

# Tricycle Christianity

## The Way, The Truth, The Life

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Introduction: I'm a husband of a faithful wife, father of 8 children. We have a mini-barn storage building business that pays the bills. I'm a co-elder in the church called Cimarron Christian Brotherhood. Cimarron is the name of the river valley we are located in north-central Oklahoma.

Fellow Kingdom Citizens, peace be to you through our Lord Jesus Christ whom we serve. This is my first time at AIC and my first time using a PowerPoint so I'm a little nervous for several reasons, but I see friendly faces and I believe you'll be my friends. God bless you!

Most of my references in Scripture tonight will be taken from the NKJV. If you're following along, I will not be turning to many Scriptures in the Bible. I have some on the overhead, on the screen and will be reciting some.

Brother Nathan asked me to introduce myself and I would like to do that even better than I did, with a very simple four-word sentence: "I am a Christian". Not too earthshaking, is it? But in many generations that declaration would have landed me in the Colosseum or in the fire or something. I am a Christian. Are you? How do we know if we are truly Christians? That is where I'm going tonight with this talk.

What is a Christian? What makes me a Christian? A true Christian, I mean a *true* Christian? Because where I live almost everyone says they're Christians. What is Christianity, true Christianity? If you are called to fill in the blank, to finish this sentence; "I am a Christian because \_\_\_\_\_." Putting it in a short, brief statement; what would you say? What makes you a Christian? Do you wrestle with that question? In a world with so much confusion, its very basic that we ask ourselves that question, and get a good answer. What is Christianity? I like to use a phrase, "authentic, apostolic Christianity". How do we know that we can claim that label? How can we know that **we** are not deceived as many are who call themselves "Christians"? And how shall we relate to the multitudes of Christians in all the different flavors that are out there?

I'd like to start with a few assumptions or observations. I'm assuming that we want to be New Testament Christians, faithful to authentic, apostolic Christianity. Do we also understand that we cannot return to New Testament times? We can not duplicate every aspect of apostolic Christianity. There are no apostles, in the narrowest sense of that word, here. I am also assuming that we agree that the Anabaptists in the first generation did an admirably good job of capturing the essence of New Testament Christianity, but that we also understand that we cannot duplicate everything in that generation either. We can't go back to where they were and put ourselves there and be exactly what they were, because they were shaped by their time and place in history. We live in a very different time and place in history. Those are a few things that I think we need to understand.

Many other restitution movements besides Anabaptism have attempted restore New Testament Christianity. I'll be talking about that a bit tonight, and I will say, and I hope you'll agree with me, that none of these movements has been perfect. There have been weaknesses in every one of them. And in many of them, maybe all of them, some very serious weaknesses that produced sad results. I believe that God wants us to learn from both the strengths and the weaknesses of various restitution movements of history. Some of them have been major movements, some have been minor, some of them have just been in the heart of an individual or a small group of believers seeking God's face.

Now the title of my talk, "Tricycle Christianity": Everybody knows this is a tricycle here, and you know what a tricycle is like. I'm using this illustration tonight to help us understand, to explain to you what I understand Christianity to be: The Way, The Truth, The Life. And I know my analogy is limited, it's not perfect, but let's go on with it. This analogy of "Tricycle Christianity" has been a grid that helps me understand the value of historical restoration movements. When I look back I use it to sort of weigh things and understand how they understood Christianity. It also helps me understand and evaluate contemporary Christianity when I look around me, and then it helps me understand what WE should aim for in our churches, and how we've missed it. And probably most important it sometimes helps me indeed to evaluate myself, look at my own heart, my own Christianity, how I relate to people, so I can refocus my heart in my quest to be a New Testament Christian, to be faithful representative of God's Kingdom; authentic, apostolic Christianity.

We go to John 14; you know the verse in John 14 just as well as I "Let not your heart be troubled," Jesus said as he gathers his disciples in the upper room facing death and the darkest moments of history. And our translations don't render it this way but I rendered it, "Do you believe in God?" The punctuation in our Bibles is altered by the editors, not by the original writers. It could just as well be translated, "Do you believe in God? Believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions," the Spanish word means "dwelling places," not kingly mansions as we sometimes think, but places for God's people in God's house. "If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And where I go you know and the way you know. Thomas said to the Saviour" - Here they were, watch - "Lord, we do not know where you are going, and if we don't know where you're going how can we know the way?" And then Jesus spake these memorable words, "I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE, no man cometh to the Father except through me. " You learned that verse, I suppose, by memory many years ago. In fact, I think it was the first or maybe the second verse I learned when I was learning Spanish and I started memorizing Spanish verses. I learned that verse in Spanish because it was so special to me. It still is.

So, look at this tricycle; you know what a tricycle looks like. A tricycle has... well, its got three wheels ~ its a tri-cycle. One of those wheels is the drive wheel; you know, the little boy sits here and he turns those pedals and that make the thing go. That's just the way tricycles are. And that same wheel is the steering wheel. So it has priority, it guides the thing, it sets the direction of where this tricycle runs.

Another thing I observed: tricycles aren't made like armchairs – they're not made to just sit and rest. When you put an energetic 4-year-old boy on here, what happens? He sits here and he puts his foot down here and these pedals start going around. And if you've had half a dozen such boys and they have room to run, you know what kind of a circus is going on. Where there's tricycle and boys, there's activity, there's movement, and that's the way it should be. No sleeping saints on tricycles. No armchair Christians. No chocolate soldiers. Christianity is made to run, my friend.

Now let me tell you about "Tricycle Christianity." I confess that I'm not sticking to the original meaning of Jesus' words in John 14:6. I don't know when it was, some 10-15 years ago that some of these concepts started formulating in my mind, and I said, "I see some thing here that is helpful to me." That's what I'm trying to share with you tonight.

Jesus said, "I am the Way." The book of Proverbs says "There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end of that way is in the mansions of the dead." (from the Septuagint translation) Ends up in death. And every one of us knows very well Jesus' words in Matthew 7, the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus talked about the two ways. He said there is a broad way, and there is a narrow way. The broad way is filled with people who are heading to destruction. The narrow way is found by a few, but their destiny is life. Did you know that Christians in the first generation were sometimes called "Followers of the way"? Saul went to to capture those "in this way" the Bible says, and take them bound to Jerusalem. Years later he stood before a Roman governor and said, "I persecuted this way," this way – Christianity, "unto death." Scripture calls it the way of the Lord, the way of salvation, the way of truth, the way of righteousness, a new and living way, and I like this one, the way of life, because all of us were at one time out of the way, the scripture says. But when we come to the great high priest, who invites us back into His way and life.

Jesus said, "I am the Way." To me this has to do with our walk, our conduct, our lifestyle, how we live, the "Follow me". The second command of Jesus in Scripture is a call to walk with Jesus in the way to become His disciples in training. So this "I am the Way" suggests that Christianity is a walk, a way of life, a discipleship relationship. Jesus says in Luke 6, "disciple who is perfectly trained, walks with the Saviour and learns from the Saviour; what is He like? He becomes like his teacher. That's the goal of our Christianity. "I am the Way"; Jesus calls us to walk with Him in the way.

Jesus said, "I am the Truth." We usually think of truth as what we believe, we embrace and it's good to know that what we really believe we put into practice some way. If it's just in our head, it's not real faith. Jesus said, "I am the Truth." He said, "I am the true God, I am the true vine, I am the true light, I am the true bread sent down from heaven"; all wrapped up in truth. Truth implies a vault. He is the truth and the truth of all that He is. "We are in Him who is true," John writes in 1 John. We purify our souls by obeying the truth. So we must teach the truth and only the truth and nothing but the truth, so that we can understand and embrace it, and make it ours. The Spirit is the Spirit of Truth who guides us into all truth and he witnesses the truth by which we are sanctified. Jesus said, "I am the Truth". Now, we often express what we believe in creeds or in a confession of faith. Our church has a "confession of common faith and practice", things that we agree together, that we believe and embrace. We need truth, we need it girded around our waist, part of the armor of God to protect us from error and from our Enemy who is the Father of Lies, with which he attacks us.

Jesus said, "I am the Life". Indeed He is the bread of life, he is the water of life, the light of life, he is the tree of life, he is the resurrection and the life. "In Him was life," John writes, "and the life was the light of men." He came to give us life, eternal life, everlasting life, abundant life. Life is for living. Life is to be experienced and enjoyed, not in a superficial, worldly way, but a deep, spiritual way. Walking with Jesus is a new life. The life, in my analogy, relates to Christian experience.

Perhaps we could use the illustration of the born-again experience. We'd say, "I'm a Christian because I'm born again," right? Have you ever heard that? You've said it, and that's true, but that's not enough. The new birth, I say, is not important, no, it's essential! You're not in the Kingdom if you're not born into the Kingdom. Some people look at life in terms of miracles, signs, and wonders, or they focus on an intimate devotional experience, the inner communion that renews their hearts, and all those things are part of Christianity. Jesus came to give us life; "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." Now in much of modern Christianity, the gift of God is forgiveness of sins forget about life, just get your sins forgiven. They missed something. He c to give us life.

So we have three things, we have three wheels here: Way, Truth and Life. One of them, I believe, if I understand Christianity correctly, is the drive wheel, the steering wheel. And the other two are supportive. Essential? Absolutely essential! Take a wheel off, put a 4-year-old boy on this tricycle with one wheel missing, well, if it's this drive wheel it's surely not going anywhere. But even if it's this wheel or that wheel, its just not going to work! Christianity doesn't work if it doesn't have three wheels: The Way, The Truth, The Life. Do not fall into the logical fallacy of the false dilemma. We do not have to choose between the way, the truth, or the life. We need all of them: the way to walk in, the truth to believe and embrace, the life to live, and enjoy.

Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." What makes us Christians? What is Christianity? And how do we evaluate the confusion of Christianity, at least in our Western world where we live and what we know? I live on the western edge of what I call Bible-Belt America, where being a Christian is sort of expected, the norm, though maybe not as much as it used to be. Our community is just full of churches, is yours? Where is the true authentic, apostolic Christianity in all of this confusion. How do we know? And are we really what we think we are, what we claim to be? What we want to be?

I'd like to take a little bit of time to evaluate some historical movements that you might call restitution movements. This idea first occurred to me some years ago with a book titled *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of the Churches of Christ*. It had a pretty profound effect on me. Its written by two Church of Christ authors in a joint authorship. It has one chapter that looks at the Anabaptist movement and it has other chapters that look at other restitution movements through history. It showed me that these different restitution movements through history took on very different shapes and flavors because of what they looked at, what they considered essential, what they considered the drive wheel of Christianity – what they put up front. It was from this book, I suppose, although they didn't use this analogy, it was from this book that the shape of a lot of this message came, so I recommend it to you. It's still available, still in print, it's sort of expensive, but it's worth reading.

It was written from a Church of Christ perspective. The Church of Christ movement is nearly 200 years old, I think; early 1800's here in America. There are Churches of Christ scattered across this country and especially in the south, if I'm not mistaken. We have some very good Church of Christ friends, and as I compared notes with them I wondered why they look at Christianity so differently than I do from my Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage. This book sort of opened it up and I understood it. It taught me to appreciate them for who they are, and why they think the way they think, why they emphasize what they emphasize, why I am different from them, and maybe how we can learn from each other. Because as I said, every movement has strengths and weaknesses.

Now I make this bold statement: (I hope you don't throw me off the pulpit here) If you focus on what the Church of Christ people focus on, they did a better job than the Anabaptists of restoring that aspect of Christianity, I think from my personal observation. But they didn't capture what I consider to be the heart of Christianity. They didn't get this wheel up here, at least in my understanding. They took one of the back wheels and made it their drive wheel. And understand, I'm speaking in generalities with a broad brush here. I'm not judging individuals. I verily believe that there have been authentic, apostolic Christians in many movements through history and even institutional Christianity; people have understood the heart and essence of Christianity and lived the Kingdom life where they were, shall I say, even in Roman Catholicism. I think so.

Let's look at a few of these movements. I've already covered that one wheel should be in front, the steering wheel, the drive wheel. In our understanding of Christianity, which one should it be? The first movement that these authors look at is maybe not a true restoration movement: Lutheranism in the Reformation Period. He "rediscovered" the great "truth" of justification by faith (I say rediscovered quote-unquote) and he put that truth, I believe, in the drive wheel position of Christianity. He understood Christianity in terms of believing truth, believing that truth in particular. And he had sort of a unicycle Christianity. Who can ride a unicycle here? Anybody ride a unicycle? I can't, I never tried. I wouldn't dare to. Unicycles aren't very stable. They don't go very far. I know one boy who rode a unicycle in Guatemala for probably 5 miles up a big hill; it was amazing, I didn't believe he could do it. Most of us can't do it.

Luther's Christianity was a unicycle Christianity, and it wobbled and failed. His truth without life far too often did not lead men into the way. In fact, in Luther's time it led Germany into a greater moral degeneracy than what the Roman Catholics had produced. So really, Luther didn't understand authentic apostolic Christianity. But he did grab hold of a truth that was neglected, and he made it his drive wheel. For Luther, the church, though invisible, was found wherever the TRUTH, as he defined it, justification by faith alone, he put it right in the Scriptures, contrary to the text. And said, "Let it be so, if Dr. Martin says its that way its got to be that way. " What arrogance! but he said, "The church is found where this truth is preached." A sad result.

From that book; Zwingli and Calvin, I won't talk much about them. Zwingli started out as an authentic restitutionalist with the noble goal of reestablishing New Testament Christianity. Perhaps Luther did too, but he soon compromised it and Zwingli also compromised it. He used the slogan "Sola Scriptura" (only Scripture). He threw out images, relics, pictures, organs, priestly vestments, the mass, even singing, if I understand right. He wanted to recover primitive Christian worship, to abolish whatever had no clear Scriptural basis. What happened to Zwingli? He compromised. He not only took up arms to fight against the Catholics (he died on the battlefield in 1531 as a very young man) he even persecuted to the death those who were earnest Followers of the Way.

A little bit more about the Church of Christ restitution movement in the early 19th century: I'm supposing that many of you are not very familiar with this but I don't know what you've read or what you've studied. Men like Barton Stone and Thomas & Alexander Campbell; they focused on the forms and structure of the primitive church and especially what happened in the gathered assembly. For the Church of Christ people, immersion baptism as part of the salvation experience is essential. It's all wrapped up in that package closely tied in time the weekly celebration of the Lord's supper. They believe firmly in congregation autonomy. They are the Churches of Christ, not a denomination, they insist, with a hierarchical structure like many. They are just churches, autonomous churches. They say, "Only the Scripture, we don't need creeds." They're a movement

that was born in the age of reason. They believe that by returning to "truth" as they defined it through clear, scientific thinking, adhering to the words of Scripture alone, discarding the accumulated traditions of men, they would be able to restore the faith of the New Testament church. And they especially had a heart and burden for restoring the unity.

They thought, "If we could just do it this way, get it done to some bare essentials, get rid of all the traditions that have grown up through the years, we could have a unified church!" And that's the heart of Jesus, my friends. They believed they could do it, and they did some admirable things. There's a lot to appreciate in their movement and I know some genuine, I would say, New Testament Christians who are part of the Church of Christ movement. They've had some radical discipleship; some of them have held to non-resistance, for example. There's a lot to be appreciated. But I don't think they understood the "life" part of Christianity.

Brother Chester is going to be talking to us about the Fundamentalist movement of a century or so ago. I'm not going to spend much time with this, but, again, I'm convinced that the Fundamentalist movement made "truth" the drive wheel of their Christianity. They listed a list of fundamental truths of scripture. They said, "We must embrace these truths to be authentic Christians, genuine Christians." Their movement grew up in the age of what was then called "modernism". That word is sort of out of use, but the modernists attacked the faith at the beginning of the 20th century, denying miracles, even the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ, and Christ's miracles, and they just made fun of miracles. They were really humanists, with a Christian thread. They didn't believe God's word and the fundamentalists responded by saying, "We must hold to truth!" And they were right. I haven't reviewed it for a while, but the list they drew up of fundamentals that for them summarizes what marks the true church, I suppose that I would, all of us probably would say, "Yes, we believe that." We certainly believe in the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ and miracles and all of that.

I wouldn't find much to quibble over in their list, but their focus on carefully defining truth, and words, and creeds, instead of in Christ himself, shows what their drive wheel was and shapes their movement. What Chester's going to explain to you, starting in the next message, is that the Fundamentalist movement tremendously impacted Mennonites. In my understanding people who come from my background of Mennonites have essentially a hybrid of the fundamental understanding of Christianity and Anabaptist/Mennonites. I won't talk very much about that because I'm going to let him do that, but it's amazing to me, once I understood this, how many times I see Mennonites putting truth in the drive wheel of their Christianity. In some circles, "Truth" is what I call one of the buzzwords, it's what people talk about, and of course I embrace the truth. I believe the truth; I am a Christian; but my tricycle has truth back here. I'm following Christ as a disciple, walking with Him in a living relationship as the drive wheel of my Christianity.

If you haven't read it, I'm going to recommend another book. David Bercot's book called *Will The Theologians Please Sit Down?* will tell you how New Testament Christianity, as it was believed the first three centuries more or less, had the drive wheel, all three wheels of Christianity, right. But in the 4th century when Constantine came on the scene and brought together the unity of church and state, from that moment, Christianity flipped that drive wheel, took this little wheel back here and put it up here.

The "truth" wheel became the drive wheel of Christianity, and the church entered into a period of endless theological debates that has never stopped to this day. It started in the first part of the 4th century at The Council of Nicea: "Who is Christ? What is He and what do we believe about Him?" They hammered it all out to the very word, and if you didn't believe those words, if you didn't embrace what they said in those words, you were a heretic, you were exiled, you were cut off, and eventually, you could be killed, if you didn't just embrace the words. That's not the heart of Jesus, my friend! You know, sometimes I get my words mixed up, sometimes I don't even say what I mean. Words alone are not adequate to express the infinity of God and His truths. Let us not "strive about words to no profit to the subverting of the hearer."

After 1600 years of truth being in the drive wheel of much of Christianity, some people said, "This is empty." They were weary of wars over words, and sterile truths, and we had a movement that sprung up a century or so ago that focused on the "life" of Christianity. They wanted LIFE, they wanted an experience. Every Christian needs to experience his personal Pentecost, they said. They did not totally forget the Christian's walk in the way. They didn't discard basic Christian truths, but they put their experience, their "life" wheel right up here, and pretty soon, for many of them, (understand I'm speaking in broad terms, I'm not judging individuals, just to help us understand Christianity in a broad sense, and what has shaped it) they made these supernatural demonstrations of life and signs, wonders, miracles their drive wheel, and, many of them particularly speaking in tongues. There have been other movements in history that have emphasized the life too; the German Pietists did; the inner life. In the German Pietist movement, some beautiful things there! but we'll move on.

Just a little warning as we pass through here: Analyzing historical movements, like this should never lead us to pass judgment on individuals. It's not our business, it's not our calling or duty; we're not able. And I've said already, I believe that many Christians in many movements have known the life of Christ, believed the truth, and walked in the way with Christ. But "each one's work will become clear; for the day will declare it because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is." (1 Cor. 3:13) So if you look at these movements and you watch what happens and often happens very soon, you can see how reshaping Christianity and moving our wheels around impacts the next generation and the next generation.

There's a lot to talk about there but I'm going to have to let it go. Most of all, I'd like to warn us, using this "grid" to flatter ourselves will only destroy us. Don't do it, my brothers. We should learn from history but what we learn from history I summarize in two simple statements: We humans make a mess of things, and, God is infinitely good and gracious to work with people, in spite of their imperfections, and use them as well as he can wherever he finds hearts that seek Him. God is faithful. God is good.

The Anabaptists, I believe, got it right. They understood the life, the new birth. Read Menno Simons' treatise on the new birth. He understood that. They didn't discount miracles, in the Scripture or in their own personal lives, but it wasn't what they looked for, what they lived for, it wasn't the heart of their Christian life. They were orthodox as far as their creeds; what other Christians believed they believed? But truth and confessions of faith, although they had a place for them, and have for us, were not the drive wheel of their Christianity. They understood that as Kingdom Christians, their drive wheel was to be a follower of Jesus, to receive life in Christ so they could walk with Christ.

"To believe" in the New Testament sense is often followed by a little preposition "into". The literal meaning of that word is to "believe into Christ". To believe is what brings us right into Christ. It connects us to the Vine. That's what "belief" is, its not I just... well, we call it "easy-believism" in our modern world. To repent is to turn away from the old life so we can enter into the new life. That's Christianity!

The Anabaptists longed for a pure church composed of those who voluntarily submitted to baptism. This sprang from their understanding of Christianity: they were disciples living in Christ's Kingdom. They purposed to follow Christ in daily life, no matter the cost. It was a beautiful thing.

So I need to conclude: We need "Tricycle Christianity". We need three wheels. They all need to be on the ground and they need to be able to turn. We can't have! them misshapen. If our understanding of truth is not in harmony with the word of God it is like having an oblong wheel back here going around bump, bump, bump, bump and our Christianity is not very comforting. If people get uncomfortable, they soon get off the tricycle. If we don't have the wheels on the ground this thing isn't working, and it's not actually moving. People aren't looking for Christianity that's an armchair. They want something that's active and powerful and moving. We need a drive wheel, a steering wheel. We need to walk in the way as Christ's disciples. We need that life wheel, the Christian experience, we need to be born again, we need to come into the Kingdom by that new birth. We need a truth wheel; sound Christian doctrine; but we are not theologians and we're not Fundamentalists.

I'd like to conclude with this: Above all, we need to remember that Jesus said, "I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life." Sometimes I've used the term "lifestyle Christianity". It has some good points, but if we just have a lifestyle that we embrace that's not springing from walking with Christ in the Way as disciples of Christ, in training to become like Him and to represent His kingdom, it's not the real way. Jesus is the Way! And brother, if we have everything lined up in our creed, our confession of faith all perfectly stated, that's not sufficient! Jesus Himself is the truth! And we've got all kinds of experiences. That's not enough either.

To finish this message I'll take you to the familiar words in Matthew, chapter 7, the end of the Sermon on the Mount. You know these words, but I think Jesus states in these 3 verses what I've said here. v. 21 *"Not every one who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven,"* it's not our confession, its not our creed, its not the statements that we say with our lips that gives us an entrance into the kingdom of heaven, *"but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven,"* he who walks in the way with Jesus as a disciple, trained in Jesus' way, imitating Jesus' life, receiving that life, will enter the Kingdom of heaven. *"In that day many will say unto me, Lord! Lord! did we not prophecy in your name?"* We said it just right, Lord, and we even cast out demons! Life! Power! In your name! We did many wonderful works. We had a drive wheel up here. That wasn't the right one. Our confession is all right, but Jesus said, *"I will say to them, I never knew you."*

Tricycle Christianity, when it's working, is attractive.

Let's pray: God the Father, Lord we thank you that we can understand these truths and we pray that you would drive them deep into our hearts for your glory. Open our hearts and help us to walk in the way. For Jesus' sake, Amen.