

What is a Christian?

By Elder Clint Buck

There seems to be many different views today as to what, or who, a Christian is. Interestingly enough, we find the word "Christian" used only three times in the New Testament. In each usage, it seems that it was not a word that one used to describe himself, but was a word used by others to describe the behavior of a disciple of Christ.

A disciple, or follower, does not dictate to his master the terms of his own discipleship: it is the Master who states the terms of discipleship. Else, how could one be described as a disciple, or follower, if it is the disciple who sets the terms of discipleship?

There are two basic backgrounds that a person will come from in deciding how Christianity is received. They will think either that Christianity is received through an act of the person or they will see that Christianity is gained only through a supernatural, creative act of God. For your consideration, I will list the three places where the word "Christian" is used in the New Testament:

- 1). Acts 11:26, where the disciples in Antioch were first called Christians. They were called Christians because they followed the teachings of their Master, Jesus Christ.
- 2). Acts 26:28, where King Agrippa was almost persuaded by the Apostle Paul to become a "Christian." I think this king knew full well that a disciple of Christ would, of necessity, manifest a changed behavior.
- 3). I Peter 4:12-16, where it speaks of one suffering as a Christian, or partaking of the suffering of Christ. Here it speaks of being reproached for

the name of Christ, Who by the world is evil spoken of; but, on the part of Christians, He is glorified.

Also, for your consideration, I will list some of the definitions of what people in the world think a Christian is:

- 1) A Christian is a person who goes to church. It is true a Christian should not forsake assembling with others in a church capacity, but the mere act of attending a church no more makes one a Christian than habitual attendance at pro football games makes one a professional football player.
- 2) A Christian is one who has been baptized. The act of baptism does not cause one to be "saved," nor does it remove the "filth of the flesh." I Peter 3:21, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (KJV) If baptism did cause one to be saved or to become a Christian, what need was there for Christ to die on Calvary's cross?
- 3) A Christian is one who believes in God. "*Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.*" James 2:19. By this definition then, the devils would be Christians because they believed in God. But we know devils are not Christians. The demons during the time of Christ's ministry knew who He was, but that is not enough. In John 3, Nicodemus knew Jesus was sent from God, and Nicodemus believed in God, but Jesus told him that he must be born again, or born "from above."
- 4) A Christian is one who does good things. Again there are two basic views of man; that man is generally good and is capable of doing right, or that man is inherently bad and is incapable of doing any good on his own.

I am not ashamed to claim the latter view. Romans 3:9-12, *"What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is no one that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one."*

We have further confirmation of this from scripture: Genesis 6:5, *"And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."* Jeremiah 17:9, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it."* Romans 7:18a, *"For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing."* This was written by the Apostle Paul after he was born again. He went on to say that with his mind he served the law of God, but with the flesh he served the law of sin, verses 24-25. So, can we conclude that the flesh can never be the origin of righteousness? Surely, for righteousness can come only from God, through the Holy Spirit, working in the lives of His people.

5) A Christian is one who doesn't do bad things. For this, I appeal to the aforementioned text in Rom.3. The mere absence of bad, or evil (as viewed from the human perspective) does not qualify one a Christian. The Bible says that man, in his natural state, can do no good. That is God's view. The view of the world may be, admittedly, different. Yet, the requirements for entrance into God's Kingdom are not set by His creatures, or creation, but by the Creator Himself. I would call this view a view of "passive Christianity." The absence of evil does not guarantee the presence of good. Conversely, the presence of good does not guarantee the absence of evil.

6) A Christian is one who has had a "religious experience." Under this consideration, we list three manner of experiences:

a) One who has "made a decision" for Christ. I am not sure I know what this means. Does it mean like to make a decision to go to the store, and if so, can I change my decision and not go? If I make a decision for Christ, can I rescind it and thus negate the work God had supposedly done in my life as the result of my "decision"? How sure can salvation be if it is based on my decision?

b) One who has "accepted" Christ. The term "accepted" implies an action of the will of man to accept the offer of salvation from God. Yet, the Bible states that the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God because they are foolishness to him, neither can he know them because they are spiritually understood. I Corinthians 2:14. The natural man does not have the ability to accept or reject the offer of salvation. In his natural state, he is totally inclined to evil. John 3:19-21. Moreover, the carnal, natural mind of man is against God, not subject to God (because of rebellion) and unable to be subject to God. Romans 8:7.

The Bible says that God quickens (makes alive) those who were dead (a corpse) in trespasses and sin. A corpse can do nothing on its own. Any who have received salvation have done so only because of the will of God. Those who received Christ did so, not by the will of the flesh, not by the will of man, but by God's will. John 1:13, James 1:18. Romans 9 verse 15, *"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy ...Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."* When we consider the term "accept," the term "reject" is also implied. The picture is painted

all too often in evangelical circles of a Fatherly God wanting so much to save you if you will only let Him. This is not an accurate picture of God. God is the One who is called Almighty in the scriptures, not man. To say that man can reject the will of God is to imply that man is stronger than God, which is obviously untrue. *"And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?"* Daniel 4:35.

c) One who has been "saved." Judas was a prime example of an unsaved church member. How often have I heard it said that all one needed to do was "come forward and be saved." Does this mean that the act of coming forward guarantees salvation? Even at church camps, the pressure to "come forward" is enormous, and the peer pressure great to conform to the wishes of the preachers and others who are "saved." Those who come forward are registered as statistics and wind up on some preacher's brag sheet. I have even heard "repeat after me" prayers, that upon finishing, the one leading the prayer said to the one following, "Now you are saved." That's it! That's all it takes? Just repeat a prayer and bang, you're in heaven's promise? I don't suppose many will see what is subtly taking place here; this manner of salvation, and others like it, simply remove God's working from the equation. Not many will see the sheer arrogance of it all. How mighty we want to make man, and how subservient we want to make God! However, it needs to be made clear that any who make it to God's Kingdom do so via salvation, to be sure. But the salvation of which I speak is that which, is worked by God in the heart according to His purpose, and not that which is bestowed by man according to his arrangements. The act of regeneration is equated by Jesus

Christ to being "born again," and the source of that new birth is from above, from God Himself. Scripture says, *"If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature, old things are passed away, behold all things are become new."* 2 Corinthians 5:17.

The positive view of Christianity!

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself left requirements for discipleship, so the matter is not left open to conjecture. Matthew 16:24-25, *"Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."* Luke 14:33, *"So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."* So how does one gain entry into God's Kingdom? *"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again (from above) he cannot see the Kingdom of God."* The new birth is what is referred to as salvation; it is of the Lord; and it comes from above.

Once a person is born again, he has the Holy Spirit within and is led by the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:14, *"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God."* Being genuine Christians and being led of the Holy Spirit, they begin to show forth certain attributes that confirm the work of the Holy Spirit within. There is the interior testimony, Romans 8:16, *"The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:"* This interior testimony works to manifest an exterior testimony, John 13:35, *"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."* This interior working having exterior effect is seen also in Philippians 1:6 *"...he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."* Also in Philippians 2:13-15, *"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and*

harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world." A Christian is a person who has been born again by the grace and mercy of God, according to the will and purpose of God.

A Christian has two separate and distinct natures, flesh and spirit. The spirit does not become flesh, and the flesh does not become spirit. They remain separate and distinct as long as the Christian remains on the earth. Further, a Christian has been set free from the law of sin and death, and his freedom is grander and more comprehensive than even most Christians recognize. A Christian is one who, as he ages in the Lord, begins to show forth the evidence of the character of the Holy Spirit who indwells him, so that he gradually begins to show forth more attributes of God and fewer attributes of self. The aim of the genuine Christian is to glorify God in all he does, in his manner of life, at his job, in his home and among his friends and family.

Christianity is a life that issues forth from God, working in the believer to effect His will, which on the one hand builds up the believer and on the other hand, brings glory to God. The irony of Christianity is that you will never understand it until you are one. You may ask, "But wait! Aren't you going to tell me how to be 'born again'? I will tell you the same thing the Lord told Nicodemus: *"Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth (will), and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."* John 3:7-8. Now, you may know something of the Bible and recall to mind the Philippian jailer of Acts 16:30-31, where he asked the question, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* Paul and Silas answered them and said, *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved..."* Many will look at this and say, "Oh, that is all? The only thing I have to do is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?" Faith, (another word for belief) is found in Galatians 5:22, listed as one of the fruits of the

Spirit of God. Faith, then, is that which, is produced by the Holy Spirit. Most will say one has to believe in order to be saved; I say one has to be saved in order to believe. Faith cannot come from a totally depraved man, but does come from one quickened (made alive) by the Holy Spirit.

Those who maintain that the natural man can exercise supernatural faith deny the total hereditary depravity of man, and would have carnal man, who is not subject to God's laws, exercising saving faith; while the Bible says that the natural man is the enemy of God. Why would God's enemy exercise faith in Him or even be disposed to regard Him kindly? How can we say that carnal man can do any good, (for faith is good) while the Bible says there is none that doeth good? Now, you may think I am trying to confuse the issue; such is not the case at all. I am trying to clarify the issue.

I have in my library a book by W.E. Best titled *A Comprehensive View of Romans* Vol. 1. I quote from page 105: "The weapons of deceivers are carnal, even though they mix in a little scripture with their human eloquence, clever propaganda, charming personality, and personal attention. The deceived are gullible because they are lazy, untutored, and possessed with self-interest." This precisely pinpoints the reason why people are easily misled. Do not be fooled into thinking that the bigger the church, the more spiritual they are. The Lord, at His death, had only eleven Apostles and few followers. I encourage you to investigate even 100 to 150 years into the past in your denomination and see if what was taught then is being taught now. Neither God nor His word change; they are the same yesterday, today and forever. May God be pleased to use this as He will, to His honor and glory. Amen.

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