

## **Christianity and the World**

**Acts 1:6-14**

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Last week I was driving east on Greenbelt Road and stumbled upon Chanan's Buffet. I like Chinese food and I like buffets so I decided to give the place a try. The hostess met me at the door and called for a waitress in what I assume was Mandarin. After giving her directions I didn't understand, the very affable woman seated me and asked me what I wanted to drink. In response to my answer, she soon brought a glass of iced tea. Over the duration of my meal, she returned a couple of times to say, "more tea?" and that was the extent of our conversation. I don't know a word of Mandarin and I think her English was limited to the names of beverages.

As I ate, I looked at the decor of the restaurant. Exotic images of far away places hung on the walls. Posters filled with Chinese calligraphy further adorned the brightly colored restaurant.

The place was noisy, filled with friendly conversations from people trying to consume as much food as possible before going back to work. Every few minutes the hostess called out in Chinese to another employee and a table was cleaned or a customer was seated or a message was taken to the kitchen.

In the midst of the hubbub, however, a momentary lull in the conversations surrounding me, combined with the fleeting silence of the hostess, drew my attention to the music that was playing. The instrumentation was what I expected: flutes and stringed instruments played and plucked in a melancholy way. As I listened further, however, I was surprised to identify the tune. It was so familiar to me, in fact, I was tempted to sing along. "Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, thou hast loved us, love us still." As that old Christian hymn was replaced by another and yet another, I was once again reminded, while sitting in the Chanan Buffett, eating General Tso's chicken and snow peas, that Jesus is for the whole world.

A debate persists as to what is the oldest of the major religions of the world. Hinduism generally wins the argument because it is connected to ancient belief systems that go back as far as 3000 years before Christ's birth. The Jewish faith, is comparatively a newcomer to world history. If you trace it's origins to Abraham, it began around 1800 B.C. Should you prefer to date it from the time of Moses and the 10 Commandments, then the religion didn't get going until about 1300 years before Jesus' birth. The Buddha began his philosophical school of thought somewhere around 560 B.C. Jesus was born, as strange as it sounds, around 6 B.C. Islam is the new kid on the block, dating it's origins to the work of Mohammed, nearly seven hundred years after the earthly life of Jesus.

Buddha lived in India, but he taught that his philosophy was for all races and nationalities. In contrast, although, there are adherents of Hinduism, Judaism and Islam all over the world, those ancient religions have always been associated with certain regions of the world. There are about one billion, one hundred million Hindus on the planet today but fully one billion of them live in India. The vast majority of the rest live in countries that border that vast nation. Judaism began as a religion for the Hebrew tribes. Initially, it's concern was with obtaining a home land for the children of Israel and to this day, it is still intricately connected to that small piece of territory in the middle east.

Islam began as a movement to unify the tribes of Arabia. Although the faith is growing in many places all over the world, it is still predominantly thought of as a religion of the Arab people.

In contrast, Christianity has no national or ethnic identification. Parts of the world may equate the United States with Christianity (until they visit here) or they might think of Rome as the capital of the Christian world, but such conclusions are not accurate. The intention of our founder Jesus Christ was, from the very beginning, for his disciples to take the gospel to all the people of the world.

Granted, the earliest followers of Jesus didn't catch the vision at first. The book of Acts tells us that forty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the Lord met with his disciples. The men and women who were soon to bear his name, asked Jesus, "Are you now going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?" In other words, they thought the whole purpose of the crucifixion and resurrection was to establish a new kingdom for the Jewish people. Since they were Jesus' closest friends and followers, they assumed they would be given positions of power in the new realm.

Jesus confronted their erroneous assumptions by saying, "you will receive power, my friends, but not to build a new nation. God's Spirit will come upon you and give you power to share your witness of all that you have seen in my life, death and resurrection with the whole world." Continuing his corrective conversation, Jesus said, "You will first have the privilege of sharing your witness in Jerusalem and then opportunities will open up in all Judea. Eventually, you will find yourself bearing witness to my life in Samaria and one day, the Spirit will enable you to tell my story to the whole world."

Acts was written by Luke, but he was not the only Biblical writer who understood that Christianity was for the whole world. Matthew remembered that Jesus told believers to "Go and make disciples in all nations." Mark reported that our risen Lord instructed his followers to "Go to all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." John captured this truth in the most famous verse in the New Testament, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son." After his dramatic conversion, Paul heard Christ say, the gospel was "to be light for all nations and salvation to the ends of the earth."

To further emphasize the understanding that he was not the possession of any one nation, race or tribe, Jesus, after finishing his final command to his followers, ascended to heaven. Note, he did not put roots down in Jerusalem or travel to India or take residence in Arabia. Jesus, by the power of God, ascended to a spiritual home for all people, a place without borders, or capital, or army or flag. The Lord went to a realm that has only official language but love, no citizenship papers but faith and no national anthem but Amazing Grace. Christ took his place of honor and authority in the heavenly city described by John the Revelator as a city whose gates always stand open, so that all the nations of the world can enter to worship the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Tragically, throughout Christian history, people have either misunderstood or intentionally twisted this beautiful truth to mean that the church should forcibly extend the reign of Jesus around the world. From at least the time of the Emperor Constantine in 306 AD, right on up to this moment, priests and popes, preachers and potentates, generals and judges have tried to force the Christian faith on indigenous, conquered and often recalcitrant people.

In similar fashion, treacherous and misguided leaders have announced that the interest of their nation and the gospel of Christ were one in the same. Acting as if Jesus were the employee of Great Britain or the Holy Roman Empire or America's barons of westward expansion or Germany's National Socialist Worker's Party they have promoted a civil religion that taught that true Christians promoted the agenda of their party, nation, tribe or class. Such perversions of the gospel are not what Jesus had in mind.

Instead, our Lord wanted all the world to hear His sweet song of salvation. Jesus told us to preach the good news without coercion or manipulation. Equipped solely with the loving Spirit of God, Jesus sent us to tell the entire world that all who put their trust in Him can have their sins forgiven, find new joy in this life and eternal life in the land to come.

Jesus did not call us to be arm twisters, fear mongers or nation builders in His name. As disciples, we have been given the holy privilege to share our witness to the saving love of God with everyone we meet. We have been recruited by God to tell our story of faith. Each of our testimonies have three parts: 1. What our life was like before Christ helped us receive the forgiveness and grace of God. 2. How we came to accept Jesus' offer of the forgiveness and grace of God. 3. What our life has been like since Jesus helped us receive the forgiveness and grace of God.

The best witnesses are those who use their own words to describe their own experience. In a court of law, if a witness starts using words or phrases that sound stilted and rehearsed, or if they simply parrot the testimony of others, they are usually not found convincing by either judge or jury. If, however, they speak of what they truly saw, heard, felt, understood in their own words without pretense, they are usually found to be persuasive.

Loretta Lynn is a 78 year-old country music singer, who was once so famous, she was known as the Queen of Country Music. Next month, she will release a album celebrating her 50 year career. Several younger country music and pop stars will sing with Loretta on this upcoming tribute album. One track of the album has already been released. It is a version of Ms Lynn's most famous song, "Coal Miner's Daughter." The song is an autobiographical account about the country legend's childhood in the coal mining town of Butcher Holler, Kentucky. Singing the song with Loretta are two very successful female artists, Sheryl Crow and Miranda Lambert. Both young stars have sold millions of records, or, to be more accurate, MP3 downloads. Singers Crow and Lambert perform their assigned verses of the country classic with style and passion. In no way do they phone their contributions in. Still, when Loretta kicks in, she takes the song to a whole new level of power and meaning. Why? Because she is a far better singer? No. Because she is singing about what she knows. The other women are singing about something neither has ever experienced.

Christ has invited us to be witnesses of our experience with Him. Picture a room full of people with Christ in front. You are in the room and so am I as well as every other disciple. The Lord looks out upon us and calls on Peter to share his testimony. He rises and says, "I was a fisherman before Jesus came along. I struggled with the guilt of many sins and thought my future would always be centered on boats and nets and fish. Jesus came along and forgave my sins and gave me grace to live my life in a whole new way. I couldn't even read or write, but Jesus make a fearless preacher out of me. My life has never been the same and I thank God everyday."

Then Jesus calls on Mary Magdalene to share her witness. She rises and says "Before I met Jesus, I was lost in random sexual experiences. I thought I needed a man to be happy and agreed to almost any kind of abusive relationship to get what I thought I had to have. I was so troubled by the emptiness of my lifestyle that people began to say I was possessed by demons. Jesus came along and forgave all my sins and gave me a new spirit of wholeness and love. Since that day I have known a peace and joy that had previously eluded me. I praise God for what Jesus has done for me."

Next Christ calls on Clyde Casey who just yesterday, at his ordination council said, "I was about dead when Jesus found me. I was so strung out on drugs and alcohol, even the VA thought I was a hopeless cause. But Christ had mercy on me and forgave all my sins and empowered me to turn away from the lifestyle that was killing me. Now I want to tell others that Christ's love, power and grace can help them live in a new way too."

As Clyde sits down, Jesus calls on . . . you. You stand and talk about your own life before Jesus and how you came to receive the forgiveness and grace of God and what a difference that grace has made in your life. That is what Christ asks each of us to do.

Jesus did not send us into the world to fake faith, pretend piety or mimic the message of others. In essence, He said, let the Spirit of God help you to tell others what you feel in your heart about me. For if you do, people as close as next door and as far away as Shanghai will too find the grace and forgiveness of God and become witnesses to all the world of my saving love.