

ERIN MILLS

BAPTIST CHURCH



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An Open Invitation to Consider Christianity

By

Pastor Andrew R. McGinn

The world is filled with a lot of different religions. For a long time, many in Canada have tried to live without religion but have found that this path has left them empty and weak. Many new immigrants to our country are curious about some of the many religions that are now practiced here, especially the primary religious heritage of this great nation, Christianity. And for those who wanted to consider other religions but who, because of religious and political controls, were not permitted to do so in their native country there is a natural curiosity about Christianity that begs to be indulged.

I am a minister of the Christian religion in a Baptist Church in Mississauga. What follows is a brief explanation about some of the central ideas of Christianity and an invitation to join us at Erin Mills Baptist Church. This little letter is not intended to criticize anyone else's beliefs, nor will I attempt to reconcile a number of different practices that exist within Christianity. All I am attempting to do in this open letter, is provide a little background information for those who want to know some basic things about Christianity and maybe excite their interests and help them to find a peaceful and happy relationship with God.

The Name Christianity

The story of Christianity is a long one. It is an exciting tale that is filled with intrigue, daring and above all, faith. Christianity receives its name from the man Jesus of Nazareth, who lived

from about 4 BC to AD 33, at which time he was crucified as a traitor to Rome, but was raised from the dead by God and was received into heaven bodily. These events along with a number of unique things about the person of Jesus led a number of his early followers to believe that God had uniquely chosen him. The Hebrew word for this special commissioning was Messiah meaning, “anointed” and is translated *Christos* in Greek. Jesus bore the title “the Christ” among his followers who were called Christians.

Of course, understanding the origins of the name “Christianity” and its function among the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is really to begin in the middle. There is a lot of stuff that comes before that is necessary to a proper understanding of how Jesus could be the Christ of God and consequently shape so much of human history.

In the Beginning

The story of Christianity begins with creation. God, desiring to share his love, created the world and humanity to dwell in it. It was his intention that humanity would exist in a very intimate relationship with himself and in harmony with creation and each other. However, he felt it necessary to test humanity and see if it could be trusted and gave a simple instruction forbidding the eating of the fruit from a certain tree in a paradisiacal garden called Eden. Our first parents chose to disobey this command and in so doing rejected God, plunged the entire human race into alienation with God and disrupted the harmony between humanity and the creation.

The consequences of this disastrous act of selfishness made it impossible for humanity to know God or to have a happy relationship with him. Human relationships were also distorted

and corrupted through this evil action. Creation was subjected to a curse making life on earth difficult. God was not pleased with this new arrangement, but chose not to punish humanity with immediate, ultimate destruction and instead, provided a means of reconciliation. He did this by choosing from out of humanity a nation of people that would enjoy a special love relationship with him and through which he would bring his love to all of humanity. This nation was the ancient nation of Israel.

A Nation for God

God spoke to Israel through a man called Moses. Moses engaged in a series of confrontations with the Egyptian Pharaoh that culminated in a miraculous mass exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt. At this time, the Israelites were slaves to the Egyptians and were forbidden to worship God. When Israel was delivered from Egypt, God brought them to Mount Sinai where he gave them a Law to govern them. Included in this Law are the familiar Ten Commandments, a summary of all that the Law contained.

The Law governed every aspect of Israel's life. Each individual had responsibilities to maintain holiness in the land and in the nation. The Law was primarily given to make Israel different from the other nations and to show it exactly how God expected them to behave in worship as well as towards each other. The Law could be summed up in two very important commandments: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself.

Before long, Israel neglected its relationship with God and the Law that was to govern them was ignored. Sometimes they ignored the rituals that governed their access to God, sometimes they ignored the ethical elements that governed

their relationship with each other, and sometimes they ignored them both. God was not pleased with this disobedience, especially when the ancient Israelites thought they could win his blessing by keeping the ritual side of the Law but neglected the ethical requirements it contained. Soon it became clear that God would have to intervene if his purpose for this nation would materialize.

Rise and Collapse of State

The intervention came in many ways. First God sent a series of governors called judges to lead Israel. The function of these judges was largely tribal and local. Kings that united all the tribes of Israel and made it into a nation state followed the judges. Prophets were sent to guide the kings and call them back to the will of God that was given in the Law. These prophets had a spirit from God that gave them special access to the will of God in specific situations. Sometimes they warned of impending judgement when the kings ignored them and foretold disasters for the failure of God's people.

After little more than 80 years as a united state, God divided the nation of Israel into northern and southern kingdoms. The northern kingdom, Israel, fought with the southern kingdom, Judah, and was eventually conquered by an Assyrian king who dissolved the northern state forcing them into exile. A few years later the Babylonians did the same to the southern kingdom.

The southern kingdom, Judah, managed to survive the exile, and by God's mercy was permitted to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. With the religious center restored and the ritual of the Law reinitiated, Judah had the opportunity to repair the breach that had so long existed between God and his people.

This reduced nation bore the name of the whole, "Israel," and came to represent the whole in its relationship before God.

A Greater and More Comprehensive Plan

God, however, had all along another plan that he did not reveal explicitly through his prophets, but about which a number of allusions are embedded in the prophets' words. This plan required Israel but would ultimately transcend Israel in a wonderful way. The plan required that a single child of Israel would fulfill all of God's purposes for the nation. To do this, this child would have to be unique. It was a plan that would save Israel and the world from the effect of that first sin of disobedience as well as each subsequent sin confirming that first one. What was needed was a representative human, a person in whom all of humanity could be represented. A person who would could pass the test of obedience and could in fact do it in a less than ideal environment, since what our first parents failed to do in a perfect world, this Saviour had to do in a fallen and cursed one. To do this, God sent his divine Son to become the perfect man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Introducing Jesus

Jesus was born to Mary, a virgin espoused to the carpenter Joseph of Nazareth. Jesus was born through direct intervention of God, who planted the seed in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit. He was born in a stable in Bethlehem and raised according to Jewish customs. He learned the Law of God and grew into a man.

Jesus was unique, because unlike everyone around him, Jesus never disobeyed God. He was born in fellowship with God and through his perpetual obedience was able to stay in that

fellowship. But more than this, God was with Jesus in a very special way. In fact, Jesus was God incarnate, i.e. God made human. In Jesus God chose to become human like us, so that he could do what we couldn't, and bring all of humanity back into a loving relationship with himself. Jesus was able to live a sinless (perfect) life, because he was God.

Jesus' Life and Death

During his life Jesus taught people how they might share in God's blessings. He used the special powers that he had to show people what the kingdom of God was like and to prove to them that God had already made that kingdom a reality. He healed sick people, brought people back to life from the dead, and offered forgiveness of sins to those who trusted him and believed his teachings. He even challenged the main religious teachers who tried to use the old Jewish religion of Israel as a means of control. Jesus was not friendly to many of these leaders and opposition from them followed many of his encounters with them.

Because Jesus threatened their power, these leaders planned to kill him. They arranged for one of his closest followers, Judas Iscariot, to betray him, by paying him with thirty pieces of silver. Then, once they arrested him, they falsely accused him of breaking the Law of God and charged him with a capital offence. However, because they were a vassal state within Rome, they could not unilaterally execute their punishment on him, so they handed him over to Pontius Pilate, a Roman governor.

Pilate did not wish to take up the job of being a Jewish executioner, but was forced to do so when the Jews made it appear that Jesus was attempting to lead a revolt against

Caesar. Pilate apparently saw through this, but could not overcome the political pressure. He bowed to their request and Jesus was crucified as a traitor to Rome between two criminals on a hill called Calvary just outside of Jerusalem.

Vindication: Resurrection to a New Life

After Jesus died, his body was buried in a brand new, never before used, rich man's tomb. But to everyone's surprise, Jesus body disappeared after two days and people began to report that they saw Jesus alive. Some received word from angels that Jesus was resurrected. His disciples on a number of occasions met with him and confirmed this to be true. On one occasion more than 500 people saw him at once. For forty days after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to and taught his disciples and prepared them for the work of building his church. On the fortieth day, the heavens opened up, and in full view of his followers, Jesus was taken up into heaven.

Ten days later, on a day called Pentecost, Jesus disciples were meeting together in Jerusalem and something weird happened. The explanation given by the disciples is that the Spirit of God descended from heaven and came upon them and made it possible for them to become witnesses of Jesus Christ. Filled and empowered by the Spirit, they preached Jesus as God's answer to human guilt and suffering and as the one who restored human fellowship with God.

Christianity Emerges

It is from the things that these followers of Jesus said and wrote, that Christianity sprang up. These writings and teachings about Jesus were gathered into a collection that was added to the Bible of the Jews and the combined collection

became the Christian Bible. Christians believe that these writings are the words of God passed onto them through the experiences of the early Church and the teachings of these first followers of Jesus. Four of these writers, called evangelists, wrote accounts of Jesus life that explained how it is that Jesus came to be known as the Christ.

Christianity is a way of life that is based upon the belief that what these writings say about Jesus is true. It believes that the Bible is God's Word, a revelation of truths that it is necessary to know and obey if we are to share in what Jesus did by dying and rising again. From this commitment to these writings has arisen a number of peculiar practices that distinguish Christianity from other kinds of belief in God. Particular worship activities and habits of assembling together are part of this teaching.

Jesus Died for You

Jesus' human life, death and resurrection were accomplished according to the plan of God. By his life, Jesus took on the role of humanity in general and of Israel in particular. His death served as a vicarious punishment for the disobedience of humanity. The ritual and cultic practices of the Israelite temple worship were used to explain the meaning of his death. Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin in accordance with the ritual atonement practice of the Jews. He became a substitute for a guilty nation and a guilty humanity.

His death frees those who choose to be identified with him from the eternal consequences of human rebellion against God. Jesus has taken the promises of God initially focused in the Jewish people of ancient Israel and made them accessible to all people in every place. His resurrection and ascension not only

vindicate him from the false charges used to justify his death they serve as a demonstration of the Christian hope. Even as Jesus has been raised and entered into the immediate presence of God, so shall all who trust in his ministry be raised from the dead when Jesus returns to consummate his work and then, they too, shall enter the presence of God forever.

Christian Tolerance Allows for Differences

Among Christians there are differences about the meaning of some the teachings of Christianity and some of the ways in which the Christian faith is to be practiced. These differences result in distinctive assemblies or churches. Some of the familiar names are Anabaptist, Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Catholic, Christian Reformed, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Orthodox and Presbyterian among others. In general it is safe to assume that the differences between these many different expressions of Christianity are not critical. Scholars will sometimes debate some of the distinctions and will include or exclude others from being regarded as genuine depending upon certain doctrinal beliefs or worship practices. These differences create opportunities for reflection and for the practice of Christian tolerance and understanding. The differences do not define Christianity even if they shape its external appearance.

The Necessity of Jesus

Christianity asserts that blessing from God is possible *only* through Jesus Christ. Those who understand this in a limited way will argue that only those who believe in Jesus and follow him will share in these blessings either in this life or in the life to come. Those who understand Jesus work to be more extensive and universal will allow for others to share in the blessings that

he has accomplished even if they do not follow his teachings exactly or, in some rare cases, follow religions other than Christianity. The overarching Christian perspective shared by both of these extremes is that God's blessings are the work of Jesus and do not exist apart from him. Whether understood in a restricted and limited sense or in a more universal and accommodating sense it is this core belief that divine blessings are mediated through Jesus that defines what Christianity is.

Since Jesus is the only channel through which God's blessing is available to humanity it is best experienced within Christianity. Even if it is believed that the blessing might be experienced outside of Christianity, it is available in a more concentrated and more pure form in Christianity. Most Christians teach that the closer one's beliefs and obedience to the Word of God the more fully one is able to participate in the blessings of God in this life. Some will also stress that future rewards will also be greater.

Christianity also teaches that those who persist in disobedience will ultimately fail to enter the blessing of God. A basic tenant of Christian teaching is that after death there is a judgement and that Jesus is the one who presides over this judgement. All who have rejected his gift of life will be refused access to it. Because the stakes are so high, most Christians stress the importance of belief and obedience, since these things are assurances of being in God's will.

How do I become a Christian?

Becoming a Christian is easy because the blessing is not brought about by what we do, but by what Jesus has already done on our behalf. It is simply for us to accept the blessing from him and on the terms that he sets. Salvation is a gift from

God mediated through Jesus Christ and not a human self-accomplishment.

The terms by which we accept the blessing of Jesus are faith in him. Faith involves believing in him, trusting him and obeying him. To believe in Jesus is to accept that he is God and that he has made possible a renewed relationship with God. He did this by becoming a human being and dying on the cross and then rising from the dead. We believe Jesus when we accept that he alone is able to save us from the future judgement and secure for us eternal life in the presence of God. We believe in Jesus when we believe that God was present in Jesus in a unique way renewing his relationship with humanity.

Trusting Jesus is expressed in the reliance upon him as God's salvation. We do not trust our good works to earn us a favorable response from God, nor do we go to other people or some other god to save us. Trusting Jesus means that we seek our happiness only in him. Our happiness is not dependent upon wealth, health or other factors, but in Jesus alone, because true human happiness is knowing God and experiencing him in full measure.

Obedience follows from believing and trusting. The teachings of Jesus and his apostolic followers, which have been recorded in the Bible, are accepted as true, trusted as reliable and obeyed. A primary act of obedience for the Christian is to join a church and to participate in its ministries. Joining a church involves making a public confession of belief in Jesus as God and Lord of life and being baptized. Baptism is a kind of ritual bath that symbolizes the believer's union with Christ in death and resurrection. It is a pledge of the conscience to follow Jesus. There are some variations among different Christian groups as to how baptism is practiced. Despite these

differences in details, all Christian churches practice some form of baptism as a form of initiation into their membership.

Becoming a Christian, then, involves a public confession of Jesus as Christ and baptism into the Christian church. Living as a Christian involves living a life consistent with the promise of baptism through participation in the life of the Church. Faith, in the Christian life, is the on going persistence in the teachings of Christ and on going participation in the fellowship of the Church. Simply it means that we continue to believe the Word of Christ, continue to trust the Word of Christ and continue to obey the Word of Christ.

Erin Mills Baptist Church and Christianity

Erin Mills Baptist Church is an autonomous assembly of Christian believers. What this means is that as a church, we are not controlled by any organization or religious structure outside of our own local church or parish. We decide all of our financial commitments ourselves, hire our own minister and other staff, and own and maintain our facilities. We are associated with the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada, which is an association of almost 500 churches across Canada that share basic doctrine and practice with us. This affiliation does not threaten our autonomy, but it does protect us from becoming too independent or isolated in our teaching or practice by setting standards of faith that we must maintain. We partner with our denomination to accomplish things that are too complicated or costly for one small church to do alone.

We are a Baptist church, which means that we practice what is called confessors baptism by immersion. This means that we only baptize people who are old enough to understand the

Christian message and have personally accepted it for themselves. We do not baptize our children until they are capable of understanding the message and we do not for membership purposes recognize as valid a baptism that was performed on children who did not choose to be baptized. Second, it emphasizes that we baptize by immersion. This means that our baptism involves plunging the entire person under water. We believe this is the teaching of the Bible and the practice of the earliest churches. We do not recognize other kinds of Baptism as valid for our church membership.

Another feature of our church, shared with many others, is that we place a huge emphasis upon singing songs of worship, listening to the reading and the preaching of the Word of God, and praying. We also have monthly celebrations of a symbolic meal called variously as Communion, the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist. In this meal a symbolic portion of bread and juice are consumed together indicating our dependence upon Jesus as the one who sustains us and provides for us as well as indicating our participation in the new relationship to God accomplished by Jesus. This new relationship is called a covenant.

At Erin Mills Baptist Church we understand this covenant in a more restricted way. You may remember that earlier I explained how some Christians will teach that Jesus' blessings might be experienced by those who do not specifically believe in him while others believe that only those who personally believe and accept him will share in these blessings. Our belief is that this second and more restricted understanding is closest to the teaching of the Bible. If the knowledge of God is mediated through Jesus, then knowing Jesus personally is necessary for knowing God personally, and accepting his gift of blessing is necessary to receiving God's gift of blessing.

Our many activities as a church all have a single goal, to exalt Jesus as Lord and Christ. To do this we seek to evangelize those outside our church with the good news (gospel) about what Jesus has done for us. We desire to see every human being accept these things as true and join us in building a bigger community of faith in Jesus. We also have times of teaching in which we try to convince unbelievers of our truth as well as increasing our own knowledge and understanding of the Bible. By increasing our knowledge and understanding we come to a better and more perfect understanding about how to live by faith in Jesus Christ.

Our worship seeks to exalt Jesus. We praise him as God and Saviour. We give God thanks for Jesus and praise him as our Creator. We commit ourselves to renewed obedience to him and excite our hearts to joy and happiness. Through various contributions and helps we seek to bring the mercy of Jesus to people with many needs. Some of our people volunteer for various citizen groups and the church practices benevolence and runs a small food bank.

Because Erin Mills Baptist Church is a small church, it is not able to do everything that it would like to do. Our community is close and tight knit, but we want to grow so that we will be better able to do the work that God has given us to do. We want to do more for needy people, we want to reach more people with the good news and we want to have more programmes to meet the needs of our own people, especially our children and youth. We believe that it is important that children learn early to trust Jesus and walk in his ways. We have a strong belief that children who learn to love and obey Jesus will be better people and more responsible citizens.

Invitation

We hope you would come and join us at Erin Mills Baptist Church. If you are a Christian and believe that Jesus has come from God to restore a broken and hurting world to God and desire to see this work accomplished, we would love to have you help us to make this a universally recognized truth. If you are not yet a Christian, but want to learn more about Christianity and what God has done through Jesus, we invite you to come and learn from us what we have learned about Jesus. We have teaching times as well as worship times where you might experience and learn about God's work among us.

The ultimate purpose of God in sending Jesus was to save the whole world and bring it back into the realm of his love. All people, young and old, regardless of ethnicity or cultural background can find the peace that God offers in Jesus. It may be that you lack peace and are looking for this peace and that Erin Mills Baptist Church is the vehicle God has chosen to show you how to find it. If your life is filled with hurt and is without meaning or purpose, we believe that Jesus can heal you, both heart and soul, and restore purpose and meaning to your life. Please come and join us so that we can journey to Christ together.

About Our Pastor

Pastor Andrew McGinn was born and raised in Northern Ontario. His parents sent him to a church Sunday School as a young boy, where he learned many of the stories of the Bible. This teaching was important in Andrew's life, as it was a constant prick in his conscience during his rebellious teenage years.

When he was 16, Andrew confessed Jesus as God and Saviour and was baptized and joined his local church. He soon began to lead Young People's meetings and organize a weekly ministry for the youth. He enjoyed reading his Bible and learning about Jesus.

Andrew was not a very disciplined student in high school. In his grade 13 year he dropped out of school and went to work in his family's business. Two years later he enrolled and began classes at Tyndale University College. While he was there he sensed a call to pastoral ministry. Following the completion of his undergraduate studies, he took up graduate work at Toronto Baptist Seminary and advanced graduate studies at McMaster University in the Divinity College faculty.

Pastor Andrew came to Erin Mills Baptist Church in November 2000. His ministry is a Word centered ministry. His strengths lie in his teaching and preaching. Pastor Andrew believes that the heart of the Christian Gospel is Jesus Christ. He loves Jesus passionately and longs for others to share in that same passion.

Pastor Andrew is married to Krista whom he met while at Tyndale University College. They were married in 1991 and they have three beautiful children, Rebecca, Gordon and Cranmer.

Erin Mills Baptist Church

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Meetings and Services

Sunday Worship 11:00 am

Sunday School 10:00 am

Bible Study and Prayer, Wednesday 7:30 pm

Kids Time (ages 5-12), Thursday, 7-8 pm

Ladies Weekly Bible Study, Thursday 10:00 am