

# The Big Idea

Christianity has a history. The Christian church is 2000 years old and is rooted in Judaism, which is 2000 years older. With all this history, it is going to be impossible to offer a brief summary of “all things Christian.” These thoughts aim not at all things but at “THE thing.” This article attempts to briefly outline the one big idea on which all of Christianity is based. This big idea is called the Gospel or literally the good news. Our interest is not the leaves or the twigs, the minute varieties or implications of Christianity but the trunk of the tree. At the end of this booklet I will suggest some resources for further reading.

Every branch of the Christian church accepts the following propositions. Here’s a sketch of the basic message of the Gospel.

## **1. Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be the promised Messiah.**

The earliest chapters of the Bible begin to set up an expectation of a person who would be born to rescue the human race from its troubles – the Messiah or Chosen One. This growing hope takes the form of promises, symbols, signs, word-pictures, stories, poems, and predictions. As the Old Testament progresses these promises and pictures become more and more explicit. It’s as if a camera lens is slowly turning over hundreds of years until, in the later prophets (approximately 700-500 BC), the picture begins to come into focus.

When Jesus of Nazareth began his three years of teaching, he gradually showed that all the prophecies of the Old Testament pointed to him. He was claiming to be the divine-human rescuer promised from the beginning of human history. In his teaching, Jesus is turning the lens all the way to the focus-point and the picture that has been emerging in the Old Testament turns out to be a picture of him! The promise is now fulfilled, not just in words on a page or from a prophet’s mouth but embodied in the promised person.

When Jesus of Nazareth repeated those famous words, “The Kingdom of God is here,” he was claiming to be the one they were expecting. The promised King had arrived and God’s rescue operation had begun.

## **2. The teachings of Jesus were simply an amplification and clarification of the Old Testament.**

Jesus was not an innovator inventing a new religion. He did not teach a new ethical system. The thrust of his teaching was already seen in the Old Testament. The moral system taught by Jesus has been called the *ethic of love*, but this way of life was already taught in the Old Testament.

What was new in Jesus’ approach was the way he himself actually lived in perfect conformity to the ethic of love. The Old Testament ethic is boiled down to two commands: “Love the Lord with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself;” but no human being had ever fully lived according to that standard. Even the priests and prophets who communicated these commands were inconsistent in the way they loved. Jesus was the first and only person to perfectly demonstrate the life of love. The Old Testament called for love and Jesus affirmed that standard. He went on to fulfill the ideal by actually loving God and other people consistently and wholly.

One of the clearest sayings of Jesus in which he expresses his reason for coming is recorded by St. John: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” The command to love is not new but the command to love the way Jesus loved IS new because the world had never seen this perfectly consistent way of loving until Jesus had come and shown love.

**3. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the main idea of Christianity is not the teachings of Jesus but the accomplishments of Jesus.**

Unlike the world’s great religious teachers, Jesus’ primary accomplishment is not the advice he gave on how to get to heaven or how to be enlightened or how to succeed. Jesus is not merely claiming to *show* the way but to *be* the way. Jesus is coming as a substitute or a representative. He is living the life of love that God required of humanity. We are all required to live as God commands, by God’s law, by the standard of love. Jesus comes on behalf of people who have not lived as God commands. He is living the way we are required to live – he is a human being living to fulfill a broken agreement between God and human beings.

In addition to the life Jesus *lived* as a substitute, he also *died* as a substitute. Great spiritual and political leaders are known for achievements made in their lives, but Jesus Christ is known for what he accomplished in his death. The first four books of the New Testament all devote an extraordinary amount of the narrative to the final days and the dying hours of Jesus’ life. Evidently, they are communicating the overarching importance of the death of Jesus. Historically, the singular symbol of Christianity has been the symbol of Jesus’ execution, the cross.

The New Testament teaches that the death of Jesus was not martyrdom. Nor is the *physical* death of Jesus the primary pain he endured. The meaning of the death of Jesus is his being punished under the justice of God for crimes he did not commit. He is, as it were, at odds with his Father, God. Jesus is suffering under the extreme displeasure of God in place of others who deserve that displeasure. He is being treated as a sinner and is actually made the embodiment of human evil. On the cross he is seen as the very thing that God hates. Because up to this point Jesus had enjoyed perfect, unbroken, eternal agreement and love with the Father, for him to become detestable in the sight of his Father was hell itself. While we might be able to imagine the *physical* pain of the cross, we can never begin to fathom the agony of being at odds with a loved one with whom we had been perfectly united for all eternity. In other words, on the cross, under the justice of God the Father, Jesus Christ was suffering hell. He, the innocent, is standing in the place of the guilty.

**4. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a historical reality and proof of his success in completing the rescue.**

The New Testament writers are writing history when they record the fact that Jesus’ body actually came back to life after being dead for three days. They are clearly not saying that this happened in a simply symbolic way, that, for instance, the teaching and attitude Jesus promoted will live on even though he died. Instead, the writers are saying that the dead man was raised to new and indestructible life. After being seen by over 500 witnesses during a 40-day period of time, it is recorded that Jesus went into the immediate presence of God and there he remains representing humanity before God. He is the first human being qualified to stand before God the Father.

Additionally, the resurrection of Jesus shows that the life of Jesus is indeed enough. Jesus' final words from the cross were, "It is finished!" By saying these words Jesus was declaring that the rescue was complete, the debt had been paid and the arrangement had been fulfilled. The resurrection demonstrates that this declaration from the cross was not just an imaginary claim made by a deluded zealot. God accepted Jesus' sacrifice. In the resurrection Jesus was vindicated and shown to be who he claimed to be.

**5. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is good news and should be received as such by sinful people.**

The coming of God in the person of Jesus means that God himself has taken the penalty for the moral failings and love-less attitudes of everyone who will receive it. This good news says to the sinful person who believes, *"In believing, you now receive a new status in the sight of God. Being represented by Jesus means that God now sees you as Jesus deserves to be seen. Jesus lived an altogether loving and obedient life, and lived that way for everyone who believes him. You (the believer) are now seen by God as altogether loving and good."* This good news is far better than simply being forgiven; it means that those who were formerly rebels and fugitives are given the status of "beloved sons."

We all try to convince ourselves that we are right and though we are constantly confronted with evidence to the contrary, we find ingenious ways of ignoring our faults. Self-justifying, blaming, excusing, and underestimating our wrong-ness are just a few of the strategies we use. Still, when we look at our actions, our words, and our thoughts, we know that we are far from the life of love God requires. If we could ever get the courage to ask our family and co-workers to tell us about our faults, what love-less-ness they see and hear coming from us, we would find the experience to be almost unbearable.

If we were truly right, we would not need Jesus Christ, the righteous one. Believing the gospel enables and compels us to face our sin, seeing how serious any lack of love truly is – serious enough to send Jesus to hell on the cross. In receiving the gospel, a person is letting go of his own claim to be right. This is a part of what the Bible calls "repentance." At the same time, repentance enables and compels us to know that God so strongly loves us that he put his son in our place. The experience of this amazing love enables those who believe to admit their faults. Their confidence is not in their own rightness (we're not as right as we think!).

People who are confident that Jesus lived the life they failed to live and died the death they deserved to die are increasingly free to face their faults honestly. Their confidence is not in their own shoddy rightness, so they're less afraid to let it go and stop being self-defensive. Their confidence is in the perfect rightness of Jesus who stands in their place.

This repentant confidence becomes a pattern in people who believe the good news. They begin facing their own flaws and faults in the light of what Jesus accomplished. They see Jesus as the King of their lives and when they fail to follow his way of love they run to him with their failures. They find that when they trust him in this way, the Spirit of God renews them again and again in the walk of love. They begin to relate to God, not as to a taskmaster who is keeping score and always a bit disappointed, but as to a loving Father who is forever pleased and satisfied by what Jesus the Son accomplished for them.

**6. The new life of repentant confidence expresses itself in love especially toward the church.**

The Bible presents the church as a new society of people from every nationality united by their common confidence in Jesus Christ. This “international nation” has Jesus Christ as its King and his charter is love. In his new nation he has reversed many of the values taken for granted in the world. For instance, he says, “Blessed are the poor” and “the first shall be last” and “whoever saves his life will lose it” and “whoever loses his life will find it,” and “bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” The new way into which Jesus is inviting people has been called the “upside-down kingdom.” In this new society the weak are called strong, the mourners are called happy, the ones we call underprivileged are counted blessed. The church is the society where these upside-down values are prized.

The believer in Jesus enters the church like a fish enters water – entering the place where we belong. The Christian life is expressed in the church as a painter expresses his art on canvas – the church is the canvas of the Christian life. The Christian is born into the church and the church becomes the playing field for living by faith, which leads to love. One indicator that a person does indeed believe the gospel is his response to the church. Here’s how St. John put it: *“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren (the church). He who does not love (the church) remains in death.”*

The church is the community of repentant sinners. Members are coming to recognize that they are not theoretical sinners but real, great, big sinners who need great grace from God. Yet, these sinners bind themselves together and agree to help one another live in faith and cultivate what St. Paul called the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, and peace. Part of this cultivation comes by the church gathering together on Sundays and other times. In these gatherings the church looks to God for grace. Believers stand together in awe that God has loved them and accepts them because of Jesus. These gatherings often involve singing and celebrating God’s truth, beauty, and goodness. The church also fosters mentoring relationships between its members in which each person helps the other to see the gospel’s ramifications for all of life.

The church expresses love not only to one another but also to the world outside. Because the church is seeking to follow Jesus and be like God the merciful Father, the church feels a special obligation to the poor, weak, elderly, and sick. This explains why over the centuries the church has started and maintained innumerable hospitals, clinics, schools, orphanages, feeding programs, rehabilitation centers, and houses of worship in every nation.

The church is imperfect but there’s probably one nearby, ready to help you look more carefully into the Good News. We would be glad to help you so please contact us.

**For Further Reading:**

***Basic Christianity*** by John R.W. Stott

***Repentance and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Man*** by C. John Miller

***The Centrality of the Gospel*** an article by Timothy Keller  
found on-line at [http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Centrality\\_of\\_the\\_Gospel-Keller.pdf](http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Centrality_of_the_Gospel-Keller.pdf)

***The Ragamuffin Gospel*** by Brennan Manning

***Abba's Child*** by Brennan Manning

***Is the Bible Intolerant? Sexist? Oppressive? Homophobic? Outdated? Irrelevant?*** by Amy Orr-Ewing

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