

Who Is a Christian?

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Photo date and location unknown

There was a story making the rounds in Harrisonburg, Virginia when I was growing up. President Eisenhower, it went, died and arrived at heaven. When he got there he asked for a guided tour so he could get the feel of the place.

Saint Peter agreed to do the honors and introduced him to each community in turn. "Here are the Catholics," he said, "and over there the Presbyterians." Later they came to the Methodists, Lutherans, Orthodox, and each in turn greeted the President. After some time they arrived at a brick wall, old and covered with ivy.

Eisenhower couldn't see over it and heard no noise. "Who's over there?" he asked Saint Peter.

"Sssh. Don't disturb them. They are the Mennonites -- they think they are the only ones here!"

That's the way the story went, and it was funny to us, because it seemed like the older people believed that we in this small Protestant sect were the only ones who could truly be assured of a place in heaven. If you weren't a Mennonite, you might not make it.

As the years went by I found most of my spiritual nourishment in groups outside the Virginia Mennonite community, and I began to think of myself more as a Christian than a Mennonite.

As I traveled I was always distressed to find people who were so willing to exclude from the Kingdom of Heaven anyone who differed slightly from them. There might be two Baptist groups, each damning the other to hell over some slight difference, as the proper location to hold a baptism ceremony. If Jesus came and died for all mankind, as the Bible says, how can we exclude our brother from the salvation he brings?

Or, to take another example, I have been to Wednesday night prayer meetings where members are called on to give testimonies.

Someone struggles to his feet and announces, "I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior 32 years ago, and I thank God for saving me and keeping me." He sits down. Has God not done anything for him in the past 32 years? Can someone accept Christ as his savior and rest on his "laurels" for 32, or however many years, content with the thought that he can now rest assured of going to heaven when he dies? Is this the extent of God's relationship with His children?

I went to the Bible to search more thoroughly for what the Bible says a Christian is and does. There is a rather curious passage, Matt. 7:21-23: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'"

A Christian hopes to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But here Jesus says that not just the people who say the right things will enter the Kingdom, but those who do the will of the Father. And there will even be many people who do good things -- prophesying, casting out demons, etc. -- who will be rejected. Isn't that the will of God?

According to Jesus, that is not enough. He told his disciples just before his suffering and death, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14: 15), and Matthew records what these commandments were: "You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (22:37-39)

This is the standard Jesus set for his followers: to love God wholeheartedly and to love our fellowman as our self.

"You must be born again," he told Nicodemus, one of the top religious leaders of the day. You cannot see the Kingdom of God unless you are reborn. We begin our life with Christ by rebirth. As a new physical baby grows through receiving light, warmth, and food, we grow as spiritual babies by receiving God's love and truth, and by assimilating it -- living it, giving it out. This is the path to the perfection to which Jesus called his disciples in Matt. 5:48.

There are many Christians today who think this is an impossible calling, to be perfect. They think they will forever sin, and forever depend on Christ's forgiveness.

How much grief this must cause God! He worries not just about a few individuals, but about all mankind. Peter wrote, "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (II Peter 3:9)

For centuries, and even millennia, Christians have been primarily concerned about the salvation of their own soul. Maybe that was proper then. However, the crisis of our day demands that we become involved in the salvation of the world, that we bring all of life under the direction of God's will, and that we give God's love and truth to all mankind.

This was the original command of God to the first two human beings, Adam and Eve, recorded in Gen. 1:28: "And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" Working for the salvation of one's own soul meets the standard of only the first third of this blessing, "be fruitful, or be mature." To multiply God's family, society, nation, and world is necessary for the fulfillment of this original blessing, and includes proper, godly, dominion over the creation as well. This is also part of what it means to be a Christian, especially in our day. We must be saved, not only ourselves, but our families, our communities, our cities, our nations, and our world. We cannot be content with individual salvation with the world the way it is.

Neither can we be content to live a life of sin, while asking over and over for God's mercy and forgiveness. We must find the way to become truly pure in heart, for Jesus said that only the pure in heart will see God. Who is the standard of perfection and purity? Christ is. We must unite with him and receive his life.

The Bible teaches that this unity of Christ and the believer must be that of one body, one organism. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said (John 15:5). Saint Paul wrote, comparing Christ to a true olive tree, "But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches." (Rom. 11:17)

This, too, is the standard for the Christian life. But most Christians live far below it. Most of us, like the apostle Paul, have to admit the great struggle within us to live a life of faith. "For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self," Paul confessed, "But I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members...."

So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin" (Rom. 7:22-25). How tragic! Many of the noted saint. of the past have also confessed terrible struggles in their life of faith and severe spiritual attacks, growing greater even as their relationship with God grew deeper.

How can we solve this dilemma?

Paul wrote further: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved." (Rom 8:22-24) "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." (I Cor. 13: 12) Even the greatest saints of the past two thousand years have hoped for something still greater.

The writers of the New Testament hoped for something better than our present life of faith. All looked for the return of Christ. With the return of Christ will come the redemption of our bodies, the adoption as sons, the full knowledge and understanding.

A greater thing will happen with Christ's return, according to John: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." (John 3:2-3) When Christ appears we shall be like him!

Even more, "For as in Adam All die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power." (I Cor. 15:22-24) We will be made alive when Christ comes. Rebirth through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection must then be only half-rebirth.

We are reborn spiritually, but not physically. The redemption of our bodies must take place with Christ's return. Our complete rebirth awaits us with Christ's return. Then the life of hope we and our forefathers have lived will be consummated. When every evil rule, authority, and power is destroyed, when our rebirth is completed, we will experience the reality of the promises in the book of Revelation: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates." (22:14) When our robes are washed (our bodies purified) we will have the right to the tree of life. We will enter the holy city.

Then all that will count is whether we do the will of our Father. When Christ returns, what will be the will of the Father? That we accept him, that we follow him, and that we serve him and unite with him. The prepared people of Jesus' time did not follow him. The most religious people of the day rejected him, even on the basis of their own religious view. It was the pure in heart, the simple in faith, those with the heart of children, who followed Jesus and were accepted by him. Perhaps the same thing may happen today.

Those who think they best understand the word and will of God may be so enraptured by their own views that they will miss the Lord when he comes. How tragic! The past centuries have been an age of faith, hope, and love. Men and women could fulfill God's will through faith in Jesus, hope in the second coming, and love for God and their fellowmen.

However, we are living in the age of Christ's return. This is an age of attendance and service. We must find the Lord and serve him. Shortly before he was to die, Moses instructed the Israelites how to live a godly life in the promised land they were soon to enter.

He himself could not lead them, but his successor Joshua would. He was almost like Jesus telling his disciples how to live until the second coming. Moses said, "You will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice, for the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not fail you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers which he swore to them." (Deut. 4:29-31)

You will find the Lord if you search for him with all your heart. This is true today as well. If we seek, we will find, as Jesus promised. If we knock, it will be opened. This is God's faithful promise. We must faithfully seek the Lord and follow him. This is our salvation.