

# **Introduction:**

## **Our Purpose**

The word “essentialist” is being bantered around these days in educational circles. It means someone who emphasizes and teaches the fundamentals. Perhaps the first essentialist was John Newman who 150 years ago wrote a classic entitled, “The Idea of the University.” The central concept of his thesis was what he called “pushing up the first principles.” According to Newman, the purpose of a university is to teach the first principles of every discipline and then to explore the limits of those principles—pushing the principles up through all levels of study.

So it is with our Christian faith. At the very core of our faith lies the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the bedrock from which everything else springs. There is a tendency today to look at the gospel superficially and quickly “push up” to more interesting things. The result is that many Christians are left without good foundations, living far below their potential as believers. The gospel, Paul writes, is the power of God. If the gospel is power perhaps Christians are living in weakness because they have not fully comprehended the fullness of the good news.

Another danger is the very real possibility of once having believed, to lose the gospel. Both the scriptures and the history of Christianity bear this out clearly. Hundreds of churches have started out well only to lose the gospel in a generation or two. And what is true of denominations and churches is even more evident among individuals. It is my conviction that nothing is more important than a firm foundation, biblical and theological, in the foundational truth of the gospel.

There is nothing new in these lessons. If some of the concepts are new to you, it is because they have not been taught or there has been a deviation. This is the historic gospel. Here is the great truth Augustine taught. This is the truth lost during the Middle Ages and brought to light through the teachings of Martin Luther. This is the truth that energized the great Puritan movement and the great Awakenings in England and America. These studies follow the general logic of Paul the Apostle’s presentation of the gospel in his letter to the Romans and to the Galatians.

## **The Design**

These lessons are designed to lead you through an adult interactive process. This process will take you through a complete learning cycle every time you study a passage or concept. First you will do an individual study of the scripture lesson, and then you will read an article geared to broaden your theological vision. Finally you will bring both the results of your study and your reading to a dialogue group. This is not a lecture, but a group of fellow learners who will spur you to think and wrestle with the ideas presented. There is a fourth step, if the process is to come full circle, and that is personal integration. The gospel must always touch the heart and therefore life. When the gospel reaches the heart, life change inevitably occurs. A personal project, although optional, is urged upon all groups doing the study. This will take an extra week, but it will be well worth the effort.

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# Is Christianity just another religion?

## Lesson 1

Is Christianity unique or is it just one in a long list of world religions? Perhaps it is the best, perhaps it is the most progressive and the most humane, but just the same, is it another religion? In one of his earliest sermons Peter, the apostle claimed, “There is no other name given among men whereby you can be saved.” Jesus himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes to the Father but by me.” Religion has to do with ethics, with morality, with following a divine ideal. The interesting thing about the claims Christianity makes is that they don’t point to a system of belief, or to a set of moral principles, but they point to a Person.

Christianity is not primarily a teaching nor a philosophy nor a way of life. It is before everything else, a relationship to a person. The New Testament in a sense will not even discuss with us the kind of life we are going to live until we have come to a satisfactory answer about Jesus Christ. All throughout the Bible shuts us down to this one matter and holds us up against this one thing. It refuses even to discuss our questions and our problems with us. Before we can discuss how to live, the gospel asks, what have you made of Him? This fact, as we shall see in this lesson, makes all the difference in the world.

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## Studying

*Read John 14:1-14*

*Take a separate piece of paper and write out your answer to the questions:*

1. Look at Peter’s question in 13:36 and Philip’s question in 14:8. What is the issue these disciples are struggling with?
2. Put Jesus’ statement in 14:6, 7 into your own words. What is the force of the claims Jesus makes here?
3. Think through what Jesus means in verse 6 by “way” and “truth” and “life”? Write out your own definitions to each.
4. With what tone of voice do you imagine Jesus speaking in verses 9-14? What evidence does Jesus give for his claims?

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## Reading

*Read the following article carefully, making annotations in the margin.*

# Christianity: a Love Affair

By Paul Thompson

The essence of our walk with God is a love affair.

Christianity is unique for a single reason: our salvation is assured not through a series of actions but through a relationship. Christianity is based not upon what we do, or even what we believe, but on how we relate.

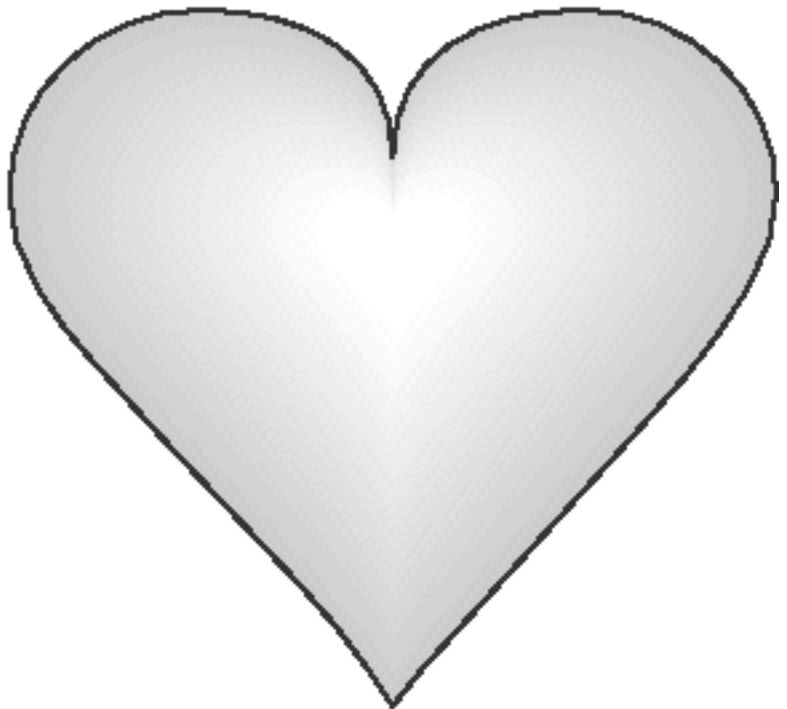
Jesus put it succinctly in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." God doesn't possess the truth, as though the truth were something he carried on his backpack. Truth is part of God's being. "I am...truth." That concept sets Christianity totally apart from all other religions.

This is significant because if truth were a series of actions (something God did) you wouldn't need God—you would simply need the actions. That would mean that the actions could become more powerful than God or at least be a substitute. If God simply possessed truth, then we are saying that truth is God and that He just availed himself of truth. That makes Him less than God.

It would also mean that you wouldn't need God, you would simply need to know the behavior He requires. Truth would become like an athletic event with the people most skilled getting the greatest glory. Religion would become a series of skills, a technique to be learned.

This brings us to the great distinction between religion and Christianity. Religion is a body of obedience skills a person buys into and tries to keep. Christianity is not like that. Jesus says that to understand the truth you must have a relationship, not with ideas and rules, but with a Personality who declares that he is TRUTH. Truth according to Christianity flows from a wonderful moral Being, not a wonderful moral principle. So to know the truth, you are forced to know not the principle, but the Person.

This means that Christianity is totally different from all religions. Truth is directly linked with relationships and interaction—it does not stem from works but from attitude. It is not closeness to a moral code or closeness to a series of truths but closeness to a moral Creator. Christianity does not follow the rules of philosophy. Christianity follows the rules of relationship and communication. It also establishes a priority. Issues of relationships are first and everything else is secondary.



It's like love and marriage. As a young college student, I was very shy, introverted and not much of a conversationalist. When I met Carol everything changed. Wonders of wonders, she accepted

me just as I was! She knew how to draw me out. She was asking about me and I was telling her everything. My life totally changed because of that relationship.

Carol is a reader. She loves good books. I had read only grudgingly in order to get by in school, but Carol read for fun. As she shared her adventures in reading, I began to understand what good reading was and I was induced into reading myself. My background in music was poor, not having had the privilege of knowing or listening to music that was good. Carol began talking to me about Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. I began to look at the world wholly different because of the relationship I had with her.

And she began to understand what it was like to go out with a missionary kid! She began to hear about exciting places, languages and people. She became excited about the world, adventure, culture and food.

The deeper the relationship, the more we learned about each other and the more we learned about ourselves. The relationship provided the context for change. This is the rule of Christianity: if you want to know truth, you will have to get to know the Truth in Jesus Christ personally.

What if you wanted to put the rules before the relationship? In college, a fellow I knew put a box of chocolates in the mailbox of a girl he wanted to go out with. A note included in it said, "Would you like to go out with me?" She had a dreadful date. He was a bore. The next week she found another box of chocolates with another invitation. She refused. She told him to stay away. He began to "stalk" her, at least, to pursue her. He declared passionate love for her. He already knew how many children he would have, how he would raise them, the rules for raising them and where they would live. She was terribly frightened. He had begun doing actions that only belonged to someone in a relationship. He had put actions before a relationship.

This form of Christianity—where doing comes before knowing, where obedience is demanded before a relationship—is the breeding ground for a dead religion. Homes, where actions and behavior are imposed before relationship is fostered, are a sure recipe for rebellious children. A gospel where rules come before relationship is no gospel at all. It is frightening. It is legalism. It is death.

Jesus explained the essence of Christianity when he declared: "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus is the way; that is, we must understand him and know him to know the way. Jesus is the truth; that is, we must understand him and know him to understand truth. Jesus is life, that is, we must understand him and know him to have life.

So Christianity is at root, a love affair.

Now when you begin to enter a relationship with someone as big as God, the changes are going to be profound. God's influence is complete. It involves not just your mind, nor just your skills, but all of eternity. This change is so deep that Scripture actually declares you to be a new species (A new creation, I Cor. 5:17). Your identity has had a complete change. There is something deeply new about you. A new relationship means a new YOU.

It's like the development of moths into butterflies. Butterflies have two sets of genes. One set, the worm or caterpillar genes, are in control first. During this stage of its growth the moth has a gigantic appetite. It eats 86,000 times its weight in two months. That's like a 7 lb. baby eating 5 1/2 tons of baby food in 24 hours. He eats so much because after two months it will not eat again. Then when the butterfly genes begin to kick in, it begins to weave a cocoon. In this leak-proof

prison the caterpillar actually goes liquid, like gravy. The new genes get more instructions and the gravy congeals, turning into a butterfly.

When in relationship with him, God gives you, as it were, a set of butterfly genes. These are so powerful as to make fundamental changes in your character. You are literally changed from inside out.

We are slaves to our worm genes, which tell us that life is found in what we do. These genes are very much a part of us. Worth, validation, identity is found in what we achieve. Self worth is validated by our ability to perform. Identity is a function of success. When we don't succeed, that means that something inside us is wrong. There is something wrong with us. This is especially true when we sin.

I get up early to pray, "Lord, allow me to love today." During breakfast my daughter spills her milk all over my clean suit. I get angry and scream, "Why are you so clumsy!?" She runs from the table in a fit of tears. I go to work feeling awful. I pray, "Lord, have mercy. I just blew it again." God says, "Mercy is yours." It is beginning to dawn—someone loves me in the middle of my sin. God is changing my identity—from having to work for my identity—to a son, a daughter, beloved of his father. Relationship changes identity.

The meaning of "the way", God's way now through relationship becomes my way. Christianity begins with relationship, flows into identity and moves into character. All this is fueled by a love affair, getting to know God; not by learning more, not by knowing more, not by doing more. But by loving and being loved.

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## Reflecting

*In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the scripture lesson and your reading, and interact with the following questions.*

1. "Christianity is unique for a single reason: our salvation is assured not through a series of actions but through a relationship. Christianity is based not upon what we do, or even what we believe, but on how we relate."

What is your reaction to this statement?

- a. It is exaggerated
  - b. It leaves me cold, without anything to hang on to.
  - c. It opens the door to licentious living.
  - d. It seems to be in agreement with what Jesus is saying in John 14:6.
2. Read aloud the following account of the great missionary to the American Indians, David Brainerd. If he were sitting beside you confessing his problem to you, how would you counsel him?

“When I was about twenty years of age I was engaged more than ever in the duties of religion. I became strict and watchful over my thoughts, words, and actions; and thought I must be very seriously religious, because I considered entering the ministry. I spent much time every day reading my Bible and praying and I gave great attention to Sunday sermons. In short, I had a very good outside and trusted entirely in my religious duties, though I was not then aware of what I was doing wrong.

“Though I often confessed to God that I, of course, deserved nothing, yet still I harbored a secret hope of recommending myself to God by all these duties and all this morality. When I prayed affectionately and felt some melting of my heart in love to him, I hoped God would thereby be moved to care for me. So I thought that through my repenting and praising him and seeking him, I could make good steps toward heaven. When my heart seemed full of love and faith, I felt that God would be affected by that and would hear my prayers for their sincerity. In other words I healed myself with duties. I told myself, “God must accept you because look at how wholeheartedly you serve and seek him.”

3. In what ways are do you feel and act like David Brainerd did in his early experience. Was he being religious or was he being Christian? What is the difference?
  4. Share with the group ways you are beginning to see changes occurring in your life “from the inside out.”
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## Applying

*Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week*

### Testimony Project

Project No. 1

One of the glories of Christianity is the assurance that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). This statement by Paul that we are “created” does not simply refer to how God has created us physically, as he has of course created all human beings. Rather, Paul is talking about being “created in Christ.” This means that every person who believes in Christ does so because she or he is the object of a process of God’s spiritual creation. The word “workmanship” is very important. It is the Greek word “poema” from which, it is obvious, we get our word poem. It means every believer is essentially a work of art – God’s art! Consider how artists work, whether they are writers or musicians, pointers or sculptors, they labor long and hard and with the utmost care for detail. Sometimes they do very little – only a stroke here or there. Other times they make massive changes. But always they seek to bring the raw materials into line with an artistic vision. Thus, Paul is telling us that God labors over every believer, throughout their entire lives, intervening, guiding and shaping them all in order to bring them into line with a vision he has for them. What is that vision? We are “created...to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Thus, God has a particular set of good works for us to do, which he prepares for us our whole lives.

**Re-looking at your life**

In the light of this teaching, it is obvious that we need to look back over our lives to see what God has been creating. That is what we are going to do this week. Using the following questions as a guide, write our insights on a separate piece of paper. You may be truly surprised at what you find.

1. As you look back on your life, how can you see that God was working, though you might not have known it at the time?
  - To protect you.
  - To wake you up to things you denied.
  - To show you weaknesses or flaws in yourself.
  - To show you your value to him.
2. How did God bring you to see that salvation was by grace, not good works? (Or how has He been doing so? You may still be in process).
3. What practical difference in your character has God made with His grace? (In other words, in what way would you have a fundamentally different personality had God not shown you his love?)
4. In what ways has God prepared you to be of service and help to others? What has he equipped you to do in his service for your loved ones and your neighbors?

**Group discussion:**

During your group session share your insights and pray for each other, especially in those areas where you are still groping to find God's vision for your life.