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# CHURCH HISTORY MONTHLY

Jul 2021, Vol. 1, no. 7, Page 1/2

## Timeline of Topics

- **-Extra:**
- **---The various ways of interpreting a Christian walk**
- **---6 often misunderstood words**
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- **-Global Christianity**
- **---Ethiopian Christianity grew in a vacuum**

## HOW TO BETTER UNDERSTAND WHY OTHER CHRISTIANS BELIEVE THE WAY THEY BELIEVE

It is no secret that vast numbers of Christians, and the myriad Christian groups to which they belonged, have different interpretations of how to follow Christ. Midway through my seminary study of church history (in my first semester as a doctoral student), I was introduced to a book which provided a frame on which to hang all the different Christian groups I had and was studying: Richard Niebuhr's "Christ and Culture" (1951).

Niebuhr's book helped me understand why there were so many different interpretations: people understand the relationship between Christ and culture differently. Therefore, as an aid to helping others understand the wide range of Christian perspectives, the rest of this article will detail Niebuhr's main point. In a nutshell, he believed that Christians view their interaction with culture in one of five different relationships; I will present them from one extreme to the other. (While he has his critics, this is helpful in understanding why there are so many different Christian groups.)

--Christ against Culture. This view holds that Christ creates a new people and calls them out of the world. Christ is not the highest authority, He is the only authority. Christ and culture are at odds with each other; the choice is either-or. In order to follow Christ you must reject culture. Christ does not work through culture. Sin easily dwells in culture and so true Christians will remove themselves from contact with culture. Culture is unredeemable and hopelessly anti-God.

--Christ and Culture in Paradox. This view holds that Christians must remain in tension when interacting with culture. They are not to reject culture, yet to view it with suspicion. Christ does not work through culture, but Christians can use certain aspects of culture to further the cause of Christ. Christians recognize that they cannot get away from culture and so live in it, but they seek to rid themselves of the influence of culture.

--Christ the Transformer of Culture. This view retains the sharp view that Christ is separate from culture, yet believes that Christ can change culture. This is done by impacting individuals who will in turn impact culture. Christ is not concerned with culture but with the hearts of people. God created all things good (according to Genesis 1), yet they have been perverted through the fall of Adam. Therefore, all perverted things (read "culture") can become good again. So, while culture is misdirected, it can be renewed through interacting with Christ.

--Christ above Culture. This view holds that there is good in culture, but only because God produces it. Therefore, Christ and culture do work together. This "good" in culture is used by Christ to further His plans; He not only works through the church and Christians but through culture as well. Therefore, Christians should seek Christ out within the church and also should seek out those ways that Christ is working in culture.

--Christ of Culture. This view holds that Christ and culture overlap. Christ affirms culture and freely works through culture. Christ's purpose will sometimes be revealed within the church and sometimes from culture. Christ is the great enlightener and will work in culture to bring all people to wisdom and peace. Being the opposite extreme of Christ against Culture, this view holds that Christians and the church need to be relevant to their time; as culture changes so should the Christians and churches change accordingly and like-mindedly.

**A certain monk came to Sisoës the Theban, and said to him, "I am angry at another monk, and I wish to take vengeance for myself." The old man said, "Let us pray." And while he was praying, he said in his prayer, "O God, from now on we have no need of You to take care of us, for we will take vengeance for ourselves;" and when the brother heard these words he fell down at the feet of the old man and said unto him, "From now on I will not enter into judgment with my brother." And so Abba Sisoës healed that monk.**

**--Sayings of the Egyptian Desert Fathers, app. AD 300s**

## **6 words that Christians often misunderstand**

--Mercy and Grace: I heard these simple definitions at seminary, and thought they were so cool that I would teach them whenever I could. If you think about it, these words are difficult for most people to define. They are words that are used a lot in churches, but I find that not many people can say what they mean. I hear things like, "Well, I know what they mean, I just can't put it into words." So here we go. Mercy: not getting what you deserve. Grace: getting what you do not deserve.

--Messiah/Christ: Messiah and Christ mean the same thing: "anointed" or "chosen one." Messiah is taken from the Hebrew language and Christ is taken from the Greek language.

--Apostle: Jesus chose 12 men to be his Apostles while he was alive. Later Paul and Matthias (Acts 1:26) were added as Apostles and there might have been more. But an Apostle is someone who saw Jesus and was given a task or appointed by Jesus. Apostles held a special authority from God. The Apostle John was probably the last Apostle to die, doing so around the year AD 100.

--Disciple: A follower of someone else. All Christians are disciples of Jesus, for example, just as all Muslims are disciples of Muhammad. The Apostles were also Christian disciples, but they were had a special spiritual authority, that made them Apostles.

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## **Global Christianity: Ethiopian Christianity grew in a vacuum**

SIM is an independent missionary agency founded in 1893. Before they were known as "SIM," they were called the "Sudan Inland Mission." But this does not refer to the country of Sudan (which today is North and South Sudan). Instead, it refers to the region in the middle of Africa that stretches across the continent and below the Sahara Desert. Another way to look at it: the top part of Africa is the Sahara Desert, and the region below the Sahara Desert from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans is the Sudan.

One of the countries they work in is Ethiopia. Ethiopia has a long history of Christianity beginning in the 300s. Some even claim that the Ethiopian Eunuch brought Christianity to Ethiopia. Most of the Christians there belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo church, which is similar in some ways to the Eastern or Greek Orthodox. About one-fourth of the Christians there are Protestant. With all that background information laid, we can now move onto our story.

In 1927, SIM decided to target a Satan-worshipping tribe called the Wallamos. SIM sent 24 missionaries there and, after about 10 years, 48 of the Wallamos had become Christian. Nevertheless, SIM was committed to the long plan.

Then the first movements of the conflict that would become World War II in the early 1940s began to creep in. In 1935, the Italians attacked Ethiopia and, in 1937, defeated the Ethiopians. One of the missionaries, Raymond Davis, wrote, "we wondered what we would find if we were ever able to come back." They would not know for a long time because that occupation eventually gave way to World War II. SIM missionaries were not able to get back in until 1943.

Unknown at that time to SIM, the Italians had tried to wipe out the Christian Wallamos population. For example, they whipped church leaders, with some of them dying from their wounds. Undeterred, the Wallamos Christians stood strong for the Lord. Two different leaders, Wandaro and Toro, preached to the crowd while being beaten. We do not know of some of the acts of spiritual courage because they were not recorded, but we do know the result: the church began to grow among the Wallamos.

And what did the SIM find when they returned six years later. They left forty-eight Christians behind and hoped to find at least that many when they returned, but they discovered that 18,000 Wallamos had become Christian! The courage of the faithful few (48) had produced a crop of 18,000 during difficult times of persecution.