

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN? Commission on Faith & Witness, February 28, 2011

### **Paul Ladouceur (Orthodox Church in America)**

The reason for being a Christian is Christ. Father Alexander Men, a remarkable Russian priest assassinated in 1990, says that “one thing alone proves the uniqueness of Christianity, namely, Jesus Christ”. Whereas every great world religion is a path towards God, “a vector pointing upwards from below”, Christ is “a vector coming from heaven towards us”: God incarnate in human flesh coming to demonstrate divine love for humans and to invite humans to respond with their freely given love, to work towards and ultimately to achieve union with him (theosis). The Fathers from Irenaeus onwards summarised this notion in a few words: “God became man in order that man might become God”. Jesus is “the Way and the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6). Jesus shows us that he is indeed the Way through his teachings in the New Testament, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), especially the Beatitudes, teachings full of wisdom and compassion and light and love. Jesus is the Truth because he reveals the Holy Trinity: “Who has seen me has seen the Father... I will send the Paraclete to you...” (Jn 14:9; 16:7). Jesus is the Life because “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). In the words of Father Alexander Men: “This is why Christianity is unique, because Christ is unique.”

Quotations from Alexander Men, *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century: The Prophetic Writings of Alexander Men* (Continuum, 1996).

### **Alexander Melnyk & Ihor G. Kutash (Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada)**

Christianity is a Faith for which reason and history are important and not just transient blips in the cosmos. The Divine Liturgy speaks of the "reasonable flock". This is an important point because there are Faiths (i.e. Islam) where reason and the orderliness of the universe through laws are seen as an infringement on the sovereignty of God.

Christianity deals with the central issue of mankind - death. It deals with this, not through mere speculation, but in an existential manner by tackling death and bridging the divide that has existed between the created and uncreated. Man hangs over the "nothing" from which creation has come into being - and death is the inevitable "fruit" of this. Christ has changed this curse of nothingness into a path to life without end. This vision is unique among all the Faiths.

Christianity respects and nurtures freedom because this is an important aspect of the image of God.

In many Faiths the unique, the personal, is swallowed up by the general and impersonal. In Christianity, we know God as Trinity, as perfect Unity in Diversity. Thus, the personal, the unique, is seen as of eternal importance, fundamental to the very Being of God. The same is thus true of His creation, especially with reference to humans. This is underlined by the Resurrection.

It is through membership in the Church that the faithful assimilate the gift of a new existence which defies mortality. This membership comes through baptism and is consolidated through a life of worship and prayer.

### **Gilles Mongeau, S.J. (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops)**

God's deepest desire for us has always been to include us in the very life of love that binds Father, Son and Spirit. In the midst of sin, violence and death, this love takes the form of patient and faithful labours to reconcile us to him, to one another and to all creation. In the world of sin and violence, we are always already caught up in – infested by – patterns of envy and pride, and our relationships with one another, with God and with creation are disordered and inevitably lead

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to personal moral impotence, social injustice, cultural decline and isolation from God. God's faithful labours to liberate us climax in the incarnation, life, passion death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of God.

The Cross is the climax of a life totally offered to the Father, and is thus best understood as Christ making of his unjust execution by the Roman and Jewish power an offering of himself to God out of love for the Father and for us. This love, which a small minority witnesses, is a "counter-infection" that touches them and evokes in them friendship with God. This renewed friendship with the Father in Christ by the Spirit transforms them: it establishes right relationship with God, self, others and creation (justification); it constitutes a new people, a small community in history living justly together; it provides new cultural meanings that bind that community and ground their common living; it also provides practices and sacraments that not only heal and reconcile, but elevate them (as pure gift) to a communion with God they could not otherwise achieve.

This community exists by the Spirit as the Body of Christ, not for itself, but to bear witness to God's desire and labours to bring all creation back to communion, to give praise to God for Christ's victory over sin and the power of death. One is not a Christian in order to be saved. One is saved by God, receives the gift of knowing this in Christ by the Spirit, and so one becomes a servant of Christ's mission to redeem all of creation for the Father.

Why be a Christian? To bear witness to the communion with God that God has made possible in Christ, through the reconciling power of the Gospel and the Cross, confirmed by the Father at Easter and claiming all of history through the life-giving power of the Spirit.

### **Arnold Neufeldt-Fast (Mennonite Church Canada)**

Christians point to an invitation from a God who creates, sustains, and redeems his creation. It is an invitation for a relationship with a God who reveals himself as personal and loving. Christians over generations have confessed: "Our hearts are not at rest until they rest in you." Christians have discovered that true peace and joy is only found in relation with the God who wants us to live at peace with him, our world and one another.

The invitation is also to become a follower of the one scripture identifies as God's own self-revelation, Jesus Christ. Christ confronted the powers that fracture our world and has overcome them with suffering love. He is ushering in a new heaven and new earth, and invites us to follow him and to work with "the grain of the universe." This includes a commitment to overcome societal divisions (race, nation, gender), to watch and care for each other, especially the poor and needy, and to learn to love war no more.

It is an invitation into Christ's new community and new politics, to self-identify as "resident aliens" for the sake of this world which God loves. There is a cost: God's invitation disturbs the configuration of our beliefs, primary loyalties, and behaviour, and calls for repentance and transformation. But with that comes the gift: God's own personal presence, his Holy Spirit, who helps us to live into this invitation in obedience and service, to liberate us from the compulsions that disfigure us and our society, and to open the door to the joy of God's reign, eternally.

### **Tim Purvis (Presbyterian Church in Canada)**

Why be a Christian? Because God has, in an ultimate grace-filled act of self-disclosure Jesus Christ, revealed the divine nature to be one of self-giving, suffering, non-violent, transformative

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love; and to respond to that divine revelation in faith by living a Christ-like life of prayer and love in action is to know one's truest, best, and most authentic self in God.

### Richard Schneider (Orthodox Church of America)

The Orthodox answer to this searching question requires 25,000 words – or else 28: “One is a Christ(ian) because Christ is in the world; there is no other way to be. One sees the world through Christian eyes, because Christ – Christ crucified, Christ risen [I Cor 1:23, 15:14 and the Paschal troparion] -- is All-in-all.”

Blessed be God, Who has revealed Himself to us [liturgies and office, *passim*, cf. John 12:45].

All the rest is *praxis* – *theoria* and *techne*. The whole of any Christian life – including Orthodox Christian life – is a search for a hermeneutic that will reveal, unfold, announce the Truth of the 28 words.

The whole of the Christian life is spent on the Road to Emmaus. But we are never hopelessly in the dark, for Christ is in the world.

Reveal, unfold, announce – both to those “inside” the church (the Body of Christ) and also to those “outside” the Church (the true Body of Christ) – and by so revealing call life to conversion/convergence, *theosis*, i.e., increasing recognition that Christ is our face in the mirror. Conversion to Christian *theoria* [John 14:7 *et passim*] is to recognize the All-in-all in past-present-future; it is to live in the *eschaton* – to put on Christ [Romans 6:3-4 and the troparion: “As many as are baptized into Christ have put on Christ] – today [Psalm 117/118:24].

Conversion is confession, and that, too is *theoria*, seeing oneself clearly in the light of Christ, recognizing that we are the Pharisee when we should be the Publican, that we are the Prodigal Son [first two lectionary Sundays at the start of the *Triodion* of Great Lent].

The *techne* of being a Christian in our living-in-the-world is simply constant striving, with God's grace, to turn the Insights [Bernard Lonergan] granted by our increasingly *theoria*-seeing eyes into the quotidian realities of our *praxis*. Christian life in all of its aspects – liturgical, charitable, *oekonomic* – is really applied *theoria*, trying to figure forth Christ-in-ourselves [Gen 1:26-27, Coloss 1:15, *et passim*] to reveal, unfold, announce that besides Christ there is no other way to be, that our face in the mirror – that every face in the mirror -- is Christ, that *theosis* has re-painted us [Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*] as the *eikon* of God.

Why be a Christian? is, for the Orthodox, not a question – it is a fact of life, THE only fact of life; all else is a derivative. The real question is HOW. How can I always recognize the *theorein* through which the eyes of my body see through the enlightened eyes of my heart [Eph 1:18]? And hence, the next question is how should I pray, and what is my prayer? And hence, how should I love? And such real, existential questions about being the Christian that I MUST be – there is no other way – enable me to cope with the Christian life, and even in the dark woods of the Road to Emmaus, God's mercy [Psalm 50/51: 1 *et passim*] will open my lips [*idem* vs. 15] and I can reveal, unfold, announce, to the entirety of the true Body of Christ, that God is love [1 John 4:7-12 and ff.].

What validity the Orthodox Church claims in teaching “Being a Christian” in the world derives from the Tradition, the “Handing-On” [*tradition, paradosis*] of Christ's commission to be apostles [Matthew 28:18-19], to be witnesses [*martyres* Acts 2: 32] and to love one another [John 15:9-12]. What validity the Orthodox Church claims as the voice of the eschatological

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Truth of “Being a Christian” will be known by its fruits in the fulfillment of this commission [John 15:16, the gospel text seen in many Pantokrator icons].

O God, teach me Thy statutes [Psalm 118/119:48 and The All-Night Vigil *passim*].

### **Kevin Smith (Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec)**

One of the major reasons for becoming a Christian is to enjoy fellowship with God. 1 John 1 declares that fellowship with God is a distinct possibility for the Christian if we are prepared to be obedient to God. It flows out of atoning death of Christ for our sins which leads to purification. This fellowship is with our triune God. As such, it involves fellowship with God the Father (1 John 1:3), with God the Son (John 15:3-4; 1 Corinthians 1:9), and with God the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1).

The question that then may be asked is "How can anyone cultivate this fellowship with God?" The answer is that we can cultivate this relationship by desiring it (Psalm 42:1; 63:1); by believing in Jesus, God's Son (1 John 1:2-3); by meditating on God's word (Psalm 1:2; Psalm 119:10-15; 2 Peter 1:4); by praying to God (Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16); by thinking wholesome thoughts (Philippians 4:8-9); by living a holy life (Psalm 15:1-5, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18); and by participating in the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 10:16, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Another reason for becoming a Christian is so that we can experience peace with God. This peace is declared in both the Old and New Testaments (Numbers 6:26; Isaiah 26:3; Romans 5:1; Philippians 4:7-9; and Colossians 1:20). Jesus, God's Son epitomizes this peace. Isaiah 9:6 prophesies a coming Prince of Peace. Indeed, peace is proclaimed at His birth (Luke 2:14). It is promised to His disciples (John 14:27; 16:33). Peace is achieved on the cross (Isaiah 53:5; Colossians 1:20). Indeed, Jesus is our peace (Ephesians 2:14) and establishes peace within the church (Ephesians 2:15).

A third reason for becoming a Christian is so that we can experience eternal life. We receive eternal life by believing in Jesus (John 3:15-16) and trusting in Him (John 14:1-3). Indeed, it is a gift from Jesus (John 5:40; 10:28). Various metaphors are used to describe this. We may drink of Jesus as the water of life (John 4:13-14), eat of Jesus as the bread of life, and eat of the tree of life (Revelation 2:7). We may receive eternal life by dying with Christ (2 Timothy 2:11) and by pleasing the Spirit (Galatians 6:8).

While eternal life can be experienced now (John 3:36 and 5:24), there is a sense in which it is still in the future. We have been promised it if we have received Christ (1 Timothy 4:8) and therefore have hope of it (Titus 1:2; 3:7). It is our inheritance (Matthew 19:29). Indeed, we will reap it (Galatians 6:8). We will rise again to receive it (John 5:28-29). Jesus will bring it to us (Jude 21) and we will receive it as a crown (1 Peter 5:4). As a result, we will reign in it (Romans 5:17).

### **Robert Steffer (Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada)**

The level of participation in the worldwide body/community of Christ determines her current vitality and effectiveness in intervening to encounter the forces of evil. As a corollary, it is confession of societal and individual sins which brings a continuing reminder that God only forgives and grants salvation to the world. The freeing power of Jesus Christ, “the hope of the world,” is offered to believers and received as a bonded trust through Word and Sacrament.

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Christians identify with the personal encounters Jesus had with individuals and corporately, as told in powerfully written scripture texts. We today have the very same relational problems. Disparities between good and evil are abundant. Rich countries and individuals remain intransigently able to provide armaments and far less able to help meet basic needs of humanity. Being Christian means speaking truth to power, acting with passion from a solid base to 'go forth' with others locally and globally.

For the Disciples of Christ, mission and witness are not strangers, though the church continues to suffer in persecution and/or from indifference. We seem to function weakly in many places these days. We mourn the loss of our moral once influence and denominational empire-building schemes, hang on tenaciously to beloved edifices and bureaucracies, resisting considering potentially effective mergers with neighbours of similar mind. That said, sometimes a weak-looking congregation has inner strength and serves, often against great odds, as a staging ground for God's future drama where 'all things are made new'.

### Margaret Trapnell (United Church of Canada)

This is a question that has been asked a number of times in different settings where I have recently been. At this time when so many in society and in the church are questioning what they believe and how, it becomes important to be able to answer clearly, why be a Christian.

For me, it has to do with that indefinable "more", to be able to rely on something outside myself that can strengthen my spirit and help me get from one day to the next. I believe in community and what a community can do when working together but to have the added depth of the spirit found in God in Jesus Christ makes it possible to do more than what we thought we were able to do.

The other answer for me is hope; hope for an unseen future, hope for loved ones whom I put into God's care, hope in all the promises given by God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus our Christ. To be a Christian is to live a life that belongs to something/someone else; to hold to values that seem to contradict today's society and to live with the knowledge of a God who really does care and who offers us life in all of its holy abundance.

### Fr. Pishoy Wasfy (Coptic Orthodox Church)

**To be a Christian** is to be **reconciled** to God (2 Corinthians 5:18 – **All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation**) (2 Corinthians 5:20 – **We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though** God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.)

**To be a Christian** is to be **united** with Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour (1 Corinthians 6:17 – But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.)

### Why Be A Christian?

Because, it is the God-willed, God-announced and God-enabled human response to God's address to humanity. God is calling every human to be –through Christ Jesus- reconciled to Him. In this unity and reconciliation, the Christian enjoys:

- **Inner Peace:** Christianity gives inner peace to those who are close to God. Peace that is born out of being saved.
- **God-Man Relationship:** In Christianity, God is not like any other god. He is not our Master, but He is our Father and wants us to be His children. This relation between God and man

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is unique to Christianity.

- **Sacrificial Love:** In no other religion will you find God loving His people to the point of giving His Only Begotten Son; "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).
- **Loving Others:** Although most religions invite their followers to love one another; Christianity is the only religion that invites her children not only to love one another; but also to love their enemies as themselves.
- **Forgiveness:** If loving others is easy, forgiving others is definitely not that easy. Christianity is the religion of forgiveness. We ask God every time we recite the Lord's Prayer; we ask God to forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us. Our Lord Jesus Christ gave us the ultimate example of forgiveness when, on the Cross, He asked the Father to forgive those who were about to crucify Him.