

Podcast Episode 77: Authentic Christianity, Part 1

This is the first part of a special series entitled “Authentic Christianity,” in which Denver addresses the questions: What is Authentic Christianity? How does it differ from Historic or Modern Christianity? Why are there so many divisions between denominations? What is God up to today regarding Christianity?

DENVER: I want to talk about religion, but I don't want the topic to be what it usually is, and that's a source of unease, and friction, and conflict, and debate, and discomfort, and—

I mean, religion is one of those things where we find it really easy to do two completely contradictory things: love religion (because we want to be close with God), and take offense at our neighbor (because their religious views differ somewhat from our own), when in fact, the Author of the religion is telling us all to love one another. If we've got Christ in common, we ought to be able to de-emphasize our dissimilarities and emphasize our similarities to find peace in Him.

If you study the events that occurred following the New Testament—that immediate generation following the New Testament; you can see it in the book of Acts; you can see it in the letters of the New Testament—Christ commissioned twelve apostles, and He sent them out with a message to bear about Him. But Christianity in the immediate aftermath of Christ's life had various kinds of Christianity. We had a Matthean Christianity that was based upon the teachings of Matthew. We had a Pauline Christianity that was based upon the teachings of Paul. We had a Petrine Christianity, and it was based upon the teachings of Peter. It was the Petrine version of Christianity that ultimately got the broadest sweep that resulted in the formation of the Catholic Church. But Christianity did not start out centralized. It started out diffused. It's almost as if what Christ wanted to do was to get the word out and let everyone have in common some very basic things in which we could find peace, and love, and harmony with one another—but outside of that, to explore, perhaps, the depths of what the message could be and not to have it insular, rigid, and one-size-fits-all.

We had during that very earliest period—you had obviously commissioned companions that had walked with Jesus, had been witnesses of his teachings, he had brought them aboard, they had heard the sermon on the mount, they had witnessed miracles. John in his gospel makes it clear that they weren't really up to speed with what Christ was doing and what he was about, because he would say things and they wouldn't understand him. From John's gospel, what happened was it was retrospective. It was post-resurrection—when they knew now that Christ was going to come, he was going to die, and he was going to be resurrected, and then he was going to ascend into heaven to be in a position of glory—that they looked back retrospectively and they say, 'Ok, now I get it. Now I understand what he was talking about.' Now those statements about the necessity that he suffer come full circle

and we get it. But walking with him during this time period, they were really not tuned in to comprehending what the Savior was intending to do and ultimately would do.

For a millennium-and-a-half the Christian church had a hierarchy, professional clergy, cathedrals, icons, pageantry, and provided social structure. Anything like Christianity's original, independently functioning groups, meeting in homes, and using donated resources as charity for their poor was long forgotten. The Reformation did not attempt to restore an original Christianity. The Reformers were victims of a structure that confined even their imagination. Their aim was much lower. It sought only to reform an admittedly corrupt institution into something marginally better. The rebellion of Martin Luther led to the establishment of a new Christian institution that mimicked its mother. The Lutheran church bears striking similarities to its Catholic mother. To a casual observer of a Sunday service in both of these churches they can seem identical. The differences are not particularly cosmetic but are based on Lutheran rejection of the pope's authority.

There are three great Lutheran principals: first, grace alone; second, faith alone; third, scriptures alone. These deprive the Catholic pope of religious significance and the Catholic rites of any claim to be the exclusive way to obtain salvation. But none of these were part of original Christianity.

As to grace alone: in original Christianity baptism is *required* for salvation. Christ's simple command to "follow me" was given repeatedly; three times it's recorded in Matthew, twice it's recorded in Mark, once in Luke, and twice in John. Christ showed the way and as part of that he was baptized to—according to his own mouth—*fulfil all righteousness* (Matthew 3:15; see also Matthew 2:4 RE). It was only *after* Christ was baptized that the Father commended Jesus and said He was well pleased.

Christ also had his disciples baptize his followers—you can read about that in John chapter 4 (see also John 3:4 RE). Christ spoke to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus and converted him by that contact. Following his conversion, Saul was healed of blindness, renamed Paul, and immediately baptized. Paul tied baptism to resurrection in Romans chapter 6 (see also Romans 1:25-28 RE). He declared that to be baptized is to put on Christ, in Galatians 3 (see also Galatians 1:7-12 RE). There is only one faith and it is in only the one Lord whom we worship and it requires one baptism to be included in the body of believers, according to Ephesians 4 (see also Ephesians 1:12-16 RE). Peter explained that baptism saves us, in 1 Peter chapter 3 (see also 1 Peter 1:2 RE).

Christians who follow Christ will all be baptized. (If you've not been baptized, or would like to be baptized again, there are those who have authority to administer the ordinance, who will travel to you, or there are some locally who are available to perform the ordinance. The ordinance is free. The service is provided without any charge or expectation of any gift or donation. If you're interested, you can make a request on the website that's identified in things that are around here www.christianreformation500years.info.)

Accordingly, original Christianity believed and taught that baptism was essential to salvation, not merely grace. As to faith alone, the original Christians not only believed in baptism but they also believed they could progress in knowledge, obedience, and virtue. Paul denounced the idea that Christians could sin and follow God: *Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?* (Romans 6:1-2; see also Romans 1:25 RE). Paul envisioned the Christian as becoming a new creation through baptism, after which we walk in Christ's path with sin destroyed: *We are buried with him by baptism unto death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.* That's in Romans chapter 6 (Romans 6:4; see also Romans 1:25 RE).

Peter taught that Christians would progress in godliness until the Christian has his or her calling and election made sure:

That by these things ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. [And] beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall. (2 Peter 1:4-10; see also 2 Peter 1:1-3)

As to scripture alone, Luther translated the Bible from a second language that was not commonly spoken—that is, Latin—into the common language of Germany, in order for the common man to read it. If scripture alone defined faith, given the illiteracy that had gone on for a millennium-and-a-half before Martin Luther's day, and given the fact that even the literate would have had to have been bilingual, (whatever country or language they spoke, Latin had become a dead language; they would have to be able to read and understand a dead language) then, by definition, if that's one of the keys to defining Christianity, Martin Luther just defined the overwhelming majority—practically all of the Christian world was incapable of salvation because scripture alone was unavailable to them as one of the required premises of Christianity.

There was no New Testament during the era of original Christianity. The idea of compiling a New Testament originated with a second century heretic who was excommunicated for apostasy. The only scriptures used or cited during the time of original Christianity was the Old Testament, containing none of the teachings of Christ, none of the letters of Paul, Peter, James, or Jude, and none of the four Gospels. It took until the fourth century for a New Testament canon to be settled. By that time many of the writings had been altered. Further, neither Christ nor his apostles handed out a New Testament. They testified of what they knew to be true and administered baptism as a sign of faith and repentance.

Despite this, Martin Luther was entirely correct in condemning Catholicism for its errors and excesses. Following Luther's example, other Protestant churches reformed Christianity in marginal ways. But reconsidering institutional Christianity, in attempting to return to its original form, was not even attempted in the Protestant Reformation. Therefore, Protestantism is only a marginal improvement from its corrupt mother church. It has never been, nor attempted to become, original Christianity.

A return to original Christianity would require a restoration. That did not begin until God spoke to Joseph Smith in 1820. But Joseph's followers also wanted an institution, and now have one of the most wealthy and self-interested institutions claiming to be a church. (They are undertaking approximately a trillion dollar real estate development as part of the Church's enterprise in the state of Florida, constructing everything that it will be necessary, from schools and streets to fire stations and homes, to house over half a million people just outside of Disney World, on what used to be 133,000 acre cattle ranch. That church owns about 3% of the state of Florida.)

Unlike the institutional Christianity of the 1500s, early Christians were called the *ecclesia*—meaning “a congregation or an assembly.” But early Christians were not institutional and certainly not hierarchical. The first century of Christianity had no formal organization and no central control. Christians met informally in small groups and worshiped together in homes or public places. In this earliest form, small groups led by both men and women, who were called *deaconesse*, a word that's translated into English as either “deacon” or “deaconess”; that Greek word means “servant.” It was in these home meetings where original Christians worshiped and learned of Christ and Christianity.

Original Christians had no professional clergy. They operated in a way akin to a method described in the Book of Mormon:

And when the priests left their labor to impart the word of God unto the people, the people also left their labors to hear the word of God. And when the priest had imparted unto them the word of God they all returned again diligently unto their labors; and the priest, not esteeming himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength. And they did impart of their substance, every man according to that which he had, to the poor, and the needy, and the sick, and the afflicted. (Alma 1:26-27; see also Alma 1:5 RE)

This is how I believe Christianity ought to be practiced today: without a professional clergy, diverting tithes and offerings that ought to be used to help the poor, needy, sick, and afflicted. We need to—and can return—to those early days of Christianity.

Justin Martyr lived from 110-165 A.D., and he wrote in the Sub-Apostolic Age. His writings give us a glimpse into how Christianity functioned in its earliest days. In his *First Apology* he describes Christian worship. They met in homes, having no church buildings.

Before being considered a Christian, a candidate was baptized “in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit” (*First Apology*, Chapter LXI-Christian Baptism).

Meetings began with a prayer and “saluting one another with a kiss.” Then sacrament was prepared and administered using a “cup of wine mixed with water” and bread, which is blessed by “giving praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands” (ibid, Chapter LXV-Administration of the Sacraments).

The early Christians recognized there was an obligation for “the wealthy among us to help the needy.” Therefore, after reading scripture and “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets” donations were collected (ibid, Chapter LXVII-Weekly Worship of the Christians). Then the donations were distributed to help those who were poor or needy among that group of Christians.

These simple observances were resilient enough to preserve Christianity after the death of the apostles and before any great hierarchical magisterium arose. It was the power of baptism, the sacrament, scripture study and financial aid among believers that gave Christianity its power. But it was diffused, and therefore incapable of destruction. When Justin Martyr was slain, the scattered Christians continued unaffected. It was just like when Peter and Paul were slain, and before them, James was killed. The power of Christianity reckoned from the vitality of its original roots. These roots were in Christ, His message, His teachings, which were employed to relieve one another by the alms shared from rich to poor.

When a centralized hierarchy took control over Christianity, the money that was used for the poor, the widows and orphans, was diverted to build churches, cathedrals, basilicas, and palaces. Ultimately, the wealth generated by the generosity of Christian believers became the tool used by the hierarchy to buy up armies, kings, lands and treasures, which were used to rule and reign as a cruel master over a subjugated population made miserable by the abuse heaped on them from Rome.

Even after the Protestant Reformation, Christianity continued to be ruled by hierarchies. Cathedrals and church buildings consumed and consume resources that are to be used to help the poor. Christ built no building, although He accepted the temple in Jerusalem as His Father’s house. Peter built no church building, nor Paul, nor James, nor John. Christianity in the hands of the Lord and His apostles needed no brick and mortar for its foundation. It was built on the hearts of believers, brought together by the charity and assistance shared between them.

Today Christianity is not benefited but weakened by hierarchies, cathedrals, edifices, and basilicas housing opulence, wealth and art. Although the prophecies foretell of a temple to God to be built in Zion, and another to be built in Jerusalem, there are no other structures

foretold to be built by Christians or latter-day Israel. How much stronger would Christianity be today if wealth were reserved for the poor and hierarchies were stripped of their wealth?

We would not be undervaluing the gospel and overvaluing the churches if all donations went to aid the poor and none went to support the institutions. We have a hard time even imagining the earliest generation of Christians. We also have a tendency to use what we're familiar with as our guide and standard in trying to understand early Christianity. It affects even how we read our scriptures. I'd like you to try to abandon the picture that you have in your head and imagine a new picture in its place.

About 1,900 years ago the ministry of that generation of believers and witnesses drew to an end and the apostles then had their voices silenced. It would take until 1,675 years ago before there was an attempt to stabilize and define what it meant to be a Christian. Between the time of the death of the apostles and the council at Nicaea there's an interlude in which Christianity assumed extraordinarily divergent forms of Christian belief, many of which were completely contradictory of one another. If you read the ante-Nicene—the prior to Nicaea—fathers of Christianity, the debates, the contradictions, the descriptions—the content of Christian belief was remarkably unstable, unsteady, and very different irreconcilable versions. And 1,675 years ago now the Nicean council made an attempt to redefine what it meant to be Christian, and to stabilize the conflicting Christianities into something that would be singular, and therefore, define what it would mean to be an orthodox Christian. Coming out of Nicaea is a creed—the Nicean Creed—but it would take until about 1550 before the efforts to suppress divergent forms of Christianity succeeded far enough so that we had our orthodox Christian faith in a reasonably stable form.

It was about a 1,000 years ago now, when what is called the Great Schism occurred in which the east and the west divided between the church centered in Rome—the Roman Catholic, or Universal Church, and the Eastern Orthodox Church—divided from one another and no longer shared communion, hierarchy, or their faith in Christ together. It was 500 years ago when Martin Luther posted the *95 Theses* and set in motion the series of events that were discussed in the videos that we were showing just beforehand.

I assume all of you regard yourselves as Christians. I regard myself as a Christian. Today there are approximately 40,000 different Christian denominations. If you go back only 500 years, most of what you regard as Christianity—and in all probability the form of Christianity in which you believe—would not have existed. If you go back earlier still, whatever it is that you hold as your Christian belief—even the current form of Catholicism that's practiced—would be regarded as heretical by the Roman Catholic hierarchy itself. Only 500 years ago the only authorized forms of the Bible were printed in Latin and they were the exclusive property of a Catholic clergy that taught in Latin—a group of people who were told what to do and how to regard Christianity. Unfortunately for almost every one of us, the form of Christianity that we hold in our hearts and that we look to in faith,

believing that it has the power to save us, would be regarded throughout almost all of Christian history as heresy, as false, as damnable.

Today—and I say these words advisedly, and I want you to take them seriously—today all Christian churches have become corrupt. They love money more and acquiring financial security and church buildings more than caring for the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted. The institutions claiming to be the church of God are all polluted by the cares of the world. I want you to understand what I mean by that. During the Apostolic Era there was no such thing as a Christian church building. Christians met in homes. They did not collect and compensate ministers. They gathered money and they used it to help the poor and the needy among them.

As soon as you get a church building, I regret to inform you, you'll have to hire a lawyer. In what name are you going to take title to your building? How are you going to hide title or hold title and deal with succession? What form will the organization take? Do you intend to qualify for tax deductibility? If so, do you intend to file as a charitable institution, as an eleemosynary institution, as an educational institution? Those are all words that you find in 501(c) of the Internal Revenue Code. And what do you do if you want to hire and fire a minister, and you want to dispossess the one you fired and put into possession the successor in the building, what rights, and who's on the board, and who possesses the right to deal with that? As soon as you own property, the cares of this world invade. It's unavoidable.

If you meet in homes as the early Christians did, and if you gather your tithing—one tenth of your surplus after you have taken care of all your responsibilities, all your needs, whatever's left over—one tenth of that is your tithe. After you gather your tithe then you ought to look at your brothers and your sisters who are there in your meeting, and you ought to help those who have needs, who have health needs, who have education needs, who have transportation needs, who have food needs, who have children that need care. Christians should take care of the poor among them, and no one should be looking at the flock and saying, 'I need your money to support myself.' Christian charities should be used to take care of the poor among you and not to engage in acquiring the cares of this world. This is why all Christian churches have become corrupt. They love money and acquiring financial security and church buildings more than caring for the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted.

I speak as part of a very tiny movement, but we're worldwide. We're a very small group of people scattered from Japan to Europe, scattered from Australia to Canada—small group of people, but we are trying to practice authentic Christianity in the form that it was originally intended to be practiced: meeting in homes. I met earlier today with a group of people from this local area, and there are a number in this local area who believe as I do. We celebrated the sacrament as a group together and we reaffirmed one another in our faith.

Jesus Christ taught many principals, truths, precepts, and commandments, but He only taught one doctrine. I'm going to read you Christ's doctrine:

Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, I will declare unto you my doctrine. And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me; and I bear record of the Father, and the Father beareth record of me, and the Holy Ghost beareth record of the Father and me; and I bear record that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me. And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God. And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned. Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and I bear record of it from the Father; and whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and unto him will the Father bear record of me, for he will visit him with fire and the Holy Ghost. And thus will the Father bear record of me, and the Holy Ghost will bear record unto him of the Father and me; for the Father, and I, and the Holy Ghost are one. And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and become as a little child, and be baptized in my name, or ye can in nowise receive these things. And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and be baptized in my name, and become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them. And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock; but he buildeth upon a sandy foundation, and the gates of hell stand open to receive such when the floods come and the winds beat upon them. (3 Nephi 11:31-40; see also 3 Nephi 5:9 RE)

We believe and practice this doctrine of Christ. We practice baptism by immersion in living waters—meaning lakes, rivers, streams, and oceans: where there is life. We prefer living waters for a living ordinance. We have authority from God to perform baptism and other ordinances, such as the sacrament, but we are not jealous with our authority and are willing to share it with any man who is willing to accept and follow the doctrine of Christ.

As to the commandment to be baptized, even Jesus Christ went to be baptized by John *to fulfil all righteousness* (Matthew 3:15; see also Matthew 3:4 RE). *And now, if the Lamb of God, he being holy, should have need to be baptized by water, to fulfil all righteousness, O then how much more need have we, being unholy, to be baptized, even by water* (2 Nephi 31:5; see also 2 Nephi 13:2 RE).

If any of you want to be baptized you can request it through our website and someone local will respond. Baptism is an ordinance between you and Christ and does not mean you are joining a formal institution, because we have no institution. We are all equal believers accountable to God. We do try to fellowship with one another and you would be welcome to fellowship with the few believers in this area. We own no buildings; like the early Christians we meet in homes. We ask for tithes, or 10% of what you have left over after you've taken care of all your needs, but anything collected is then used to help anyone in the fellowship meet their needs. We hope for there to be no poor among us because we use donations to help one another.

We cannot bear one another's burdens without fellowshiping with one another, and bearing one another's burdens presumes that you know what the burdens are that someone else carries. Which means that I have been patient enough, I have been attentive enough, I have been friendly enough, and I have been trusted enough that I can find out what the burden is that they bear.

I have a very good friend—went to elementary, junior high, high school with him—and I've kept in touch with him for many years and he has recently contracted a terminal form of cancer. He called me to talk about that without telling his family, without telling his neighbors, without telling his friends because he and I have a friendship that is built upon the kind of trust that allows me to share that burden with him because of the relationship.

We're supposed to help one another get through this ordeal of mortality. And it is an ordeal. It is not easy. Even the people that you think you envy, if you were living inside their world you'd find out that they have burdens they are carrying as well.

Fellowshipping allows us to bear one another's burdens, and bearing one another's burdens implies a whole universe of connectivity, trust, confidence, friendship, and affection between one another before you get to the point that you even know what their burdens are. But *that* is supposed to be a blessing and part of what it means to worship together. Worshipping together, by assisting one another, allows all of us to feel a great part of what it is that Christ is and does. It allows us to know *who* we worship, and it allows us to know *how* to worship Him, and it allows us to know *what* makes us one with one another. Now, it's really hard to accomplish that across state lines, but it still can be done.

The example I use of that friend—he and I have spent a lot of time on the phone since I learned of the illness about a month ago, and that's because I care, and that's because he needs to talk to someone, and because he finds it a relief to be able to do that with me. It can be done. It can be done across any barriers.

All of us are victims of institutional abuse. Many of us can sense it when the slightest hint of abuse appears. One recent writer on your blog has identified it as 'paternalism' and that's not an inappropriate designation for it. We should learn how to be loving and equal with one another. The idea of equality is resisted by a lot of skeptics, who accuse me of wanting authority and control, when I despise control, but I absolutely welcome fellowship, equality, and worship with one another. This isn't easy, but it is godly to pursue and we're going to make mistakes and there are going to be a lot of institutional habits that we walk in and we want to 'whip this into shape.' The idea of a whip—when Christ resorted to the scourge to drive them out—he didn't drive them out to organize them. He drove them out to cleanse the place. If we're going to whip anything, we're going to drive them out. We would be better off practicing the kind of patience, and kindness—and to realize that in terms of Mormonism, almost everyone is a refugee suffering post religious trauma syndrome, and they're going to think you're abusive. They're going to think they want to be used as a tool for someone else's power base; someone wants to use you. The idea that there's someone that doesn't want to use them, or abuse them, but wants to fellowship with

them, and help them bear a burden—that's the idea of Christianity at its core and *that's* what's really alien in this world. We need to bring *that* back again.

The foregoing excerpts were taken from:

- Denver's *Christian Reformation Lecture Series*, Talk #8, given in Montgomery, Alabama on May 18, 2019;
- Denver's *Christian Reformation Lecture Series*, Talk #2, given in Dallas, TX on October 19th, 2017;
- Denver's *Christian Reformation Lecture Series*, Talk #1, given in Cerritos, CA on September 21st, 2017; and
- A Q&A session entitled *A Visit with Denver Snuffer*, held on May 13, 2015.

Today's podcast addresses important questions about authentic Christianity, but is only an introduction to ideas that listeners of any denomination may find important and relevant. These topics are more fully addressed in Denver's eight talks addressed to all Christians of every denomination, which are available to watch, listen, or download for free at christianreformation500years.info.