

What is a Christian?

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THE BIG QUESTION

OF ALL THE questions we can ask or answer in life, this question is the vitally important one. It is a simple question, but if the answer was simple, then most people would not get it wrong. If I were to ask you your age or your hair colour, or the way to find your home, they are all straightforward questions with straightforward answers. So, why does the question ‘What is a Christian?’ baffle most people, even very clever people?

Some people say that a Christian is a person who believes in God. Yet Jews and Muslims believe in God and they are not Christians. Others say that a Christian lives according to a strict moral code and yet there are lots of moral people who don’t claim to be Christians. People will say a Christian is a person who is religious, goes to church, gives generously, doesn’t swear, smoke or drink, and is kind to his neighbour. Those are among the many wrong answers and yet, although such behaviour may be accurate, it simply answers the question, ‘What does a Christian do – or not do?’, rather than ‘What is a Christian?’

Most people who answer in that way have at least one thing in common – they have no idea why Easter was necessary. For them

being a Christian is all about human activity rather than what God has done – especially through the events of Easter. So, the cross of Jesus and his resurrection simply become more examples of human endurance.

The word ‘Christian’ occurs three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; Acts 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16). When the New Testament describes Christians, it describes them far more regularly as having a location – they are ‘in Christ’ (Rom. 8:1; Eph. 2:10; Col. 3:3). A Christian therefore is a person who lives in union with Jesus, who lives in solidarity with Jesus, and whose identity is wrapped up with Jesus, a person who believes in Jesus, belongs to Jesus, and is growing daily to become more like Jesus.

The Christian author C. S. Lewis said, ‘the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs ... God became Man for no other purpose.’¹

OUR GLOBAL PROBLEM

All of us share the same problem, which is that we were born into this world sharing a human nature passed to us by our mum and dad. And this nature was passed on by their parents, and before them by their parents, going right back to the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. We have inherited a nature which has an awareness of God and yet a determination to ignore God and establish our own rule over our lives. The nature we all have as humans seeks to divorce God and marry self. According to the book of Genesis (3:16-19), because of our first parents’ rebellion, the world we live in is marred by friction, division, pain, and ultimately death. The only possible solution does not lie with us but with God.

THE ONLY SOLUTION

God has acted decisively by sending Jesus who is uniquely qualified to solve our dilemma: Jesus does not share our link with Adam; Jesus is a real man, but Jesus was born of God, and Jesus lived in perfect harmony with God; in fact the worst his enemies could say of Jesus was that he ate with the wrong types of people! Jesus died on the cross on Good Friday – a death he did not earn or deserve

1 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 4, Chapter 8.

– because he always did God’s will. He died to pay the fine that all rebels must pay, which is death. As someone has said, ‘He paid a debt he did not owe, for we owed a debt we could not pay.’ Jesus was then raised from the dead, three days later, proving that death could not hold him down, and defeating this great enemy. God was showing that Jesus really is the Lord and King of all creation. At Easter therefore we see that Jesus is the rescuer we need and the Lord who has every right to rule over us.

SO, WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

A Christian is a person who no longer lives outside of Christ but ‘in Christ’. How does the change take place? It is God who initiates the change.

In John 3 Jesus had a conversation with a man called Nicodemus, a deeply religious Jew. Jesus told Nicodemus that if he was to be right with God, to see and enter God’s kingdom, he must be born ‘from above’, be completely remade, and have a fresh start. Nicodemus was not told to remake or ‘rebirth’ himself, but that this new birth is something that God does. Jesus said it is God’s Spirit that is at work, and the Spirit is as uncontrollable as the wind (3:8).

A Christian therefore is someone who humbly recognizes that they are helpless before God – unworthy and unable to make themselves fit for God. Only he can produce the change within and draw us to Christ.

Yet in the same chapter and in the most famous verse in the Bible (John 3:16), Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must nevertheless put his trust in Jesus Christ, God’s greatest gift to the world. To believe in Jesus is therefore to rely on, depend on, or trust in him, to transfer your confidence from your own performance to the perfect performance of Jesus Christ – his life, death, and resurrection. The record of our life, which prevented fellowship with God, is wiped clean and replaced with the record of Christ – so fellowship with God becomes his gift and our privilege.

AN ILLUSTRATION

In John 3:14-15, we read about an Old Testament incident (from Num. 21) which illustrates the need to turn away from self to God.

Israel had complained against God and God had sent a punishment to discipline them. The snakes that came were fatal and the people cried out to God for help. He told Moses to lift a brass snake up on a pole in the camp and said that all who looked to this snake would be healed. By looking at the snake, people would recognize two things: that death was what they deserved and that rescue was what God graciously provided.

In the same way Nicodemus was told that he must look only to Jesus – to the One who would soon be ‘lifted up’ on the cross. There, Nicodemus would recognize that death was what he himself deserved and that Jesus was dying as his substitute. And so, a Christian is a person in whom God has brought about a ‘new birth,’ and the first thing the newborn child of God does is turn away from their sinful life and trust in the sinless Saviour.

And here are some benefits of being ‘in Christ’: I am now forgiven by God, my rebellious record, my greatest problem, has been transferred to Jesus, and he has paid the fine I deserved, so that I don’t have to pay. And his perfect record becomes mine as I stand before God. I now enjoy a new life in which God lives in me, giving me new loves, new desires, and new strength to serve him, by placing his Holy Spirit within me. I live confidently before God, knowing that he is my perfect Father who has given me this new life, who has promised to guide and direct me, and one day to take me to live with him eternally.

The person who is ‘in Christ’ now begins to resist all that is inconsistent with following Jesus, not trusting in this new life but in the perfect life and death and rising of Jesus. This is why the well-known song, Amazing Grace, rightly says that grace is amazing! As the apostle Paul says of Jesus in the New Testament, ‘the One who knew no sin, became sin for us, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God’ and that he ‘became poor, so that we might become rich’ (2 Cor. 5:21 and 8:9).

So here now is the most vital question you must ever answer: Are you a Christian? Have you been ‘born again’ from above, by God? I was once challenged to ‘put my name’ into John 3:16, so it read like this – that ‘God so loved David, that he gave his only Son so that when David believes in him, David will not perish, but David will

have everlasting life.' Can you put your name in there? God is not reluctant to have you believe and belong. He may well be the One who is prompting you to read this book!

The future without Jesus is bleak but the future with Jesus is bright. A new start and a new life which will never end.

When you are a Christian, having had a 'new birth' experience, your needs are clear: you need spiritual food from the Bible, and teaching and fellowship from a good, faithful church. So, find a church where the Bible is preached and believed, and tell the leaders of that church who you are and – if possible – get into a good sustaining Bible study group.

You also need exercise. Find ways of serving Christ in your home, church, workplace, and community – passing on the undeserved kindness that you have received from him. This is not to win God's favour (because you could not be more in God's favour than you are), but it is the fruit of being a Christian, the consequence of your salvation, not the cause.

As the apostle Paul says, 'If anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17). May this joy be yours.