

Chapter 21

Christian Faith and Practice

Chapter Summary

All Christians believe that reentry to a living relationship with God is through faith, an act of trust based upon knowledge of God and his deeds. Faith is not a blind leap into the dark but a confident step into enlightenment regarding the nature and love of God. Inspiration for the Christian understanding of faith is found in the Old Testament story of Abraham who left the security of Ur of the Chaldees to become a nomad in response to God's call. Theistic faith is an expression of trust leading to a new way of life based on a living relationship with God.

St. Paul, as he is known to Christians, begins his definition of faith in the New Testament letter to the Romans by stating that people have renounced truth and "served created things rather than the Creator." Faith restores our relationship with God and fellow humans. Because faith is somewhat intangible, people resort to laws rather than faith for guidance on how we should live. Such legalism actually creates bondage and dependence whereas faith frees people to enter meaningful, nonexploitive relationships. The essence of legalism is the replacement of trust in God with manipulation through rituals.

Ideas about the return of Christ give many contemporary Christians their distinctive emphasis. Attempting to understand the "true" meaning of prophetic passages in biblical books such as Daniel and Revelation, some Christian movements ignore established methods of exegesis and employ novel interpretive tools leading to foolish predictions that do not materialize (e.g., Charles Taze Russell, founder of Jehovah's Witnesses).

There are three basic theological understandings of biblical eschatology (end times): (1) postmillennialism, the historical view that asserts the gospel must be preached to every nation after which a thousand years of peace will prevail before Christ returns as judge; (2) premillennialism, a nineteenth-century view popularized by John N. Darby (1800–1882) and the dominant mode of interpretation in North America, teaching that society will deteriorate into chaos before Christ's return so that instead of a thousand years of peace, there will be universal unrest and persecution of Christians; and (3) amillennialism, which argues that Scripture is unclear on the exact time of Christ's return or the events leading to it, thus Christians should live in a manner reflecting their belief that Christ could return at any time.

Dispensationalism is a variation of premillennialism popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible (1909). It adopts the basic premillennial scheme but divides history into seven time periods (dispensations) during which God is said to have dealt with mankind on the basis of different expectations. Premillennial dispensationalism retains a powerful influence in American evangelicalism.

One of the important differences between the postmillennial and premillennial views is related to the biblical teaching about Israel. Premillennialists insist that references to Israel in the Bible relate to the Jewish people and the return of the Jewish people to Palestine, and that the establishment of Israel in 1948 was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Postmillennialists reject this interpretation,

maintaining that the biblical nation of Israel was destroyed in the sixth century BC, so references to Israel in the New Testament are in fact referring to the church of Christ.

Christian eschatology has given rise to significant prophetic and charismatic movements. Charismatics believe speaking in tongues, healing, prophetic words, and other “gifts of the Spirit” are signs of God’s Spirit at work in the last days. They strongly emphasize directly relying on the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Eschatological and charismatic beliefs have led to the formation of many community-oriented Christian groups, another hallmark of the Abrahamic tradition. In Judaism and Islam, community is clearly identified with ethnic, national, or religious groups as was Christianity until the Reformation. The Protestant Reformation’s emphasis on faith led many Christians to return to a concept of community found in the New Testament (Acts 2–4). Puritans, Pietists, monastic movements, Mennonites, Hutterites, Doukhobors, and charismatics are examples of such communities.

The question of leadership is important in assessing religions. Those of the yogic tradition revere gurus who gain complete authority over their disciples. Christian groups have no official gurus although they usually have highly visible leaders (pastors, spokesmen). Some charismatic groups appoint prophets who take existing revelation and apply it to current situations. Their teaching is tested by experience, Scripture, and history.

The Christian world is divided over adherence to the Julian (old) calendar and the Gregorian (new) calendar. As a result, there is a fourteen-day difference between the celebration of any given Christian holiday in the Western churches and the celebration of the same holiday in the Eastern churches.

Christian liturgy from earliest times has adhered to “the Christian year” composed of: the season of Advent, Christmas, Feast of Epiphany, Ash Wednesday (beginning of Lent), Palm Sunday to Easter (holy week including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday), Feast of Ascension, Feast of Pentecost. Not all Christians particularly mark all of these.

Christians hold a highly personal view of God that is reflected in the importance of prayer. The basis of Christian prayer is the idea of a personal, direct relationship with God in which individuals can worship, cast all their cares upon God, and seek divine direction.

The earliest Christians were Jews who continued to worship in synagogues and temples as well as in private homes. After Constantine’s edict of toleration (313), Christian congregations obtained their own buildings known as churches. Today, Christian places of worship vary from private homes to large cathedrals and modern megachurches. Although some ethnic groups like the Hutterites and certain Mennonites retain standardized types of dress, most Christian groups have no particular dress code. Most usually gather for worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, in keeping with Christ’s resurrection.

Christianity has its own set of ceremonies known as the sacraments. Theologically speaking, a sacrament is a religious rite in which God is believed to be uniquely active. The Anglican Book of Common Prayer describes a sacrament as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.” Most Christians practice two main sacraments: baptism—the application of water to a person’s body, and the Lord’s Supper or Mass

Christians have significant disagreements regarding the meaning and means of both the main sacraments. Paedobaptism, or the baptism of infants, prevails among Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Orthodox Christians, Presbyterian and the so-called mainline denominations in keeping with certain Bible texts (Romans 4:11–12) where circumcision is a sign of faith with communal significance. In later years, when a child comes of age, they confess their faith in a ceremony known as confirmation. Antipaedobaptism is adopted by those of the Anabaptist tradition, which strongly opposes the former view, arguing from Scriptures that only those who are cognitively capable of making a choice to follow Christ should receive baptism as a testimony to their personal faith.

Christians also divide over the nature of the Lord's Supper. For Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, many Anglicans, and Lutherans, the act of consecrating the sacred wine and bread takes literally the words of Jesus "this is my body," and "this is my blood" and actually transforms the elements into the body and blood of Christ prior to consumption (Mass). Most Protestant traditions claim such literalism misunderstands Scripture and prefer to view the wine and bread as merely symbols of Christ's shed blood and broken body.

In addition to these two main sacraments, the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions recognize five other sacraments: confirmation, penance (confessions), anointing the sick with oil, marriage, and ordination of deacons, priests, and bishops.