

## The Essence of Christianity in Eight Words

How is it possible to communicate a relationship? Relationships are a unique entity in this cosmos. They can be described only vaguely and partially. To know what a relationship is, one has to experience it. We all experience relationships growing up in a family. We form friends, we work with colleagues, etc. If married, we know how deep a relationship can be. So we all know intuitively what a relationship is. Yet, a relationship remains difficult to communicate in words. The Apostle Paul however does exactly this in a surprising way in Philippians Chapter 1. He says, **“to live is Christ, to die is gain.”** The great movement of God that began in Genesis 3, climaxed in the incarnation and atoning work of the Son, to be culminated in the future, can be summed up in these eight words, the words of relationship.

Paul is saying a lot in these eight words in Philippians 1:21. We have today in our land an abridged and superficial understanding of Christianity. The debasement began in the early centuries of the Church Age and sadly was only minimally reformed by the Protestant Reformation. And in recent decades, it has only gotten worse. So we need to reflect on these words of Paul to return to biblical Christianity.

What does Paul mean by this verse? Well, he’s not saying in any way that he merely believes in a doctrine, in a proposition, in a biographical fact. No, he’s communicating in the best way that anyone can that he’s in an intimate, loving relationship with the living Jesus, the Jewish Messiah/King. His life is perfectly wrapped up in the life of Jesus. And vice versa: His life is wrapped up in that of Paul. They are bonded together in an intimate union, a communion of persons. And he’s saying that his purpose in life is to exalt Christ. “Gain” doesn’t mean release from the pain and his sufferings due to the persecutions in his life. Nor do I think it means that how he dies will benefit his readers. He’s saying that the fellowship that he’s in with Jesus is an eternal one; it cannot ended by his death. In fact, on the other side of death that communion is heightened, even more intimate and more wonderful to experience.

Why does Paul say this? To impress us that he’s a super-Apostle? Hardly. His intention clearly is for us also to experience, to enjoy that same kind of fellowship with Jesus. And to pursue our lives with the very same purpose as he does, to exalt Jesus. Because: this is what Christianity is! We are at the very core of Christianity here with these eight words. Christianity is a real, living, experiential relationship with the risen and exalted Christ. Elsewhere, Paul teaches (repeatedly) our union with Christ. In another place, he says, **“When Christ your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory”** (Colossians 3:4). Being a Christian is to be a totally new person whose very life is that of Jesus Himself. This isn’t abstract doctrine! This isn’t mere theology. And this isn’t simply an option for those who desire to go deeper into their faith. This is how Paul expresses the relationship that’s the very essence of Christianity.

How do we miss it? We miss it precisely because we *want* to miss it. If the preacher says “Trust Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and to have eternal life,” that we want! But that’s *all* we want. We suppose that “trusting Christ” and having forgiveness of all sin gives us license to live as we please, to be and to do exactly the same as before we “trusted” Christ, except of course that we go to church on Sunday mornings. So we are mentally in agreement with a true biblical statement, “Christ died for our sins.” But that’s not a relationship! We cannot be in a personal relationship with a fact. It doesn’t matter how true that fact is, facts don’t save. The risen, living, exalted Jesus saves, and that by being in a trusting, loving relationship with Him. Jesus Himself said this: “I never knew you. Depart from me you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:23). Those religious people that Jesus was addressing knew who Jesus was, but they were not in a saving personal relationship to Him. And because they didn’t love or trust Him, they didn’t obey His instructions and commands. I fear many of us today are self-deceived. That’s why this lesson is so needful.

Yes, relationships will deepen over time. Both prayer and knowing and loving Jesus as we encounter Him in the Word lead us into ever closer communion. And as we obey Him in the enabling power of His Spirit our relationship deepens. But indifference to Him has to mean that there’s no relationship. Let no one accuse me of teaching here what’s called, “Lordship salvation” or of “front-loading” the gospel. We’ve created these bugaboos to defend ourselves from having to be in the very kind of relationship Paul states that Christianity is.

There’s more. What Paul has stated is not only the fact (necessity) of a personal relationship with Jesus, but that the purpose of our new life in this relationship is to exalt Jesus. Full-time. “To live is Christ” means that revealing Christ is the

reason, the purpose, the meaning of life itself. Attending Sunday morning “worship” service doesn’t do it. A Christian identity added onto our life doesn’t do it. How we live, and what kind of person we are (or are becoming) reveals our life’s purpose, reveals and exalts the Christ in us. Serving Christ as He instructed us to do likewise demonstrates our new life in Christ. The more we serve and the more risks we take and the greater the sacrifice that serving Him involves deepens the relationship, as Paul’s own life demonstrates.

The people of Israel in the Old Testament were complacent about their religion. They assumed that God had covenanted with them and that they therefore were immune from judgment. They could therefore live as they pleased. The writing prophets knew otherwise. They—*all* of them—warned Israelites that their covenant relationship with the Lord demanded obedience to His revealed will. They had to actually demonstrate in real life the Lord’s will. So must we. The Church isn’t in any covenant relationship with God. [Believers are indirectly, through Christ, under the Abrahamic covenant; and Abraham, you will recall, had to demonstrate by his obedience that he believed God.] We’re united with Christ, and that’s a radically different kind of relationship than covenant. If we love Jesus, if we trust Him, if we’re grateful to Him, we’ll obey Him. We’ll do that by living, being, and doing as He taught. That’s how we exalt Him; we exalt His wisdom and His love and His goodness.

Let’s be more specific: How did Paul exalt Christ? (1) By imitating His character. Paul lived a life of weakness, of total dependence on God, and he gladly sacrificed himself for the sake of others, for just two examples. Being like Christ not only honors Christ but it reveals to others Christ’s perfections. And so, Paul said (repeatedly), “Imitate me as I imitate Christ.” (2) By teaching and actually living out biblical righteousness. His collection for the needy Jerusalem believers exemplifies that righteousness. And (3) By bringing others to know Christ and to love and trust Him. In these ways, we too exalt Christ. And we should do that with the same commitment that Paul had, a commitment that flows from being in relationship by grace with the living Creator God.

Paul’s “To die is gain” has another significance. It’s the central thesis of our faith; it’s our motive for living to exalt Christ; and it’s our blessed hope and the only one that satisfies our soul. In Hebrews 11, all those listed there “were longing for a better country, a heavenly one.” They “looked for a city whose builder and maker is God.” The great creation blessing that God intended for His beloved human creatures, because of the fall, occurs on the other side of death. Our “reward” for living to exalt Christ comes in the future, in the next existence, not in this life. The hypocrites (Matthew 6:5) have their reward (such as it is) now, and they don’t receive the reward that comes from God. The wealthy (Luke 6:24) likewise have their reward now, not in the next existence. If we insist on living this life as we please without regard to what Christ has revealed as His will for us, we’ve had our reward (such as it is) now.

Something else about Paul’s, “to die is gain.” For us, if we believe God’s Word, death is the transition to blessing and reward. Whether we live or die doesn’t matter because in either case, we’re in God’s presence, united to Christ, experiencing His resurrected life. In fact death is superior because we’ll be glorified, relieved of our sin nature, able to see and enjoy the living, eternal God. For a believer, there’s an unbroken, continuous, conscious existence from this life through death to life eternal. This is the greatest thing that Jesus has accomplished for us, which forgiveness of sins makes possible. Practically, what that means is, if even something as severe as our death has such great meaning for us, how much more should we live, regardless what sacrifice is entailed, to exalt Christ? I suspect very few of us realize just how radical this is. “To live is Christ” means that Christ’s priorities, His values, His love, His work of calling people into the Kingdom and, indeed, perhaps His very words, are ours. Even our motives and thoughts need to be brought into conformity with Jesus’. So we need to know Him and then live out His life, which we can do enabled by His indwelling Spirit.

Dear reader, don’t be smug about your “faith.” Paul’s words are - or should be - totally life-changing. Each of us needs to say about ourselves with sincerity and in truth: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”