A non-Christian who read recent newspapers to learn about Christianity might arrive at the following picture: Christianity believes that marriage is between a man and woman, so no marriage between members of the same sex. Christianity believes life begins at conception, so no abortion and no stem cell research. Christianity believes that God created the universe, so evolution should not be taught. Sexual activity belongs in marriage, so no premarital sex.

But Luther's dictum of the individual alone still rang out. When Roger Williams interpreted Scripture for himself in the 1630s, the Massachusetts Puritans expelled him. Williams believed in a radical understanding of Luther's dictum: The church should be separate from the government so that the church could not use government powers to enforce doctrine and interpretation on individuals. Williams' idea became the foundation of America's religious freedom.

In this picture, Christianity is about actions that people should or should not do; it is about morality. What is missing from this public Christianity are the religion's core features. Salvation, Scripture, faith and belief have disappeared from public view. How did this happen?

By the 1680s, variety was the religious flavor of the era. Formulations of Christian beliefs called catechisms proliferated. Puritan preacher Increase Mather thought that "over 500" different catechisms were circulating at the time. Over the next century or more, European immigrants brought in new Protestant denominations and Americans created their own.

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By the 1800s, Christians realized all this religious freedom fragmented Christianity and interfered with its ability to accomplish the great deeds needed. So, they banded together into nondenominational organizations to take on moral projects. To accomplish this unity, they overlooked doctrinal features which divided them.

Thus, the great ethical movements of the century were founded: anti-slavery, temperance, women's suffrage, and missionary projects to evangelize both foreign peoples and the USA's "unchurched" masses. By the mid-20th century, new nondenominational groups joined with those of a more secular bent in the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements. Lessons of these movements were, that if the divided Christian populace overlooked matters of doctrine and Scripture interpretation, they could unify on moral issues.

Toward the end of the 20th century, a new alliance of Christians was formed. Since the great moral concerns of slavery and personal civil rights had been resolved (more or less), these groups took up new ones. Thus, the Right to Life movement, for example, took up the cause of the unborn. This brought together an alliance of conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons, who were able to overlook their differences on doctrine and Scripture, and to unite on what they saw as a great moral concern.

Morality is, thus, a great religious unifier, where different religious groups can agree. They may arrive at those moral positions through different doctrinal interpretations of Scripture, even from different versions of Scripture. But to strengthen their unity, they ignore those differences. The public unity of Christianity, as apparent in American news coverage, comes from morality rather than doctrine.