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Ordinary Misconceptions

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There are many misconceptions about Christianity in today's world, but the greatest is this: that there's something ordinary about following Jesus Christ.

Non-believers often look at Christians as people who have joined a sort of club; one with a certain set of rules for behavior, where most people share a certain political perspective, which we're expected to advise other people to join with us "for their own good" (whatever that means). Believers often, unfortunately, treat it much the same way. There are different associations for different kinds of people and purposes, and (for many) churches are the kind of social group you might join if you enjoy a certain kind of wholesome atmosphere with lots of music, frequent meals together, and of course a weekly lecture or two (we call them sermons).

There is a difference between clubs and churches, though, or at least there ought to be. The difference comes from Christianity's roots in the life of one man who was the most astonishingly unique person ever to walk the earth.

He brought teachings of an utterly new kind of life, one of joy and freedom and grace and love. He astonished the fakers (hypocrites) of his day by tearing off their masks — and by refusing to wear one of his own.

He spoke paradoxically of giving up our lives so that we could gain them. He demonstrated it for us by giving up his own life and rising again from the dead.

He started a movement of followers who kept on following almost recklessly after his death to their own deaths, because they knew that the new life to which he had been raised would be their own as well.

Following Christ is not ordinary. It is death and life at the same time. It is death to self-centeredness, to fruitless and weary attempts at managing everything on our own, to scabbling for the power, prestige or wealth, to being beaten down by seemingly unending loss, heartache and pain. It is death to personal pride.

And it is life! It is life that gives up everything, sets all personal gain aside, sacrifices itself, and then discovers that God gives back far more. It is life that gives love and experiences love. It is life that knows joy deeply enough to keep passing it around in any circumstance. It is life that overflows with hope, and that builds hope within the hopeless.

It is a life in which all this flows from an inexhaustible river whose source is God the creator, the ultimate reality behind all of reality.

It is life that passes the test of reality. Through the loss of family members, through periods of difficult work-related situations and some very painful school-related problems our children have experienced, through periods of serious financial challenges, and even through a four-month bout with serious personal illness this year, the life and joy of Christ have kept me strong, hopeful and often (not always, I'll admit) smiling.

Not that it's all about the bad times, for when things are going well, I could never base my hope on some idealistic (and idiotic) expectation that "things are good and I can count on them staying that way." My hope remains in Christ who is always good.

Other followers of Christ could say much the same and often do, in their own words based on their own lives. All of us would also say that we still fall far short of the incredible example Jesus Christ set, and that we don't live in his kind of faith, love, hope and joy fully or consistently. But even when we fall short, we know he forgives. In a not too theologically precise way, we could say he makes up for all of it. He gives us freedom to be who we are, while at the same time he guides and builds us toward being something even better.

As well as I can express it, which is all too inadequate — I'm constrained by lack of space and especially by my own weakness — that's what Christianity is like. It's not ordinary.

It's not a club we're cajoling people to join. It's a fantastic life we're inviting others to share in.

Non-believers' view of Christianity is seldom anything like what I've described. Sometimes I wonder how many Christians' view of life in Christ matches that picture. Sometimes I even wonder how well my own view of life stacks up to this; for we're all prone to this great misconception in different ways. If non-believers get it wrong, could it be because they're getting it from us?

The key for believers is to stay close in touch with the reality. That means staying close in touch with the root of reality, who is Jesus Christ. The more we do that, the less we'll make the mistake of thinking following Christ is something ordinary, and the more we'll be able to show the true reality to those who do not know it yet.

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