to be guided. Therefore, interpretations of God's Word must be lucid and definite, having a firm, sure foundation on which one may confidently rely."⁷ Consequently, as we attempt to answer this question it is incumbent upon us that we define true Christianity with the true words of Scripture. Let us proceed with an explanation that will show true Christianity to be an inner merging of true doctrine and true life.

Paul says in II Thessalonians 2:13, "You accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God." When Lutherans say they believe in God it means they accept the Bible as His divine revelation to men and through it learn about God and His will for their lives. God's will is that we inherit eternal life. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3) Knowing God and receiving salvation through His Son predicates an acceptance of all that is written by Him about Himself in the Word. In principle, all of His Word must be accepted and believed. John 10:35 says that "the Scripture cannot be broken." God warns us in Deuteronomy 4:2 – "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it." True Christianity consists in believing the true doctrine as revealed to us in Holy Scripture. True Christianity accepts all of Scripture. The Swiss Brethren were unwilling to do this. Their reason prevented them from accepting by faith the mysteries of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Their human pride caused them to deny the reality of original sin. Paul predicted that there will always be those who will "not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (II Timothy 4:3, 4). But we must stand firm in professing true Scriptural doctrine, however unpopular that may be. We must join Paul in proclaiming, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

The Swiss Brethren were cognizant of the absolute importance of God's Word in the Christian's life. Grebel's conviction that the Bible was the supreme authority of discerning God's will led the brethren to read and study this Book for themselves.⁸ The more educated

leaders like Grebel, Mantz, and Hubmaier felt called to make the Bible accessible to the rank-and-file members who joined the movement. One way they did this was by the publication of what came to be called “concordances” – systematic collections of Bible quotations for use in Anabaptist study groups. Unfortunately, as we have noted, perhaps in part because of their leader’s humanistic antecedents, the Swiss Brethren’s use of Scripture violates a basic exegetical principle: instead of letting Scripture interpret itself, they hammered and wrenched passages to fit their preconceived notions of what reason told them it should say. We saw some of this in our doctrinal study earlier in the paper.

Luther utilized Scripture as the infallible norm and let the Word dictate his doctrine even if it ran counter to human logic and reasonableness. Above all, he stressed, don’t lose your hold on true doctrine:

Now who can recognize the wolf under the sheep’s clothing and defend himself against him? I reply that the only advice I know is that I have already mentioned. Everyone should see to it, above all, that he is sure of his cause and of the doctrine. In his heart he should be so well grounded in it that he can stick to the doctrine even though he sees everyone on earth teaching and living contrary to it. Anyone who wants to move along in safety simply dare not pay attention to any of the outward masks in Christendom and guide himself by them. He must pay attention only to the Word, which shows us the right way of life that avails before God. For example, you must hold on to the chief part, the summary, of Christian teaching and accept nothing else: that God has sent and given Christ, His Son, and that only through Him does He forgive. ⁹

Everything depends on doctrine. Where doctrine is right; faith, works, life, suffering, good and evil days, eating, drinking, hungering, thirsting, sleeping, walking, standing, and living are right. Where doctrine is not right; everything is in vain, everything is lost, and everything utterly condemned: works, life, suffering, fasting, praying, giving alms, wearing cowls, tonsures, and whatever additional holiness is to be found.¹⁰

It follows that a substantial part of this “searching” feeling that Christians often experience is a direct result of unsatisfactory doctrine. Luther’s search for the truth ended when the Holy Spirit directed him to the correct doctrine concerning justification through faith in Christ alone. Luther was now certain of his relationship with the Triune God. The Holy Spirit has not written doubts into our hearts. He has written assertions more certain and firmer than life itself and all human experience.¹¹ Certainty is largely attainable for the Christian because it comes to him from the Spirit of Truth. This is not to say that the Christian will not still experience doubts and misgivings. The Old Adam is still very active in our hearts this side of heaven. We are reminded of Paul’s word to the Galatians: “The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.”

This sinner/saint dichotomy was a stumbling block for the Swiss Brethren. The life of the Christian is passed amid seeming contradictions. He is at once a saint and a sinner, perfect and imperfect, exalted and humiliated. Grebel wanted perfection not only in heaven, but also while the believer lived here on earth. Zwingli testified at Grebel’s trial in Zurich in 1525 that Grebel and Felix Mantz had come to him asking that a special church be established that would have in it Christian people who lived completely without blame. He also said that Mantz had told him that no one should remain in the church except those who knew that they were without sin.¹² While it might be incorrect to call the Swiss Anabaptists strict “perfectionists,” nevertheless they were certainly intent on establishing a truly sanctified church. They wanted only true Christian saints in their congregations and saw lapses into sin not as evidence of the ongoing struggle with the unholy three, but as proof of unbelief.

Luther, on the other hand, saw the paradox of Christian life as evidence of man’s incapacity to save himself. God is at work in His children in a manner so marvelous that He actually saves them amid contradictory and dissimilar conditions for, though hope and despair are opposed to each other, Christians must hope while despairing. Fear is nothing but the beginning of despair, and hope is the beginning of certainty.

These two, so opposite in their nature, must be in us because two beings, opposite in their nature, are in us — the old and the new man. The old one must fear and despair and perish; the new one must hope and stand and be exalted. Both of these dwell in the same person, and are at work at the same time in one act. A carver furthers the form of his image by removing and chiseling away the wood that should not remain on it. This hope, which forms the new man, is revealed as the Old Adam is chiseled away.¹³

After the Holy Spirit works through the Word to place faith in the heart, the New Man, created to be like Christ in true righteousness and holiness, stands ready to daily battle with the Old Adam. Whereas we were formerly enemies of God prior to justification, now the New Man enables us to do God-pleasing works and to walk unashamedly in the Gospel's light. This is the beginning of sanctification, and ongoing process in the life of a true Christian.

True Christianity consists in the exhibition of a true, living faith, active in genuine godliness and the fruits of righteousness. We bear the name of Christ not only because we ought to believe in and hold dear the correct doctrines about Him, but also because we are to live in Christ and He in us. The Word of God must daily produce in us new spiritual fruits. If we have become new creatures by faith, we must live in accordance with the new birth. In a nutshell, Adam must die and Christ must live in us. It is not enough to only know the right teachings, but they must be held close the heart and should produce a living, active faith.¹⁴

Whoever seeks after true Christianity must bear in mind the words of John 12:24-26. In these verses we are told to hate our life in this sinful world and work for the eternal life that results from being a servant of Christ. And what does it mean to serve Christ? In verse twenty-six, Jesus tells us, "If any man serves me, he must follow me." A true servant of Christ must be Christ's follower. Remember that this section of Scripture was near and dear to the hearts of the Swiss Brethren. They sought to carry out its injunction to serve Christ by following in His footsteps as nearly as they could. Their zeal and their sense of mission in accomplishing this stands as a good example for others.

We, also, should be more than willing to pattern our lives after Christ and to mirror His humility, meekness, patience, suffering, shame, and contempt, even if our flesh feels pain because of it. Paul, who was in jail when he wrote these words, urges us to do this in Philippians 2:1-10:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interest, but also the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

The Swiss Brethren saw believers as “Christians of the Cross.” Suffering was the surest path to salvation. Dr. Hubmaier inveighed against an effortless habitual Christianity which threatened to creep in and which routinized believer’s baptism. He had a concept of a Christianity which suffered at the hands of the world, but which was nevertheless responsible for that world.¹⁵ Christians are to imitate Christ’s life of service and suffering. Menno Simons, writing in his Book of Fundamentals in 1539, said that “true faith causes man to walk in the ways of Christ. This is a divine ordinance which marks the spiritual rebirth of a Christian.”¹⁶

The early Anabaptists were quite interested in the practical applications of Biblical teachings to life in this world. Grebel's views concerning the Christian's attitude toward the world grew out of his conception of the suffering church. He and his followers attempted to carry out in detail the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁷

In pursuit of this noble goal, the Swiss Anabaptists were, at times, guilty of excesses which once again betrayed their misunderstanding of the Christian's dual nature. A contemporary criticized Grebel and other Anabaptist leaders whose natures were allegedly "scrupulously peevish and peevishly scrupulous."¹⁸ They tended to a legalistic righteousness which made of the Gospel another Law. The Sermon on the Mount became a testing ground whereby the real Christians would establish their purity.

In 1532, Vadian, teacher, friend, and brother-in-law of Grebel, critiqued the Anabaptists, speaking of the "terrible raging and raving of the Anabaptists which originated with some unruly persons in the city of Zurich... They alone were holy and blameless, like the Donatists of Africa during St. Augustine's time. No church but theirs was the body of Christ; no faith but theirs was the justification of Christ... they alone were sinless..."¹⁹

Luther, in Table Talk, is reported to have said:

The Anabaptists who talk so volubly about their being angels of God sent to purge the world... are incendiaries, for they kill themselves and confess nothing... that is the peculiarity of all heretics, to believe that they have the spirit of God, and to know nothing of original sin. They think themselves saints. In myself, however, I find no sanctity, but rather great weakness. Hardly have I begun to be tempted when I recognize the spirit, but the flesh fights against it. Idolatry is an offense against the first commandment; I should like very much to feel myself formally justified, but I cannot find it in me. ²⁰

This is a point which we have touched on before, but bears repeating. True Christianity rests on what God has done for us and on what He enables us to do subsequent to conversion. It is not dependent on human emotion or effort.

CONFLICTING VIEWS OF TRUE CHRISTIANITY

LUTHERANS

Man is
by nature
an enemy
of God.

ORIGINAL SIN

*Spirit works through
the Gospel in
Word and Sacrament
to achieve...*

God chooses man.

*JUSTIFICATION
"Christ for us."*

Man now has
Old Adam and
New Man.
Faith-life results
from justification.

*SANCTIFICATION
"Christ in us."*

SWISS BRETHERN

Man is morally
neutral, but with
inclination to sin.

INCLINATION

*Man "proves" his
Christianity by a pure, moral,
outward conduct apart from the
Gospel in Word and Sacraments.*

Man chooses God.

*SANCTIFICATION
"Christ in us."*

God seals the covenant
through...the baptism
of fire and blood.

*JUSTIFICATION
"Christ for us."*

A pious Christian is nevertheless flesh and blood as other people are. But he battles with sin and evil lust and feels what he does not like to feel (Romans 7: 15ff); but the others are not interested and do not battle with sin and evil lust at all. To feel evil lust is of no consequence as long as one fights against it. That is why a person must not judge according to his feeling, as though he were saved or lost because of it. Rather he should work throughout his life against the sin which remains and which he feels. He should let the Holy Spirit work and should sigh without ceasing that he would like to be rid of this sin. Indeed, this sighing never ceases in believers and goes deeper than can be expressed, as St. Paul says to the Romans (8:26). But it has a precious listener, the Holy Spirit Himself. He feels this longing and comforts such a conscience.²¹

So these two must always be mixed: that one feels both the Holy Spirit and our sin, or imperfection. For we must be like a sick person who is indeed in the hands of a physician and should now improve. It is only the pardoning grace of God that makes the sin still inherent in the Christian harmless to him so far as eternal life and salvation are concerned. A Christian is not a perfect, but a pardoned person. ²²

In summary, then, a true Christian has and believes the Gospel. This faith brings remission of sins and the grace of God. But it is not received except by the Holy Spirit. In this world, faith is plagued and afflicted, but the Holy Spirit strengthens it. You are not called a true Christian from what you do, but because you have Christ. Luther simply said, "Christians are people who believe in the forgiveness of sins. If, then, you believe in Christ, if you love His Word and embrace it by faith, you are a true Christian." ²³

It really is that simple. The search has an end when we stop casting here and there for something more. Christ has provided all that we will ever need. True Christianity is realized when God grants a person grace to come to Christ, His Son, to be baptized in His name, to hear His Word, and to accept Christ by faith.

Luther said that the Christian life consists in these two things: in faith and then in good works; that after coming to faith a person should be pious and lead a visibly good life. Most depends on the first part, on faith, and the second is not at all equal to the first in importance.²⁴ The creeds will determine the deeds and not the other way around as the Swiss Brethren seemed to desire. Every deed of a man should be an outflow of his creed. Christian faith and life should agree. God grant us all to live as we teach and to practice what we preach.²⁵

To realize our misery and helplessness on account of the inherited abomination of original sin, to refuse to place any trust in our merit or worthiness in working out our salvation, to see our wretched condition in the law's mirror and through the Holy Spirit's working through the Gospel in Word and sacrament receive salvation and strengthening for our weary soul, to recognize that this is a gift of grace to which we owe God alone the praise, to then live in Christ and for Christ and to produce fruits in keeping with repentance, to conduct ourselves in such a way that brings God honor – this is the Christian life.

May God enlighten us all by His Holy Spirit, so that we may be pure and without blemish, in doctrine and in the life that doctrine produces, so that when our Lord Jesus Christ should call us home we may inherit the crown of eternal life and thrill to experience the perfect truth of standing in God's glory.

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