

Making the Story Meaningful

Christianity Isn't the Way—Jesus Is

by *Tim Timmons*

I've spent most of my life seeking to understand how to relate to the non-churched, non-Christian world. My books and speaking platforms have all had a crossover flavor to them and I finally ended up at the peak of professional speaking opportunities on the largest platforms in addition to pastoring one of the early mega-churches.

During that season of my life I came to the conclusion that only Jesus could transform our lives.

1. *Not* Churchianity
2. *Not* Christianity
3. *Not* conversion methods
4. *Only Jesus*

I came to the conclusion that in order to reach the non-churched world I would have to separate myself from mainstream churches and Christianity. So, I did that to a certain degree, but I still had to take up offerings to keep the church and its staff alive.

In the second season of my life Jesus apprehended my heart in a fresh way and poised me toward taking this same *Jesus plus nothing* message beyond the “secular,” non-churched world into the 7 major cultures of the world.

So, now my focus and perpendicular learning curve have taken me to a simple understanding of Jesus and the Kingdom. I've spent so much time and energy unlearning a lot of my theological premises I received at graduate seminary while a student and professor. It's been a fresh look at Jesus and His message of the good news of the Kingdom. He only mentions “church” twice, yet we are all about building, preserving and uplifting the Church. His message was not the Church, but all about the Kingdom.

In this journey now we are working with the 7 primary cultures of the world—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Animist, Christian and Atheist/Agnostic. We don't present Christianity to them, but Jesus. We teach them to follow the teachings and principles of Jesus as the early disciples did. It took a while

Editor's note: This is an updated version of an article that originally appeared on www.assistnews.net. Used by permission of the author.

Tim Timmons is a former pastor of a mega-church who is now in the full-time focus of mentoring/discipling those who have ears to hear and eyes to see in seven cultures of our world—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Animist, agnostics and Christians. Tim is with a local fellowship of followers of Jesus in Orange County, California. From that base he and his team are visiting those who are interested in the JESUS PLUS NOTHING message, or the Good News of Jesus and the Kingdom message, in every city they are invited. They have no agenda or fee, but are interested in lighting Jesus in the hearts of all God raises up.

for the disciples to become believers. However, it's important to note that being a believer is not enough—the demons believe, false prophets/teachers of Matthew 7 are believers and we are believers. So, what's the difference? Jesus says, "Only those who do the will of my Father will enter the Kingdom." So "hear my words and practice them" . . .

We are working with the Buddhist youth. What is so amazing is that these young Buddhists are followers of Jesus. It's just like hanging out with the early disciples while Jesus is out for the evening. As these Buddhist followers of Jesus grow they are making a major difference within their own society and nation. It is mind-blowing! We are seeing the same results within the other cultures. Jesus trumps everything else. Not Christianity, but Jesus. My concern is that we must stick to the teachings and principles of Jesus without depending upon a set of beliefs or a theological system that man has built around Jesus. I believe Jesus never was a Christian and doesn't want to be.

The problem I sense with making Christianity the answer or making the ultimate goal for a person to become a Christian is the following:

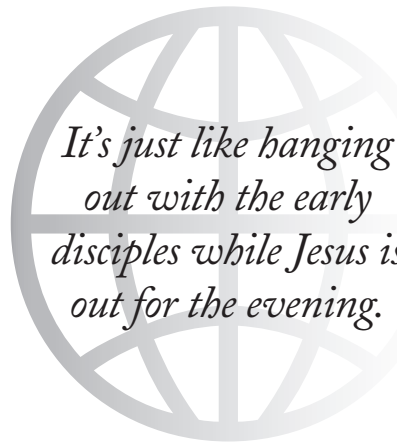
We are using and promoting terms (Christian and Christianity) that are *not* even used by Jesus or any writer in the New Testament. Worse, we have transformed these terms into sacred goals for not only our lives, but the entire world. By doing this we set it up for people to hate Christians and Christianity, even lumping it altogether with the West. Therefore, so many do not hear the Good News. So many miss the most attractive person ever—Jesus.

Many people use the term "Christianity" and mean by it a personal relationship with Jesus. However, words must be chosen well in order to communicate most clearly. So, consider these observations:

First—Making Western Cultural Christianity the primary way to God

implies all other cultural religions are wrong and Western Cultural Christianity is right. It tells people that to be a Follower of Jesus, one must also undergo a cultural transformation to Western Christian culture. It's as if Western Christian culture and Western Cultural Christians own Jesus. This is not scriptural; Jesus is not exclusive, but all-inclusive.

Second—Making Christianity the primary way to God implies and requires that Christians must convert the world to Western Cultural Christianity. Obviously, this requires a vast array



of evangelistic campaigns, exporting Christian music and Christian doctrine, which is really a brand of Christianity from the West, with the intent of changing the audience to a more western culture. This creates a prideful, imperialistic, cultural type of evangelism. It creates a situation where people of other religions are the "enemy of our faith" who must convert to "our side," instead of simply follow Jesus within their context. The turn-off level is great and very offensive to many who don't want to reject their culture in order to come to Jesus. The truth is that only Jesus through His Spirit is able to bring about spiritual transformation. This is not a cultural transformation, but a heart transformation.

Third—Making Western Cultural Christianity the primary way to God brings with it a narrow view of God, Jesus and the Kingdom. God and Jesus are limited as being from the West. It's a negation of God's full creation

of every culture, nation and tribe and thereby diminishing the cultural richness of the Creator-God.

Fourth—Making Western Cultural Christianity the primary way to God reduces Jesus and the Kingdom to a religious system, competing for the hearts and minds of men and women everywhere. Christianity is another religious system on par with the religions of the world. Jesus and the Kingdom are not! We cannot change people with religious rituals and programs; that is pride. Only a personal relationship with Jesus, who is above all religions, can and will change people; from the inside out.

E. Stanley Jones' approach in the Indian culture was marked by his meeting with Mahatma Ghandi. Ghandi had just returned from his work in South Africa. He asked Ghandi how he might make the Good News more effective in the nation of India. Without skipping a beat, Ghandi offered two suggestions to Jones. First, "If you Christians would practice the teachings and principles of Jesus, that would go a long way in communicating your faith." Second, "If you would study our culture and religion, then you will find we aren't all that bad and reprehensible." Jones found these to be profound enough to make them the cornerstone of his approach to not only the Indian culture, but the cultures of the world.

Fifth—Making Western Cultural Christianity the primary way to God ignores the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus is for the entire world. Jesus never urged anyone to become a part of a Christian culture or to join a Synagogue or Church. His only concern seems to be the person's heart of faith and the subsequent act of whether or not the person becomes a follower of Jesus.

Jesus made it a habit of reaching out to people from all kinds of religious and cultural backgrounds. Note just a few illustrations of how the approach of Jesus and his disciples was all-inclusive.

John 4:12—The Woman at the Well

The woman at the well was a Samaritan with very different beliefs regarding the center of worship. He left her with cultural beliefs intact, except that He trumped the center of worship by saying that someday the center of worship will not be in a given location, but in your heart. Jesus was not promoting a new religion; he was offering a personal relationship with God. This personal relationship would transform both her religion and the Hebrew religion. When Jesus conversed with the Samaritan woman, He didn't make certain to warn her of her false beliefs and be sure to change the mountain where she worshipped. There was no renunciation of her false doctrines.

Mark 7:26—The Syrophenician Woman

She was a gentile from a godless culture. Her faith was evident in her persistent conversation with Jesus about her daughter. Jesus honored her faith, however He didn't pull her into a new religious system or study class, nor did He have her renounce her cultural upbringing. The presence of Jesus will change a person from the inside out to be like Jesus. God's presence will convict their hearts in His time of what needs to be changed in their personal and cultural ways; *not us!*

Mark 6:45—7:23—Trip to Gennesaret

Do you notice how many times the Gospel writers refer to going to the other side of the Sea of Galilee? Whenever they were on the Jewish side, they crossed over to the other side. Why? Jesus performed the same works among the gentile world. He never urged them to change their religious culture, but let them remain right where they grew up. However, they were drawn to Him.

Matthew 8:5—The Roman Centurion

No doubt the Roman Centurion grew up with the Roman gods, yet Jesus does not speak to this at all. His concern was his faith. When Jesus declared the Roman official's faith as outstanding,

C*ultural Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Animists, Agnostics, Muslims, and even Christians can all be followers of Jesus.*

even greater than He had seen among the house of Israel, Jesus didn't tell this man to make sure to repent and go renounce the many Roman deities or his faith would be for naught. Further in the scene in the healing of the Roman Centurion's servant, Jesus says: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." These are non-Jews or, in our vernacular, non-Christians.

John 10:16—"Other Sheep"

Jesus mentions "other sheep" that are His. Who are these other sheep? Could it be that they are from the various cultures of the world? Could they be those spoken of in Romans 2:14-15 and 1 John 4:7?

Acts 15:1-29—The First Gentile Followers of Jesus

The first followers of Jesus were all Jews. When the first gentiles (everyone else) came to Jesus, some religious Jews insisted that all followers of Jesus must become cultural Jews. The apostles clearly decided against this. All people could be Followers of Jesus without changing their culture.

Acts 10:28—Peter's Experience with the Non-Jews

After Peter was supernaturally led to the house of Cornelius by a radical vision from God, he told them: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

Acts 17:26-27—Message of Paul in Athens

"From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did

this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us." God made the nations—all nations—in such a way so that all men might seek and find God.

Acts 17—Paul Addressing the Gentiles in Athens

When Paul spoke before the gentile audience in Athens, he didn't quote Scripture, didn't use Jesus' name at first, stroked them for their many idols of worship and proceeded to explain to them who this UNKNOWN GOD is that they commemorated. He didn't call for the renunciation of these "gods" and he used their "heathen" poems to explain what God is like (Acts 17:28), yet many believed in Jesus that day. What's that all about? I don't know many with this kind of approach.

Revelation 5:9—Every Tribe and Tongue and People and Nation

Jesus came to reach all of these, not by exporting any given tribe, tongue, people or nation, but from within each of these faith in Jesus naturally emerges. Since the Creator-God is the source of all people, He has already marked all of these people groups. The word translated as "nations" is actually *ethnos* in the Greek. This is where we get the word "ethnic" from; in other words, there will be every cultural group with Jesus.

Anyone, anywhere can be a follower of Jesus—Cultural Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Animists, Agnostics, Muslims, and even Christians can all be followers of Jesus. Christians have said for years that a cultural Jew doesn't have to renounce being Jewish in order to follow Jesus. Following Jesus makes a person's Jewishness more full and meaningful. I believe this translates into the many cultures of the world. Following Jesus brings out the fullness of any and all cultures. A cultural Buddhist can be a follower of Jesus. A

cultural Muslim can be a follower of Jesus. It's just like a cultural Catholic can be a follower of Jesus without renouncing his cultural background or a cultural Baptist or a cultural Methodist. Anyone can be a follower of Jesus and still remain within his or her cultural background...and this is quite Biblical as demonstrated above.

I love Paul's words, "I am afraid as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness that your minds might be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (II Cor. 11). I wonder if this is what is going on in our ministries.

I don't want to slam any church or Christian leader by what I'm saying, but I do want to be helpful in awakening leaders everywhere to the simplicity and purity of following Jesus. I have pastored a few churches over the years and know how easy it is to fall into the habit—patterns of keeping the "show" going—whether it is the Sunday morning service, the youth program, the

children's ministry, and the obligatory prayer-letter back to supporters. Sometimes we get caught in the trap of pleasing our constituencies and are not free to see Jesus and His teachings as they are. We pray for a special releasing of the people of God everywhere to be free to see what Jesus said and did and *just do what he says*.

By the way, when Jesus spoke of being hated by the world as He was hated, He was referring to the religious leaders ("They will put you out of their synagogues"), and that's where I receive most of my attacks...from those brothers who ought to know better.

Why is the church viewed as irrelevant and out of step with the culture? Why is the church so impotent and dying out in the USA at the rate of 70+ churches per week? Why is the church not expanding in our country?

The building and expansion of little local kingdoms called Churches has replaced genuine transformation through the good news of Jesus and the

Kingdom. Christianity, though well-intentioned, has placed the emphasis in the wrong place and is missing the power of personal transformation. And that relational, spiritual transformation can only happen through the power of Jesus, not Christianity.

The emphasis must be upon Jesus and the Kingdom and churches/fellowships gathering in the name of Jesus to teach and practice the Kingdom lifestyle. So, it's not so important that a person becomes a Christian or Catholic or Baptist or Adventist or whatever. What's important is to be a follower of Jesus. Christianity isn't the way; Jesus is. **IJFM**

Connecting students to God's global purposes.

A pastor and parent share about INSIGHT, a college-level worldview program of the U.S. Center for World Mission, available for 32 college credits at locations nationwide:

Insight
Intensive Study of Integrated Global History and Theology



"...a God-entranced vision of reality that will make all other study, and all the rest of life, deeper, richer, and more in sync with God's ultimate purposes for your life."

John Piper
Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church

"The INSIGHT Program was a life changing experience for our daughter....My wife and I consider the money invested in the program to be one of the best investments we ever made with any of our children."

Doug Birdsall
Executive Chair, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization



Contact INSIGHT for program locations: insight@uscwm.org