

What It Means to Be a Christian

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Ask the question “What is a Christian?” and many will answer by outlining the steps that must be taken in order to become one. That is akin to explaining what the president of the United States is by describing only the election and inauguration process. Surely there is more to understanding the meaning of life in Christ than memorizing the “first principles..” In a familiar passage, we are admonished to go beyond the fundamentals to spiritual maturity: “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection” (Hb. 6:1).

We sometimes also make the mistake of discussing the meaning of being a Christian solely in terms of the Christian’s conduct. To be sure, discipleship is an active matter, not just an honorary status one enjoys. But what the Christian is is no less important than what he does. In fact, the key to doing the right thing is being the right person. Deeds are to character what fruit is to a tree. When we come to grips with what it means to be a Christian, we will find that right behavior takes care of itself.

Fellowship. The heart of the matter is that the Christian is a person who is in fellowship with God, his Creator. In place of his old alienation, he now enjoys “reconciliation..” In sin and apart from Christ, a man is “without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). But forgiven of sin and in Christ, one is at peace again with God. “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Rom. 5:10). The condemnation of sin having been done away, it can be said that “our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn. 1:3).

Because he is in fellowship with God, the Christian shares life with God. In the language used to describe the communion of men like Enoch and Noah with God, the Christian “walks with God” (cf. Gen. 5:22; 6:9). Looking at it in a slightly different way, the Christian is a person who comes to “know” God. Jesus prayed to his Father, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent” (Jn. 17:3). At the practical level, that means the Christian is one who thinks often about God, studies eagerly the word of God, meditates on the character of God, rejoices in the approval of God, and thrills continually at the prospect of heaven with God. The Christian lives life “near to the heart of God..”

Commitment. Not only is the Christian a person in a reconciled relationship to God, he is a person who has wholeheartedly devoted his will to that of his Lord. He has committed himself to total obedience to Jesus Christ. In a sense, 1 Pt. 3:15 contains crux of Christian living: “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts.” The actual authority of God is immutable — his Son is Lord of lords and King of kings. But, while others do not, the Christian acknowledges the authority of Christ. He enthrones Christ in his heart as the Lord that he deserves to be. One cannot talk any more fundamentally about being a

Christian than to talk about the lordship of Christ. The Christian pays a good deal more than lip service to that principle.

Too, the Christian's commitment to the Lord's will has to do with more than just the work and the worship of the church. All of his conduct is submitted for the Lord's approval, not only those parts that are connected to the collective "teamwork" of God's people. In his daily, individual activity, as much as in what he does at the church building, the Christian is seeking to do all the Lord's will, and only the Lord's will. Colossians 3:17 ("do all in the name of the Lord Jesus") is the banner over the entirety of his life's activity. He takes not a single step, as an individual or with the church, without being able to give thanks for the Lord's approval.

Character. A Christian, in short, is a person who is being transformed into the likeness of God's own character. He is among those who are "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt. 1:4), a person who is in the process of becoming conformed to the very holiness of God. Peter wrote "But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Pt. 1:15,16). Learning not merely the Book of God, but the God of the Book — in order to share the divine character — that is what being a Christian is about.

Seen that way, obedience to the instructions of God is no burdensome task. The Christian's highest joy is to please the Father whom he loves. To do what God wants — to be as God is — is the noble aspiration that motivates every thought and word and deed of the new man in Christ. To be like God and to be with God is really what it means to be a Christian. As William Barclay suggests, "if a man all his life has sought to walk with God, if he has sought to obey his Lord, if goodness has been his quest through all his days, then all his life he has been growing closer and closer to God, until in the end he passes into God's nearer presence, without fear and with radiant joy — and that is the greatest reward of all."

So, in conclusion, there is one other way we can look at the meaning of being a Christian, and that is in the context of the benefits to be enjoyed. There are many, many good things about being in Christ. Indeed, there are no lastingly good things outside of Christ! And while the Christian does not choose to be who he is merely for what he "gets out of it," the fact is that being a Christian means walking with a God "who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). To be a Christian means not only to be the friend of God and the servant of God, but also the heir of God.

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