

Questions about Christianity

1. How are Catholics and Protestants different?

I could write a book on this, but let's just touch on some of the more obvious points. First, the organizations are different. The Catholic Church has a pyramid-shaped organization, with the Pope at the peak. Protestant groups have various organizations, but none of them are under the Pope. The next most obvious thing is the matter of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Protestants respect Mary very much, but they don't put up statues of her and they don't pray to her. In contrast, some Catholic churches at times seem like a "Mary Religion." The third easy-to-understand point is that Catholic priests and nuns aren't allowed to marry, while Protestant pastors are.

2. What nationality was Christ?

Jesus ("Christ" is a title, meaning "Savior") was Jewish.

3. I've heard that Islam and Christianity worship the same God.

The difficult point is that in Arabic, the word for "God" is "Allah," so it looks like Christians and Moslems worship the same Being. However, if you look just a little bit deeper the differences are obvious. The God of Islam could be called "The God of Revenge," while the Bible clearly states that God is love. That's not all, but it must be said that the God of Islam and the God of the Bible are fundamentally different. One man who converted from Islam to Christianity said, "While I was a Moslem, the idea of addressing God as "Heavenly Father" was unimaginable."

4. Will anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus, no matter how good they are, go to hell?

I'd like to answer using two passages of Scripture. The first is the Gospel of John, Chapter 14, verse 6: Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The second is the Letter to the Romans, Chapter 2, verses 12 through 16: All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Basically, human beings can't clean themselves up enough to be accepted by God. That's why God sent His Son Jesus Christ to take away our sin, being born on this earth and being killed on a cross. However, the believers who lived in Old Testament times were also saved through Jesus, though He hadn't been born yet. Those who have never had any opportunity to hear about Jesus will be judged on the basis of their own conscience, but anyone who knows enough to ask this question doesn't have any excuse, do they?

5. What kinds of Christian groups are there? I hear all sorts of group names and I don't understand it all.

I need to start by saying that there are three well-known groups that use the name of Christ, but aren't Christian. They are the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, and the Unification Church (Moonies). The reason they fall outside of the classification of Christian is that their understanding of who Jesus was, and is, is twisted. (The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus wasn't truly God, but was a created being. The Mormons believe, among various other off-the-wall things, that Jesus and Satan (the devil) were brothers. The Unification Church teaches that Sun Myung Moon is a second Christ.) True Christianity holds that Jesus Christ was pre-existent from before the creation of heaven and earth, that he was incarnated in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and was born on this earth as a very normal human baby. Accordingly, Jesus is truly God as well as truly man. In that dual capacity He took the penalty for human sin on Himself on the cross. Then, on the third day, He rose from death. Those who believe that are Christians.

Within the large category of Christianity, the two major divisions are Catholics and Protestants. (There are also the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, but they have very little presence in Japan outside of Hokkaido.) There are many different denominations and groups within the Protestant category. Each one naturally has its own flavor and personality. The central point is what is understood and believed about Christ.

6. Is it OK for people who aren't Christians to go to church?

Of course! The Church isn't some cliquish club; it's God's family, desiring as many people as possible to join in.

7. What is baptism? What is required for baptism?

Baptism is from a Greek word that means, literally, to wash or immerse. In the Bible, baptism has two big meanings. The first is a symbol of repentance from past sins and commitment to Christ. The second meaning is a picture of the old self having died with Christ, being buried (under the water) with Christ, and then being resurrected with Christ. The qualifications for baptism are very simple: believe that Jesus Christ went to the cross for your sins, He died as the penalty for your sins, and He rose on the third day to give you salvation.

8. How do you become a pastor? What kind of place is a seminary?

To be a pastor you need the gifting and calling from God. It's futile to try to be a pastor without those two things. Along with the calling from God, there needs to be appointment from a church. It's necessary for the people of a church to look at a person, evaluate their gifting and maturity, and say, "Please become our pastor." Unfortunately, there are people who become pastors simply out of admiration for the office. The results are terrible. Education isn't bad, but you can't tell how good or bad a pastor is, or will be, by what school they went to or their grades there. The pastors of the 1st Century Church were mostly uneducated men. Theological seminaries like we have today didn't start until hundreds of years later.

Having said that, just what is a seminary? Most people who feel a calling to become pastors study at a school of theology. (The word, "theology," means "the study of God.") There are

three types of theological schools. One is a graduate school, which is open only to those who have graduated from 4-year colleges or universities. The second type is essentially a college or junior college with a major in theology, and a high school diploma is sufficient for entrance. The third type accepts students regardless of their educational background, but their diplomas carry far less weight than those of the other types of seminary. Of course, every school of theology will have its own theological slant, so choosing the right school can be a real problem. Also, particularly with the 3rd type of school, there can be wide variations in quality.