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1

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

IN SCORN AND RIDICULE the world gave birth to the word *Christian*. In Antioch of Syria, a city of half a million inhabitants, the followers of Jesus were given this nickname. The word *Christian* appears only three times in the New Testament and never in the Old Testament. First occurring in Acts 11:26, “And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch,” it appears again in Acts 26:28, “Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian,’” and again in 1 Peter 4:16, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.”

To be a Christian in the early centuries was a life-and-death challenge; it was a faith for heroes. To be a Christian meant at times facing a pagan arena and wild beasts; it also meant a narrow gate, a straight way, the denial of self, shouldering a cross and following Jesus.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

1. *To be united with Christ.* The word *Christian* is really the combination of two words: *Christ* and *man*. When a man or woman is united with Christ, he or she forms one word—*Christian*. A Christian is the combination of *Christ* and *you*. The sinner receives the Savior, and the Savior receives the sinner. A Christian is a “Christ man” or a “Christ woman.”

2. *To be born again.* When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus He said, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). According to Jesus, a Christian is one who has been *born again*. Spiritual birth is the only way to enter God’s family; *we must* be born again.

In our day, the word *Christian* has been seriously corrupted. It has been pulled and stretched to cover the whole civilized world. Often it has been misused, misapplied, misunderstood, and misappropriated. Thousands call themselves Christians who have no claim to the name at all. Some say, “All civilized people are Christians.” Others suppose this word includes all Gentiles and excludes all Hebrews. To the contrary, there are many splendid people who are Jewish and

Christian, and, sad to say, there are thousands of Gentiles who are not Christians at all. The concept of Christianity has become so distorted that millions do not know the difference between true spiritual salvation and mere religious profession.

The story is told of some American seamen marooned on a South Sea island. Fearing the natives, the sailors hid, until one day they heard some of the inhabitants speaking perfect English. In relief, the marooned men falsely exclaimed, "They are Christians!"

In reality, no one has the right in his unforgiven state to say, "I am a Christian."

You ask, "But why?" Because the Bible teaches that "all have sinned."

God's justice and holiness demand that sin be paid for and dealt with. Jesus, God's Son, voluntarily died to atone for the sins of all mankind. When one receives Jesus in faith, then, and only then, does that one have the right or the scriptural authority to be a child of God. John the apostle said, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave *the right* to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12).

3. *To receive Christ as Savior.* To receive Christ is to have faith in Him, that He is the sinless Son of God, that He died voluntarily for our sins so that we might be free from spiritual death and judgment and have everlasting life. The all-important question is, Have you made this decision? Have you received Jesus Christ as your Savior?

A WORD OF WARNING

Religion is popular in our day. The world is full of people who say, "I believe in God. I believe in Jesus, and I believe in the Bible." Sometimes the lives of these do not correspond with what they claim to believe. For the most part, this is not a saving faith but a false faith.

The Bible says, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20), and again, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20). So, if there is no difference, no distinction, I fear that some individuals are in the flesh, and will "reap corruption" (Galatians 6:8).

In all probability, there's not a prisoner in the world who does not believe it is better to be honest. There is not a drunkard who does not believe it is better to be sober. But mere belief does nothing to change the condition. Faith has come to be thought of

today as a simple acquiescence to the Word of God. But this kind of faith is paralyzing and deadening. The Bible reminds us, “Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (James 2:19). The difference between heart belief and head belief is the difference between being saved and lost. Any faith that does not result in a changed life is not a saving faith; it is a deceiving faith. So the important question to ask is, “Have I believed savingly?”

Occasionally there are those who claim they cannot believe what they do not understand. But in reality we believe much that we do not understand. For example, no one understands the mysteries of electricity, yet it would be foolish to say, “I will sit in darkness until I understand electricity.”

No doctor completely understands the marvels of the digestive system. Yet, who would say, “I will not eat until I understand the digestive system”?

Who understands the miracle of the common watermelon? A seed is dropped into the ground. It sprouts, and soon there is a vigorous plant that bears several watermelons, each of which is hundreds of times the weight of the original seed. Outside of each there is a beautiful coat of green, then a rind of white and an enticing core of red with dozens of seeds, each

capable of producing additional watermelons. The most brilliant person cannot explain this mystery, but the most ignorant can enjoy it.

So when you submit to the gospel, you become part of the divine mystery. You are quickened by God and become “a new creature.” Jesus said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

By way of review:

1. A Christian is one who is “united with Christ.”
2. A Christian is one who has been “born again.”
3. A Christian is one who has “received Jesus Christ.”

WHAT A CHRISTIAN IS NOT

Sometimes we understand the positive better by considering the negative. I remember well the happiness of my own boyhood experience. On Sunday, all six of us children accompanied Mother and Father to church; our meals were always prefaced with family prayer; we read the Bible systematically. Ours was a Christian home, yet this wonderful inheritance did

not automatically make me a Christian. Relationship to the redeemed does not bring redemption. Kinship to Christians cannot make one a Christian. God's salvation is *not* by natural birth. *God doesn't have any grandchildren.* John 1:13 shares three errors that exist today: "Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

1. *Natural birth cannot make one a Christian:* "who were born not of blood."

John is simply saying that one does not become a Christian through our earthly parents. The blessing of a godly mother and father is a great heritage, but this does not make one a Christian. Parents can give a good push in the right direction, but they cannot make their children Christians.

The Jewish people used to say, "We have Abraham as our father," and therefore they thought they were safe and secure. The exponents of Nazism boasted of pure "Aryan blood" and talked of a "super-race." This, too, is unscriptural. In the Bible the mystery of blood is in the heritage of sin, derived from Adam by natural birth. It is also in the gift of salvation purchased by the blood of Christ through spiritual birth. John the apostle is saying that no one can

become a Christian through earthly parents. Natural birth cannot make one a Christian.

2. *Good works cannot make one a Christian:* “nor of the will of the flesh.”

Probably the greatest error that exists today is the belief that salvation is the result of *personal effort*. Thousands imagine themselves Christian because they seek to keep the Golden Rule or because they live decent, moral lives. Some rely upon their religious activity or church membership. In direct contrast, the apostle John says that salvation does not come through “the will of the flesh.”

I once asked a faithful church attender if she were a Christian. She quickly answered, “I have taught in the Sunday school for sixteen years.”

I commended her and kindly repeated the question. “Are you a Christian?”

She then told me of her efforts in the missionary program but did not answer my simple question. This individual was depending on *her own efforts* to earn salvation. If being active in religious work makes one a Christian, she would be one many times over; but the Bible says, “not of the will of the flesh.”

The Bible message is plain and easy to understand.

Paul said, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Salvation is not *something* you do but *Someone* you receive. Salvation is a relationship with Jesus Christ.

It would be easier to tunnel through the mountains with teaspoons than to get to heaven by personal effort, character, or morality. Salvation is *an offer, not a demand*. It is not based on what *I do* but on what Jesus Christ *has done*.

We do not become Christians by climbing the ladder of good works, rung by rung. In fact, the very opposite is true. Jesus came down the ladder via Bethlehem’s manger and Calvary’s cross to meet us where we are. Good works cannot make one a Christian.

3. Religious ordinances cannot make one a Christian: “nor of the will of man.”

Some time ago I asked a medical doctor, “Are you a Christian?” He answered, “I was baptized by Dr. So-and-so years ago.” After further discussion, I learned that he was banking everything on the ordinance of baptism rather than upon his personal faith in Christ. No man, no matter how prominent or pious, can make you a Christian. The false idea that some religious

leader can make one a Christian by some religious act is contrary to the teaching of the Bible. No church sacrament of ordinance, however important, can forgive sin.

Evangelist D. L. Moody once said, "I freely admit salvation is worth working for. It is worth a man's going round the world on his hands and knees, climbing its mountains, crossing its valleys, swimming its rivers, going through all manner of hardship in order to attain it, but we do not get it that way. It is to him that believes."¹

Ministers are instruments of God to perform His will. As Paul said, "we are God's fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9). "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). Never can any man confer salvation or forgiveness upon another.

Being a Christian is much more than believing certain doctrines or submitting to any ordinance. *It is receiving Christ.*

WHAT A CHRISTIAN OUGHT TO BE

For the apostle Paul, salvation and surrender were simultaneous. Immediately upon believing, he asked, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (Acts 9:6). Just as

Paul wanted to do God's will only, so every Christian should commit his entire life to Christ. Paul called upon all Christians to "present yourselves to God" (Romans 6:13). Adolph Deissman suggested that the word *Christian* means "slave of Christ," as *Caesarian* meant "slave of Caesar."

In the Old Testament, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, with children as numerous as the sand of the sea. But Abraham had no children. Contrary to the life of faith, he fathered a son by Hagar, his wife's slave. This act was of the flesh, representing man's blundering way rather than God's way. God intervened and performed a miracle. In her old age, Abraham's wife Sarah gave birth to Isaac, a child of faith, the fulfillment of God's eternal plan.

God calls each Christian to let go of his own solutions to life's problems and accept the way of faith. He is really saying, "Don't hang on to anything; *yield everything*."

It is a big mistake to imagine that you can carelessly ramble along in the Christian life. As Samuel Rutherford said, "You will not be carried to Heaven lying at ease upon a feather bed." Tertullian said, "He who fears to suffer cannot be His who suffered."

The call of Christ while on earth was uncompromising and unconventional. His words were so piercing that the hearers tried to kill Him. Yet today, we often present the Lord of glory as meek and mild rather than high and holy, as soft and sentimental instead of steadfast and strong. Artists and poets have occasionally portrayed Jesus with flowing chestnut hair, breathing mild benedictions upon everyone. This is false! It is true that He went about doing good; but on the other hand, He was firm and His words were stringent. At times He gave offense to His disciples, to His relatives, to the scribes and Pharisees. On one occasion, Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

True, He was loving and kind, but we must not overlook the demands of His call. "Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, 'Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.'"

Jesus answered the enthusiastic offer with a staggering response: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

Another cried, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."

The reply struck back as fast and devastating as lightning. “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.”

A third cried, “Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.”

Jesus dealt a crushing blow when He said, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57–62).

The Christian life is a great adventure, but it is not a picnic. Jesus never gained disciples under false pretense. He never hid His scars but rather declared, “Behold My hands and My feet” (Luke 24:39).

John Koessler says it well, “Paul compared the life of discipleship to the rigors of military training or athletic competition. The opportunity to endure is also the opportunity to experience God’s grace. God uses hardships and endurance to transform us into the image of Christ.”²

From history’s pages we learn of a cowardly young soldier in the army of Alexander the Great. Whenever the battle grew fierce, the young soldier would retreat. The general’s pride was cut because this timid soldier also bore the name Alexander. One day Alexander the Great pointedly rebuked him, saying, “Stop being a coward, or drop that good name.”

The call to each Christian is the same today. May we live up to all that the name *Christian* implies.

QUESTIONS

1. How many times does the word *Christian* appear in the Bible and where?
2. Give two definitions in answer to the question, "What is a Christian?"
3. List three errors that exist in our world today, according to John 1:13.
4. According to John 1:12, what happens to the person who receives Jesus Christ?
5. According to Acts 9:6, a Christian ought to be what?
6. What did Paul call all Christians to do, in Romans 6:13?

NOTES

1. Sam Paxton, *Short Quotations of D. L. Moody* (Chicago: Moody, 1961).
2. John Koessler, *True Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody, 2003).

REMINDERS

A Christian is the combination of *Christ* and *you*.

The difference between heart belief and head belief is the difference between being saved and lost. God doesn't have any grandchildren.

Salvation is an offer, not a demand.

Jesus never gained disciples under false pretense. He never hid His scars but rather declared, "Behold My hands and My feet."

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of
our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

2 PETER 3:18 NIV

“How does the soul grow? Not all in a
minute! Now it may lose ground, and now it
may win it; Now it rejoiceth, and now it
bewaileth; Now its hopes fructify, then they
are blighted; Now it walks sullenly, now
gropes benighted; Fed by discouragements,
taught by disaster; So it goes forward, now
slower, now faster, Till all the pain is past,
and failure made whole, It is full grown, and
the Lord rules the soul.”

SUSAN COOLIDGE

“We ought always to thank God for you,
brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is
growing more and more, and the love every
one of you has for each other is increasing.”

2 THESSALONIANS 1:3 NIV