

What Makes Christians Different?

Christians come in all shapes and sizes. They pursue practically the same diversity of occupations and interests as everyone else. They have political and economic opinions. Most of them spend their working lives balancing budgets, living in suburbia, paying off mortgages, raising kids (or electing not to have them) and generally coping from the cradle to the grave.

But there is something different about most Christians, once you peel away the first layer of the onion. They are not the same inside. They think differently. Their lives are guided by principles that don't always seem to make sense. They handle problems differently. Their conversations are not the same as those of their non-Christian friends. Sometimes they are harassed because they are different. At other times they are respected for their steadfastness. People regard them as either weird and eccentric or "normal", depending on their own world views and experiences.

What makes Christians different?

Why do Christians stand out in a post-modern world? Why do they think differently? Why are their life priorities and activities often different from those of their neighbours'?

I want to unpack this question and see how, as Christians, we can link with friends and neighbours and demonstrate that we are normal, but different for very good reasons that can enrich their lives and attract them to Christ.

The meaning of life

Christians have a different view about the meaning of life. The Bible teaches that God has made us in his image, for relationship with him. So, Christians do not subscribe to atheistic theories of evolution, historical determinism, fate, racial intolerance, abortion, astrology or nationalism. Christians believe God is involved in the world and wants to guide our lives and bless us. The Bible teaches that when Christ came he initiated a brand new "man" (1 Corinthians 15). When a person becomes a Christian they are "born again" and start life over as a member of a new creation, in a sense a new race. In this context, ethnic, social and economic distinctions become irrelevant (Galatians 4: 28).

Christians have a new DNA. The Bible says they have become partakers of God's nature (2 Peter 1:4). This does not imply they are "gods" or "god-like", as certain New Age groups teach, but that the life of God has been implanted in them (like a computer chip) and their spirits have been vivified (or made alive) with God's life.

The meaning of life is tied up with discovering why we are here and how our lives can count for eternity. Beauty fades (Proverbs 31:30). Popularity is unreliable; peoples' opinions can be fickle. National leaders disappoint the polity and are expelled from office after years of trying hard to make a

difference. Celebrities fall out of favour and are no longer subject of Hollywood's introspective indulgence. The world is materialistic. The Christian is therefore urged to lay up treasures in heaven, where inflation, theft and corruption do not affect their investments (Matthew 6:19-21).

Jesus commanded us to pursue eternal priorities, to "seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness", that is to be in right relationship with Him and live accordingly (Matthew 6:33). To the Christian, the concept of "win-win" is linked to a lifestyle choice that has eternal rewards. All too often I hear the expression, "He (or she) is a loser". No one is a loser who has trusted in Christ. Such a person can experience and express confidence without having to be "pumped up" by circumstances or other peoples' opinions.

Values

Christians have a different view about social values. The mores we espouse are not social averages or the lowest common political denominators in society. We believe God has shown us how to rise above the downward pull of social gravity and, the power of the media and other social engineers, has given us clear commands for living, through the Bible, and established Christian leadership in the church to help us understand how to implement these standards and practices with moral character and capabilities. This often puts us at odds with everyone else. However, the Christian believes his or her values are eternal, and will therefore not automatically toe the line regarding the issues of the moment.

When Christians make decisions that involve value judgements, they do so actively, not passively. They know what they are doing and are aware that every decision involves a judgement about how it fits in with God's way. The Christian knows his or her beliefs are not simply ideological. The Biblical man or woman does not espouse many of the world's values, because they are empty cant, hype, exaggeration or feel-good philosophies. They know Christ was not sucked in by the rhetoric, but went on and changed history. They, too, want to be history-makers.

Coping mechanisms

Christians have a different view about man's capacity to cope and do well. We believe sin is real, that the problems that exist in the world are the result of man's rebellion against God and that only Christ can change our hearts and enable us to put things right. The Holy Spirit has come from God, through Jesus, to fill us and supernaturally empower our lives (John 14:16-23). We do not need positive thinking, psychotherapy, group dynamics, or mind-over-matter principles to get above our problems. (Anyone can do that for a while, with the right training, but it is always tenuous.) We do not believe in escapism, denial, euthanasia or suicide as viable solutions. We become enthusiastic about life because we are "en-theos" (in God). We believe our children can – and should – grow up in the presence of God. He is the one who sustains us for the whole of life. He is the one who has declared that his truth will set us free (John 8:32).

Christians know that the “rat race” can make us feel and act like rats, that comfort zones can make us boring and mediocre, that the daily drill can be a relentless and tiresome grind. Christians see the hand of God in global and personal events that people without hope or divine perspective regard as calamitous.

Christians have a hope that no other faith system can provide. Bombarded with negative images every day, they know their lives are established on principles and a relationship with God that are rock solid. They know they do not have to follow others, to imitate or articulate their cynicism, or to win their approval to have self-worth. The Christian’s hope is predicated on Good News (this is what the word “Gospel” literally means). Everyone needs Good News. No other religion sings as much. (Christians probably sing more than almost anyone else in Western societies.) No other faith system consciously radiates joy as much as Christianity.

Relationships

Christians have a different view about relationships. Instead of being in relationships with others for “what’s in it for me” (usually abbreviated WIIFM), the Christian believes his or her primary relationship is with God and that Jesus Christ is Lord. Christians who implement God’s word are given strength to live in marriage, family, work and community in terms of higher relationship principles than the world prescribes. Christians believe they are children of God, adopted sons and daughters and that other Christians are their extended spiritual family. Christians draw on divine strength for power to forgive, to reach out to unlovely and unloving people and work with more highly tuned inter-personal skills. Non-Christians cannot explain this adequately, because they cannot identify the active ingredient.

Making a choice to be different

The fact that Christians are “different” can be dangerous. In some countries governments do not know what to do with people in the community whose first allegiance is not to the nation state. They are arrested, tortured, pressured to change, to buckle under, and to subscribe to the policies of parties and image makers. Christians find it impossible to do this if party or state are contrary to Biblical teaching. Peter told the religious leaders in Jerusalem, “We ought to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Maybe it serves them right if they suffer, but the choice is theirs (1 Peter 4:12-16).

Christians know they cannot serve two masters. They can be good patriots and loyal citizens, obey the law, pay taxes and work for social stability, but they cannot sell themselves to a lower bidder, because their Master is Christ. Christians will always stand out, in many cases to the displeasure of those in authority. “If they hated me, they will also hate you” (Matthew 10:22). Jesus said, “If any man loves me, let him follow me, so that where I am, there will my servant be also” (John 12:26). But Christians do not sink into the “victim” morass; they know there are more important issues at stake. They are

reminded of Jesus' concluding words, "If any man honours me, him also will my father honour"

There is also a theological explanation. If Christians act differently this is because they are undergoing a process the Bible calls "sanctification". This seemingly arcane word simply means "separated". When we follow Christ, we are separated. We no longer belong to ourselves. We belong to God. Incidentally, the word "saint" comes from the same root; in the New Testament ordinary Christians were known as "saints" (cf Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1). What a liberating truth!

Conforming to be different – a paradox

The non-Christian world stresses uniformity. Christians stress conformity to Christ (Romans 12:2). The world says, "Be like us". The Bible says, "Do not let the world squeeze you into its mould". "Repentance" (*metanoia*) literally means a "change of mind". People who repent on the inside are transformed on the outside. Those who try to change the outside alone cannot stop the storms of life from dissolving the mask. The Bible says Christ renews our minds.

Christians are not superior or elite, operating within a narrow clique, for they know only the grace of God is "sufficient" for them (2 Corinthians 12:9) and that when they are weak in themselves they can be strong in Him (1 Corinthians 12:10). Instead of taking pride in their achievements, they humbly acknowledge that it is the grace of God that has transformed them and made them what they are. Grace ("*charis*") is God's gift; it is given, not earned. Someone has said that grace is an abbreviation of "God's Riches at Christ's Expense".

The non-Christian world says, "Live it up; you have only one life". The Christian Manifesto is based on being "crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 2:20), being "dead" to the world so that we can live for Christ (Romans 6:1-7). That makes every Christian different, but for the right reasons.

Christians are not rebels or mavericks; they are surrendered to Christ and the direction of the Holy Spirit. They have different priorities. Those priorities occasionally conflict with everybody else's expectations, but they can also be powerful magnets attracting others to the Christ who lives within. Speaking about the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, "He will be with you and in you". The Christian's Constitution is to be a loyal citizen in this life (Romans 13:1-7), but live and hope as citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). If necessary, Biblical Christians are prepared to go to jail and even to die, rather than give up eternal life that is theirs in Christ. They go about recalling the observation of Jesus, "Unless a corn of wheat falls into the ground and dies it abides alone, a single seed. But if it dies it brings forth much fruit" (John 12:24).

The thing that makes us different is what transforms us. It is a new way of thinking, with new goals, desires, drives, appetites, ambitions and key

measures of satisfaction. The Holy Spirit is the Teacher and mentor (John 14:25-26; 16:13-15). Other Christians are the community of supporters who provide mutual encouragement. We are different from the rest of the world for the same reasons Jesus was different. At times we feel inadequate, but we have what many people are looking for, and they recognise it when they see it (“You’ve got something.”)— even if our witness has been less than ideal. God is greater than our limits (see 2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

No fakes

Personal and document fraud are growing exponentially throughout the world. I have been professionally trained to spot fake passports, currency notes and other legal documents. I can also detect impostors. The techniques are not rocket science. In every day life, most people can spot fakes. If Christians are really different, as I have been asserting they are, they will pass the test of genuineness every time. I am wearied of the hackneyed and ill-informed generic claim that “the church is full of hypocrites”. That is a lazy social comment, devoid of empirical meaning and often trotted out to justify non-involvement on the part of non-Christians. (If they started attending, the immediate effect would be that there were even more hypocrites.) Sure, there are many people in church buildings who do not live up to what they believe (or claim to believe). The fastest track to irrelevance is to pretend we are perfect.

But there is an underlying distinction between people who have been “born again” through faith in Christ and the rest of humanity. Christians are aware that they need to grow up, to put off the old way of living and mature as followers of Jesus (1 Corinthians 13:11). If we fail in this area, let’s be honest enough to admit it and allow the Holy Spirit to continue to change us. Churches are full of religious people, and irreligious ones too, from the leadership to the lowliest pew warmer. That does not detract from the genuine article.

Metamorphosis

To get back to the original question, “What makes Christians different?” God does. Every testimony of change, of a new life, of shackles of old lifestyles struck off miraculously, is evidence of the power of God.

A caterpillar sat on a juicy green leaf munching its way through the vegetation. As a beautiful butterfly flew overhead he grub turned to its companion and remarked, “You’ll never get me up in one of those things”. When I was a boy I used to keep silk worms. Given plenty of mulberry leaves the grubs inexorably grew larger and larger; all they ever seemed to do was devour food. Where was the silk? Where was my return for hours of protecting them from the local birds and from starving to death? One day they would stop eating and start building cocoons around their fat bodies. Then they would close the hatch and disappear. “Good-bye caterpillars”. The cocoons would be surrounded by fine silk, which I would patiently wind onto an ice-cream stick for later use. In due time, the ends of the cocoons would open up and

moths with moist white wings would emerge, to lay eggs and eventually die. The caterpillars were nowhere in sight. They had been “metamorphosized” into moths, so that life could go on.

When we allow God to carry out his work in our lives we undergo a process of metamorphosis, of radical change. We no longer think, act or speak the same way. “The old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). A supernatural transformation has occurred. That is why Christians are different. And that is why every person I know needs a personal encounter with Jesus, because he can change their lives too.