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What it means to be a Christian

Through the centuries, the followers of Jesus have emphasized that true faith is the intensely personal commitment of an individual to God - a communion beyond words.

But there is also a cognitive side to things. This is expressed in the statements and credos of classic Christian faith. These are authoritative summaries of “What Christians believe” and their content is binding for his followers.

My wife recently asked me how I would “summarize” this cognitive side what it means to be a Christian if I only had a very few moments with someone who had very little background information about the Faith.

Here’s our joint attempt:

There is one and only one God who made the world and the entire universe. This God is infinite but also personal. This God has made us (and maybe other rational creatures beyond our star system!) to live in Community.

I will, out of respect for tradition, call this Creator “He”, but in reality, God is beyond our purely human dimensions and categories.

At the beginning of real human history, our race chose against Community with God and decided on its own path. This act is at the root of the evil and tragedy of human history and the deepest reason for our individual fault, frustration, and – ultimately – death. The philosopher Augustine put it succinctly: “Our hearts are restless [O God], until they find their rest in Thee.” God, though, did not abandon us in our rebellion and evil and leave us to our own ways to die in the darkness.

He sent his message to us through witnesses, teachers and prophets in every culture and people group of the world. But he gave a final and authoritative message and definition of how we should think about and understand Him through one family that He chose. This was the family of Abraham and his descendants.

Finally, the Creator Himself stepped personally into our history in a particular person, time and place in what came to be called the “incarnation”. That person was named Jesus. He was born in a village near Jerusalem in the early Roman Empire. He lived his entire life in the Roman provinces of Judea and Galilee on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea and spoke Aramaic, Hebrew, and probably, some Greek as well as, perhaps, a little Latin. Ultimately, Jesus was unjustly tried and executed by the Roman political authority after a brief mock trial. Through

the kindness and intervention of friends, his body was not dumped in a mass grave or exposed to scavenging dogs and other animals. Instead, he was buried in a cave tomb just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Trustworthy reports declare that his body did not remain in the grave to decay, but in an unexplainable way it was transformed by God to a new level of bodily existence. This is called his "Resurrection". After rising from death, he met with many witnesses over a period of about 40 days, during which he explained his teaching in a deeper way to his followers. At the end of that time, he gave a final message to them and was taken into God's überdimensional reality and presence.

He left his people with the commission to take his message and story to the world. He further promised to return and consummate history and lead the way in healing the world.

We are each invited to face and admit our own individual and personal short-comings and evil, receive forgiveness and live for Jesus in community with others who are his followers.

If we choose to do this, we are not only forgiven for our personal evil but we are commissioned to help heal the world and take his message to others. If we choose to follow him, he promised his Holy Spirit - his own personal presence - to be with each of his followers individually and as a community. As we then live in fellowship with him and each other, we are commissioned to help heal the world until he returns.

This is what it means to be a true Christian.

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