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What is a Christian?

The question needs to be raised because it is being answered in all kinds of different ways. The result is that some people imagine they are Christians when they aren't, and others think they are not Christians when they really are! In the next chapter I shall explain what it means to become a Christian, but first of all let me tell you what it doesn't mean.

1. It's not enough just to call yourself a Christian

Christianity is much more than a name. The Bible talks about some people who claimed to be Christians and belonged to a church without being true Christians at all. Sadly there are many people who profess to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, but who show by the way they live that they have never really turned away from their sins. They may claim to know God, but their lives deny it. In fact, the Lord Jesus warned that it is possible even to preach and perform miracles in His name without being a real Christian (Titus 1:16; Matt. 7:22-23). After all, how can people say God has saved them from their sins when they haven't given them up?

2. It's not enough to be baptised

It is quite a common idea to think that baptism makes you a Christian. Many people think that because they have gone through a form of baptism they are children of God and sure to go to heaven. But if baptism really made you a Christian and earned you God's favour, all you would need to go to heaven would be a certificate of baptism! Millions of people have been baptised, but the Lord Jesus Christ says 'narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to life, and there are few who find it' (Matt. 7:14). He also speaks of seeking, knocking and wrestling to enter heaven (Matt. 11:12; Luke 13:24). All this would be quite unnecessary if baptism were all that were needed. Baptism is a sign of what God has done for us. In itself it does nothing. Baptism is good, but it is no substitute for the thorough and powerful change that Jesus called being 'born again' (John 3:3).

3. It's not enough to live a good clean life

In Bible times, there was no group of people more particular about good clean living than the Jewish scribes and Pharisees. But the Lord Jesus Christ declared, 'Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:20). You don't have to be a Christian to live a good clean life. Long before he became a Christian, the apostle Paul could claim that he was blameless in his lifestyle (Phil. 3:6). But it wasn't enough. You need more than this or else God will still condemn you, no matter how much you protest your innocence. I am not against morality; I simply warn you not to rely on it. Good clean living never saved anyone.

4. It's not enough to be religious

The Bible says it is possible to have a form of religion without any reality or spiritual power (2 Tim. 3:5). You can pray long prayers, listen to religious preaching and teaching, fast, and do all kinds of other things to serve God without being a real Christian (Matt. 23:14; Luke 18:12; Isa. 1:11). True Christianity involves much more than going to church, being generous with your money and saying your prayers. You can do all these things—and even lay down your life—and yet still not really belong to God.

5. It's not enough to reform yourself

The Bible teaches that it is quite possible for you to have your mind enlightened with regard to the things of God and to feel guilty about your sins, and yet still to fall short of becoming a Christian (Heb. 6:4-6; Acts 24:25; Mark 6:20). There is a distinct difference between conviction and conversion. Cain, the first man ever to commit a murder, restlessly wandered from place to place with his troubled conscience until he managed to stifle it with business and building projects. But there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that he ever really sought God (Gen. 4). Some people imagine they are Christians simply because they have stopped committing a particular sin, given up a bad habit or distanced themselves from certain evil influences. But there is far more to becoming a Christian than any of these things.

While their consciences are troubled, many people will pray, read the Bible, listen to preaching and give up some of their sinful pleasures, but as soon as they don't feel convicted any longer they go straight back to their sins. There was never a more religious group of people than the Jews when God's hand was against them, but when their period of suffering

An Alarm to the Unconverted

was over, they invariably forgot God again. You may have reformed your life in any number of ways and yet still be exactly the same person at heart.

You can take a lump of clay and mould it into a flower, then into an animal, then into the shape of a man, but all the time it remains clay. In the same way, any one of us can move from ignorance to knowledge and from open ungodliness to a form of religion while our nature is the same as it always was.

If you have been basing your hopes on some of the things we have discussed so far, you may have found this chapter difficult to accept. It can be a painful experience to realise that all is not well between you and God when you might have thought that it was. As I have been writing I have felt a little like a surgeon about to amputate the limb of a close friend, not for pleasure but out of necessity. It is far better for you to realise the situation you are in now, rather than continue with your false hopes and end up in hell.

If you claim to be a Christian, let me invite you to examine the basis of your hope:

- Is it because you have been baptized?
- Is it because you are a church member?
- Is it because you know quite a lot about religion?
- Is it because you try to live a good clean moral life?
- Is it because you have felt troubled by your sins?

All these things are very good in themselves, but they do not make you a Christian, and they will not save you. Examine yourself and turn to the Lord with all your heart. Unless God Himself changes you, you will be lost.

But perhaps you do not claim to be a Christian at all. If so, your position is certainly no better. You too must repent

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of your sins and be converted. Turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. Receive His forgiveness and new life. Give yourself over to Him and live a holy life, or else you will never see God. If you stay as you are, you will suffer eternal death for sure.