

The Christian's World

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BASIC CHRISTIANITY SERIES

BRIDGEWAY

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The home

Living for each other

The world of humankind is such that people of all kinds have to exist together, and to some extent depend on each other, to maintain human life. Christians share in this world the same as others, but for them there is a difference. For them there is a living God, and that God is concerned with every area of life. In other words, the Christians' faith in God affects the way they live. Their relationship with God governs all other relationships.

Probably the most basic of all human relationships is that between a man and a woman, because without it human life could not be perpetuated. But the Christian view of this relationship involves more than mere sexual relations for the purpose of producing offspring. Sex is only one part of a total relationship where a man and a woman marry and commit themselves to each other for life.

The perfect marriage

From the beginning, God's ideal for marriage has been that one man and one woman live together, independent of parents, in a union that is broken only by death. God intends people to have and to enjoy sexual relations, but only as part of this total marriage relationship. He does not approve of sexual relations before marriage or with any person other than one's marriage partner.

Not only is marriage more than a sexual union, but it is also more than a cultural custom or legal arrangement. It is an unselfish giving of each to the other in a lasting relationship, to the exclusion of all others. Divorce is therefore not part of God's plan; nor is remarriage, except when the former marriage has ended through the death of either husband or wife.

Another characteristic of marriage as God intended it is equality between the sexes. The man and the woman may fulfil different roles, but there is no difference in status or dignity.

The physical, psychological and emotional differences between male and female mean that each partner is equipped to do what the other cannot do. The two complement each other so that between them they form a unit. The exclusively male characteristics of the husband mean that he starts the process that produces children, and perhaps that is why he carries the ultimate responsibility for the family. The exclusively female characteristics of the wife enable her to bear children, and perhaps that is why she carries special responsibility for the children's care. Husband and wife fulfil their roles and exercise their responsibilities in a relationship of freedom, equality, love and mutual respect.

Christian love

Christians, more than others, should try to live the way God intended people to live. Being part of an imperfect world, they can expect occasional disagreements with their marriage partner, but their new life in Christ should give them an attitude towards marriage that is different from that of other people.

One characteristic of the Christian life is loving self-sacrifice. Christian love means pleasing the other person rather than oneself. All Christians, husbands and wives included, are to love each other, submit to each other and give themselves for the sake of each other. 'Submit yourselves to one another . . . Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord . . . Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it' (Ephesians 5:21-25). When Christian husbands and wives live together in this kind of relationship, where each is willing to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of the other, they will find that their life together is enriched.

Since their relationship with God governs all their other relationships, Christians are warned not to marry those who do

not share their faith in Christ. However, where one partner of a non-Christian married couple later becomes a Christian, the marriage should be maintained. In such a case, the Christian partner in particular should do everything possible to help the marriage function harmoniously.

Although the Bible condemns sexual relations outside marriage, it encourages a healthy and full-blooded enjoyment of sex within marriage. It recognizes human sexuality as one of God's gifts, and, like all God's gifts, it can be properly used or it can be shamefully abused. Prostitution and homosexual practices are therefore condemned in the Bible as perversions.

Family life

In his concern for the continued existence and welfare of the human race, God desires more than simply that men and women should produce children. People do not exist in isolation, but as part of a vast society, and they are fitted for their part in that society by being brought up in families. Stability, love and co-operation in the family will help produce similar characteristics in society as a whole.

God has fashioned human nature in such a way that people naturally accept and exercise authority as part of the ordering of human life. He has, for example, given parents authority over their children, and requires children to obey their parents, simply 'because it is right' (Ephesians 6:1). This does not give parents the liberty to treat their children as they wish, for parents in turn are answerable to God for their behaviour. 'Parents, do not treat your children in a way that provokes them to anger. Instead, bring them up with Christian discipline and instruction' (Ephesians 6:4).

Christian parents cannot avoid their responsibility to instruct their children in Christian belief and behaviour by hoping that the children will learn such things at school or church. They have a duty to teach their children, but they will never be able to do this if they are ill-informed themselves.

Parents must support their teaching by example. They will do more harm than good if they do not practise in the home the ideals they teach their children. Parents must teach and practise the sacrifice of one's own interests for the sake of others, so that the family is a place where people learn how to love others, forgive others, honour others and serve others.

As parents and children pray together, talk together, have leisure time together, do work together and examine God's Word together, they will understand each other better and trust each other more. In addition, they will find new confidence in the midst of a world of uncertainty. This training, however, starts not when children begin school, nor when they reach their teens; it starts in infancy and it starts in the home. Whatever children may be educated for at school, the training that equips them for life in general is the responsibility of the home.

Just as parents are not to leave the training of their children to the state, so those children, when they grow to adulthood, are not to leave the care of elderly parents to the state. Christians cannot use government welfare programs as a way of ignoring their family and social responsibilities.

Facing reality

In every era and every culture, the breakdown of family life has resulted in widespread social disorder. If people reject what they consider restrictions in matters of marriage, sex, discipline and obedience, the result is not freedom, but chaos. Instead of peace there is conflict; instead of contentment there is tension and dissatisfaction. Trouble is inevitable when people refuse to follow the guidelines that God has laid down. After all, the Creator knows what is best for his creatures.

God's plan for marital and family life is not a mere theoretical ideal. It is both workable and attainable. That does not mean that people are to expect perfection, but it does mean that if they are obedient to God they can expect to find in life the meaning and satisfaction that God intended.

Nevertheless, disorders arise in marriages and families, and at times become so complicated that there is no simple way to correct them. There are no clear-cut solutions to many problems. No matter what is done, some principle or ideal will be broken somewhere. The right course of action may involve choosing the lesser of two evils.

Christians must be people of understanding and discernment as well as people of principle. God's standards do not change, and Christians must be like Jesus in upholding those standards when others want to destroy them. But they must also be like Jesus in giving help and support to those who, having broken God's law, are later repentant. Christian morality and Christian love go together.

The church

A living community

God is concerned for the individual and he deals with people personally. He offers his salvation to all, though it is of benefit only to those who accept it personally. But when people accept it, God does not leave them to live independently as if personal security is all that matters. He builds them into a community of people to whom he has given new life through Jesus Christ. Because all these people are united to Christ, they are also united to one another, no matter what era they belong to or what racial background they come from. This vast international community is called the church.

The Bible uses a number of illustrations to show what sort of community the church is. These illustrations emphasize that the church is something living and active, but only because of its union with the living Christ. It is best understood by comparing it not to a political, business or academic organization, but to a family. Christ is the head, and the people in it are brothers and sisters. It is held together not by organizational mechanisms, but by the common life in which all share. Its strength depends not on rules and regulations, but on love.

Families, however, often fall short of the ideal, and so does the church. As long as Christians are part of a world spoiled by sin, they will contribute to the problems of any community they are part of, including the church. There will at times be friction in the church, as there is in any family, though people should be willing to admit mistakes and put right what goes wrong.

Part of something bigger

People can easily become discouraged because of the imperfections they see in the church, and so try to live as Christians

apart from the church. But it is not possible to reject the church and still live the sort of life God wants. The church is not a club of like-minded people, but a community formed by God and formed for a purpose. God has a plan to remove all evil and conflict from the universe, and in the end bring perfection, peace and unity through Jesus Christ. The church is part of that plan.

Ever since the first humans rebelled against him, God has been working in human history, directing it towards its ultimate destiny. In Old Testament times he formed a community of his own people, Israel, which in due course produced the saviour of the world. Some of this old community accepted the saviour, and from them God built a new community, the church, through which he has continued to work.

The significance of this new community, in contrast to the old, is that Christ, having died, is now alive and working through it. The church is likened to a living human body, where Christ is the head and Christians make up the rest of the body. All Christians are united with Christ and are, by that fact, united with one another in the church. They are all part of the body, and therefore in a sense part of each other. Christ lives in them as individuals and in the church as a body. He does so through the Holy Spirit, whom he gave as his representative to his people after he left the world and returned to his Father.

All Christians of all nations in all eras make up the universal church. Those who live in any locality are a local expression of that church – a miniature of the timeless, worldwide church. All Christians (to return to the illustration of a human body) are part of the body of Christ, and they function properly as Christians only as they function as part of that body. Through the church they help in developing God's plan for the human race, and at the same time help in developing themselves as people.

Growth and strength

This concern for development, or growth, is one reason why Christians should be enthusiastic about participating fully in the

life of the church. One of the greatest of the early church leaders, Paul, emphasized this by referring again to the illustration of the human body. Just as different parts of the body are designed for different functions, so different people in the church are fitted by the Holy Spirit for different tasks. Each person should make some contribution to the life of the church, and in doing so will benefit both himself and the church.

Some, perhaps only a few in each church, are fitted for roles of teaching and leadership, but their job is not to do everything. On the contrary they have a responsibility 'to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service'. Then, as people learn through the church how to work for God and live for each other, they will 'become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature'. They will 'grow up in every way to Christ, who is the head. Under his control, all the different parts of the body fit together, and the whole body is held together . . . So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love' (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Freedom under Christ

The Christian church is remarkable for its ability to function in any age and any culture. This is partly because the Bible, the book from which the church takes its guidance, is not a book of rules and regulations. It does not give instruction concerning all the practical details. If it did, the day-to-day procedures would be so tied to the world of the first century that they would be unsuitable in another age or culture.

Instead, the Bible tells a story. It first describes how churches grew up everywhere as the early Christians spread the good news about Jesus. Then it goes on to record certain letters written to churches that needed instruction along the way.

There was no standard pattern on which the early churches were organized. They met in any ready-made place available, and they functioned by making whatever arrangements were necessary as needs arose. Churches differed in their composition

and style, though all held to the same basic beliefs and practices. In all churches, for example, Christians met regularly to worship, pray, sing praises, read the Scriptures and receive instruction in Christian teaching. They also went out to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ so that others too might believe.

Not only did the early churches have no set form for local operations, but they had no central organization to control all the churches or hold them together in one body. Each church governed itself through its leaders, though it had fellowship with other churches. The churches were bound together through the common faith that Christians had in Jesus Christ. Christ was the head of the church, the life of the body, and the source of the church's unity and strength.

Since the church is something with life – a body, a family – it is able to adapt. The Spirit of the living Christ lives within it to guide and direct. He enables present-day churches, in whatever country, to work out the application of timeless principles in their circumstances, as the early churches did in theirs.

Life in the church

The church's life consists of more than the regular meeting of Christians. Certainly, they will want to spend time together, formally and informally, as a church and in small groups. This is part of the church's life. But the church must be concerned with more than the well-being of those within it. It must be concerned for those who do not yet share its life in Christ.

This means that the church should be energetic in making known the message of God's salvation and in helping those who are the victims of sickness, loneliness, injustice, hunger and other misfortunes, whether small or great. It has a responsibility to the people in its locality and to people in distant nations.

However, the church will be effective in reaching out to others only if its own relationship with God is healthy. Prayer, teaching and worship are therefore essential to the church's life. God is the source of the church's power, and the church draws

on that power through prayer. He is the guide to the church's conduct, and therefore the Bible must be taught constantly and clearly. He is, above all, the Lord of the church, and therefore he is to be worshipped by his grateful and adoring people.

The worship of the church may contain many elements – singing, praying, meditating, reading, preaching. It may express both love and awe; it may combine quiet reflection and joyous outbursts. One person may lead or many may share. No matter what form church services may take, two things are always important: giving glory to God and giving help to his people (Ephesians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 14:26).

Fellowship with Christ

Worship, then, is a two-way movement – from God to the people and from the people to God; in other words, communion. This is well expressed in that simple ceremony that Jesus himself introduced, known as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. Jesus asked his followers to remember him regularly by the simple act of eating bread and drinking wine together. The bread (symbolizing his body) and the wine (symbolizing his blood) speak of his sacrificial death for his people.

But this miniature supper is not a memorial service for a dead person; it is an act of fellowship with a living person. When believers join in this act, besides declaring afresh the fact of Christ's death, they enjoy afresh all that the living Christ is to them. As they share literally in bread and wine, so they share spiritually in Christ. There is living fellowship between forgiven sinners and the one who died for them and now lives in them.

In addition to having fellowship with Christ, those who share in his 'supper' have fellowship with one another. In worshipping together in this way, they strengthen the unity within their church. They remind each other of the common life they share, and so are encouraged to exercise the same sacrificial love for each other as Christ exercised for them.

The society

The governing authorities

Although Christians are part of God's community, they are at the same time part of a larger community that is made up of all sorts of people. Whether as part of a village, a region, a town or a nation, they live in a society that is regulated for the benefit of the people as a whole. Their Christian viewpoint will at times create tensions for them in their society, but they have a duty to live positively and to contribute to the common good.

God is the overall ruler of the world, and he desires that all societies be controlled justly and orderly. He is the source of all authority and he has given to governments, as his representatives on earth, the authority to administer society.

Christians are told to 'obey the state authorities, because no authority exists without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God'. The twofold purpose for which God put them there is to promote the welfare of society (the state is 'God's servant working for your good') and to restrain wrongdoing in society (the state is 'God's servant to carry out God's punishment on those who do evil') (Romans 13:1-5). In another place Christians are told to pray for those who govern them, because God desires people to live in peace and contentment (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Jesus himself set the example for his followers when, in relation to the payment of taxes, he said, 'Pay the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay God what belongs to God' (Mark 12:17). The guiding principle Jesus gives his people is that they are to be loyal to God and obedient to the government. But governments are sometimes guilty of action that is against God's laws, and Christians find themselves faced with a conflict between their loyalty to the state and their loyalty to God.

Different circumstances

The response of Christians to unchristian actions by the government will depend largely on the kinds of issues they object to. It will depend also on what political rights they have.

In some countries Christians are in a similar position to those of New Testament times. Citizens have no rights in deciding who governs them or in challenging government actions. Laws may be not merely unchristian but deliberately anti-Christian. In other countries, by contrast, the citizens are the ones who decide who governs them, and they have the right to challenge the government and influence its decisions. Laws in such countries may even be sympathetic to Christianity.

Christians and their rights

There is nothing unusual if Christians suffer government opposition because of their faith. Some of the New Testament teaching concerning Christians' obedience to the government was given originally to people whom the government was persecuting. If governments persecute Christians, God will hold them responsible for misusing the authority he has given them. Christians, for their part, must follow the example of Christ. They must accept such persecution bravely and not try to retaliate.

At the same time the early Christians were not indifferent to the standard of justice that the government administered. There were times when they claimed their rights as citizens, in support of the principle of justice that government officials were supposed to maintain. But in matters of their personal religious beliefs, if the ruling authorities tried to force them to do something they believed was disloyal to God, they refused to cooperate and took the consequences. Their response was, 'We must obey God, not men' (Acts 5:29,40).

Jesus taught that although Christians have their rights, they must be willing to sacrifice those rights for the sake of others. Christians are always to think of others before themselves. They

are never to use their rights for selfish reasons. Nevertheless, while being prepared to sacrifice their own rights, they must be ready to defend the rights of others. Jesus condemned the oppressors and defended the downtrodden, and so did those who followed him.

Influence for good

Christianity's first concern is for the salvation of the individual. Its aim is to bring sinners to know Christ, to make them his disciples and to create within them a Christian character that is consistent with their Christian belief. But Christians do not exist as individuals in isolation. They are part of a society, and in society they have to live for God. Their responsibility is to bring others to Christ, and then to teach them so that they too are disciples who reproduce the character of Christ and pass on the message of his salvation.

Jesus and the early Christians disapproved of the evils of the society in which they lived, but they knew that the reason for those evils was the evil within the human heart. Their way of dealing with the problem was not to change society in the hope that people might improve, but to change people so that through them society might improve.

Christians must not think, however, that since they have improved their personal behaviour, they need do no more. It is easy for Christians, particularly those in countries that have a long history of Christian influence, to accept whatever the government does and never raise any objections. Because of this, Christians in various eras have quietly accepted such social injustices as slavery, the oppression of women and child labour; though it is also true that Christians have often been leaders in introducing reforms to get rid of such evils.

In different societies Christians deal with issues in different ways. In New Testament times Christians had no power to elect or influence governments, but that did not stop them from working for a better world. By their conduct and teaching they

introduced values of human worth that were so superior to those of society at large that cruel and unjust practices were undermined. In some countries today Christians may be a disadvantaged minority, and such action may be all they can do to relieve social injustice.

On the other hand, there are many countries where Christians, like other citizens, have the freedom to speak and act in support of what is right and in opposition to what is wrong. And with that freedom comes the responsibility to use it correctly.

Action in a free society

God cares about the well-being of society, and Christians also should care. If they live in societies where governments exist by the consent of the people, they have the opportunity to express their views openly and lawfully. In such societies, policies and laws are formed by the citizens through those who represent them in government. Christian citizens therefore have a responsibility to use their powers to promote those values of justice, freedom, morality, honesty and compassion that God desires for human society. If Christians pray that God's purposes be carried out on earth as they are in heaven, they should do whatever they can to help fulfil those purposes.

This is not to say that the church should form a political party or seek to govern society. That is not the church's job. God has entrusted the government of society to civil authorities, not to the church. When the church has tried to do the state's job, the results have usually been disastrous. But when Christians have weakly given their approval to unjust state actions, the results have again been disastrous.

Christian faith does not make people experts on all subjects. The problems of society – politics, justice, education, finances, employment, health and the like – have to be dealt with by people who have the necessary skills. God never intended the church to be an agency to control these areas; though if

Christians had the skills to work in these areas, society would surely benefit.

If Christians live in a democracy, then, regardless of whether they have special skills, they must use their Christian judgment to decide which things to support and which to oppose. They may lawfully try to influence public opinion. At the same time they must bear in mind the basis of the democratic freedom they enjoy, namely, that the government exists by the choice of the majority of people. A minority may firmly believe its view to be the best, but it cannot expect to use the law to force its belief upon the whole society if the majority does not want it.

Whatever social improvements Christians may hope for through better government action, they cannot escape the duty to sacrifice their time and money to help people personally. Christians cannot pass off their responsibilities to the state. Governments can make laws to provide social welfare, but government programs are no substitute for personal help. To practise Christian love will always be costly.

The wider world

Restoring what has been damaged

Because of sin, nothing in the world is as it should be. On every hand people suffer from the consequences of sin. Instead of enjoying life as God intended, they are troubled in mind by fear and tension, and troubled in body by sickness and disease. They experience conflict and stress in all their relationships, from personal to international. They are also in conflict with the natural environment, because even the world of nature suffers because of human sin. Above all, they are in conflict with God.

Jesus Christ came to bring healing. He healed people not only in their bodies and minds, but also in their relationships with each other and with God. He even worked healing in the natural environment.

None of Jesus' healing work, however, was universal. He showed that he was the Son of God who came to save, and he made complete salvation possible through his death and resurrection. People have the opportunity to accept that salvation now, so that they can enjoy it in its fulness when Jesus Christ returns at the end of the age.

Christ's final triumph will mean that all the rebellious will be taken away in judgment, and all the effects of sin in the world will at last be reversed. Disease, sickness, suffering, war and death will be removed. People will enjoy perfect peace – within themselves, with others and with God. The world of nature will have the perfect splendour originally intended for it.

As they look forward to sharing with Christ in a life that is free from sin, Christians are encouraged to work towards freedom from sin in the present life. This concerns all the damaging effects of sin: not just those in their own lives, but also those in the world at large.

A message for all nations

In the work of restoring all things to a state of harmony with God, the Christians' first task is to spread the message of God's salvation to a sinful world. This work will start in a person's own family and neighbourhood, but it must not end there. Jesus told his disciples to take his message 'to all nations', 'into all the world' and 'to the ends of the earth'. There is only one God, and there is only one person who can bring sinners back to God, and that is Jesus Christ. 'Salvation is to be found through him alone; in all the world there is no one else whom God has given who can save us' (Acts 4:12).

As Christians take the message of Christ into new regions, they baptize those who believe in him, teach them how to be his followers and build them into local churches. These churches then become centres from which the new Christian community expands into the regions round about. The Christian message is for all people; it is not tied to a particular culture, race or language. Christ brings new life and new hope to the entire human race. In fact, he is the human race's only hope.

Throughout the world Christians are busy spreading the message of Christ. Some devote their full working time to the task, while others use their normal occupations to gain access to places where full-time preachers may not be welcome. Christians make efforts to reach people everywhere, from remote villages to crowded cities. Whether tribal people or students, whether factory workers or politicians, they all need Christ.

A better life now

Although Jesus was concerned first of all with releasing people from the bondage of sin and giving them new life, he was concerned also for their physical needs. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind and relieved the oppressed. As his followers do likewise, they carry on Christ's work and at the same time show people the kind of world God wants.

Wherever Christianity has spread into an ungodly world, it has had a good effect on society. It has produced greater care for the sick and the poor, greater protection for the underprivileged and the defenceless, and greater respect for justice and honesty. In some countries Christianity has, over generations or even centuries, become the dominating influence. Although this has been a benefit to those countries, it has also resulted in careless social attitudes among many Christians. They have become so accustomed to regarding their country as Christian that they unthinkingly approve of whatever their country does.

If Christians live in a society that gives them a comfortable standard of living, they have special cause to examine all issues carefully. A danger of such a society is that people may have high principles of personal behaviour, yet support a system that ignores those principles. Personally, for example, they may give generous aid to needy people in poor countries, yet at the same time support a trade policy that ensures their own country gets richer while other countries get poorer. They may readily approve of something done in business or government that they would condemn if an individual did it.

Christians must avoid two extremes. One is to be concerned only with personal godliness and to ignore the evil that infects the system. The other is to be so concerned with social reform that personal duties are overlooked. People can easily denounce racism in distant lands while despising socially 'inferior' people who live in their own street. Others condemn governments for lack of social concern, while they themselves ignore needy families and lonely people in their neighbourhood. Many were condemned by Jesus not because of any wrong they had done, but because of the good they had not done – usually to the sick, the poor and the outcasts.

Respect for human dignity

One difficulty in any society is that those in a position to bring about change are the least likely to want change. People in

places of power and influence are the people who benefit most from the existing order.

Jesus refused to use violence in any form, either to protect what was good or overthrow what was bad. But he refused to be silent when he saw people of power and influence exploiting the weak and the defenceless. As a result those who opposed him most bitterly were the well-to-do, religiously respectable people. It suited them better for the social order to remain unchanged.

As always Jesus showed that the root of the problem was human sin. The oppression of the weak by the powerful is one of the evils that resulted when sin entered the human race. It is a denial of the human dignity that all people possess equally, for all are made in God's image.

To treat people as unequal because of race, social status or sex is contrary to all that Jesus taught and practised. He wants his followers to do all they can to remove the hostility that sin has created. 'Happy are those who work for peace,' said Jesus; 'God will call them his children' (Matthew 5:9).

Renewing the earth

Besides exploiting each other, people have exploited the natural world. Although the world belongs to God, he has placed it in the care of those who live in it. They have God's permission to use it, enjoy it and develop it, so that on the one hand they might gain benefit, and on the other nature itself might develop its full splendour.

As a result of human sin, however, the natural world has suffered. In some ways it may have become more beautiful, but in others it has been made ugly. Through greed people have exploited the earth without thought for its future, and used its resources to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Though in some cases they have brought widespread benefits through their skills, in others they have selfishly enriched only a few and left lands and people devastated.

Christians recognize that people are merely God's representatives in administering the world he has entrusted to them. They are answerable to God for their treatment of nature and their sharing of its resources. They do not have the unlimited right to devastate the earth for financial profit, or to destroy life for their own pleasure. Christians should encourage a lifestyle that cooperates with God's work in nature by using the earth's limited resources with sympathetic care and without unnecessary waste.

God's plan is that at Christ's return a new era will dawn, when all sin's evil consequences will be removed. God's people will at last be free from all the effects of sin, and the physical creation, which was denied its full splendour because of human sin, will at last be perfected. It will be 'set free from its slavery to decay and share the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). If God's purpose is to bring the natural world to its full splendour, Christians should be working towards the healing of nature now. God's goal should be theirs – new people, a new community and a new earth.