

# Perspective Digest

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Volume 9 | Number 3

Article 2

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7-1-2004

## Is Christianity Christian? (The President's Page)

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### Recommended Citation

Zinke, Ed (2004) "Is Christianity Christian? (The President's Page)," *Perspective Digest*. Vol. 9 : No. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol9/iss3/2>

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Ed Zinke\*

**I**n the fifth century, Simeon Stylites became a dedicated Christian. Upon his conversion from paganism, he determined to understand Christianity's very essence, so that he could devote his life to it. Having sold his large inherited estate and set aside enough of the proceeds to sustain his sister, he donated the remainder to the church and committed his life to monasticism.

Withdrawing in seclusion to a cave near his native village, he sought peace of heart in meditation. As his lonely quest became known, disciples gathered, and nearby villagers crowded close to the pious monk. In order to escape the world, he moved farther into the wilderness, where he built a tower upon which to live. Determined to share his piety, his disciples erected towers around him. He responded by constructing even higher towers. According to tradition, he lived out his life on a 60-footer—sufficient, he felt, to separate himself from the world and allow uninterrupted

## IS CHRISTIANITY CHRISTIAN?

meditation.

Did Simeon reflect the essence of Christianity? What lies at its core? What *is* Christianity?

People understand Christianity in many different ways. For some, it is a legalistic religion. Obey the laws, and you are a Christian. Keep the commandments, pay tithe (add a few extra cents for safety's sake), attend church, eat right—that's what makes Christianity Christian. Others regard Christianity as a knowledge religion. If you know that the seventh day is the Sabbath, and that it must be observed from sundown to sundown; if you know that the dead are not conscious, and that the investigative judgment started in heaven in 1844; and if you know that Christ will return soon in a literal, visible manner, then you have

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*\*Dr. Ed Zinke is a past president and treasurer of the Adventist Theological Society. He is "pinch hitting" The President's Page while ATS President Jiri Moskala is on an overseas assignment.*

achieved Christianity.

Others would see the essence of Christianity in socially correct living—giving to the poor, establishing schools, caring for the homeless, and healing the sick. And some would agree with Simeon Stylites that meditation best sums up Christianity.

These approaches demonstrate how far humanity will go in its attempt to find Christianity. Further, they illustrate how hard we will work, think, give, or meditate to make ourselves presentable to God, and thus achieve our salvation. If we can only find the right thing to do, than we can be saved and will be ready for the Second Coming.

Paul expresses concern about religion based upon human effort. In Romans 1, he reviews the status of the Gentiles who have founded their religion on human activity. The result of their human endeavor, he points out, was worship of the creature instead of the Creator. In Romans 2, Paul discussed the Jews. Despite possessing special revelation from God, they also sought salvation by works. Finally, in chapter 3, Paul concludes that all have sinned (both Gentile and Jews) and come short of God's glory (Rom. 3:8, 23). Therefore, the deeds of the law will justify no one (Rom. 2:8-18, 23).

Paul has similar concerns for religions based upon wisdom and knowledge. God will destroy the wisdom of even the wisest, for we can-

not come to know God through human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:19-25). Instead of affirming a knowledge-based approach to religion, Paul prays that all will instead experience the love of God that surpasses all other knowledge (Eph. 3:19).

Christianity is not a ladder that we may use to climb to God or a checklist of do's and don'ts on how to live. Neither can we reduce it to mediation or a list of doctrines. It is not a human philosophy at all.

### The Essence of Christianity

Christ himself summarized the essence of Christianity for us. "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3, NKJV). The sum and substance of Christianity is to come to a knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. The word *knowledge* here does not refer to facts and figures, such as the distance between two cities or the substances required to produce soap or the specific parts needed to repair a car. Rather, it involves the kind of knowledge that leads to a personal relationship. The goal of salvation is to enter a full, rewarding, and mature fellowship with God and Jesus Christ.

God created us for communion with himself. The very first evening after human creation God spent in the garden in fellowship with Adam and Eve. He made us in his image be-

cause only thus can we have fellowship with him. When our character is in harmony with that of God, we can relate to him with no human barrier between. The Lord desires such close fellowship with us that his book often uses the imagery of marriage to describe it: "I am married to you," God declares (Jer. 3:14, NKJV).

When we are married to the Lord, we "shall know the Lord" (Hosea 2:20, NKJV). We shall enter a personal relationship with him who is the real substance of Christianity. As Christ said, to know God is life eternal (John 17:3). Because of sin, we are, by ourselves, helpless and hopeless. We cannot come to God and say, "Let's be friends and forget the past. Let's build upon our mutual strengths and enjoy each other fellowship." Nothing within our-

selves can commend us to God.

The wonderful truth is that even when we were sinners—in fact, his enemies—he reached down to us through his one Son, Jesus Christ, in order to reconcile us to himself. God gave himself to us in Jesus Christ so that we could once again fellowship with him (Rom. 5:8-11; 1 Cor. 1:9).

Christianity is simply accepting God's gracious order, and in faith, acknowledging ourselves to be his children. We can do nothing, *absolutely nothing*, to commend ourselves to divine favor. We must not trust at all in ourselves nor to our good works" (*Selected Messages*, Book 1, pp. 353, 354, italics supplied). Rather, let us find fellowship in him who alone is the essence of Christianity.

## T H E O L O G Y   D I A G N O S E D

**T**heology is an affliction that robs a pastor of time to do the Lord's work. And only those truly "active" in his work receive Heaven's approval, says a critic.

A wise woman didn't seem to think so:

"Thousands of men who minister in the pulpit are lacking in the essential qualities of mind and character because they do not apply themselves to the study of the Scriptures. They are content with a superficial knowledge of God's word, and they prefer to go on losing much in every way rather than to search diligently for the hidden treasure."—*Gospel Workers*, pp. 249, 250.