

April 24, 2011
What Is It All About?
1 Corinthians 15:1-11

A Christian is _____.

How would you fill in the blank?

A Christian is someone who believes in God? So do other religions ... but they define or understand God (or "gods") quite differently!

A Christian is a good-living, honest, decent person. But many good people don't even believe in God!

A Christian is someone who has been baptized or someone who goes to church, but many people have been baptized or go to church and don't really believe anything!

After Jesus' resurrection, his family and friends, began to tell everyone about Him. They turned the world upside down and began a movement that is stronger today than ever before. They described themselves as "followers of the Way."

The Romans were the ones who gave them the label "Christian." The Romans liked to classify and categorize everyone and everything - they recognized that there was something distinct about this group of people "following the Way," people who were connected with Jesus, whom they called the "Christ" (Greek), or "Messiah" (Hebrew) or "the Anointed One" (English). What is it all about?

The Gospel Truth (literally "Gospel" means "The Good News")

Consider this tale of two students. The first is a straight-A student. He has not received anything less than an A in his entire university career. The second has never received an A in his life. Actually he struggles to pass.

One semester both find themselves in the same class, and both are in trouble academically. There is a real possibility the A student may receive a B for the course, while the struggling student might not even pass.

The semester ends and both anxiously wait their grades. Now suppose the professor goes to the A student and says, "I have good news for you. You just passed!" To the A student, that is definitely not good news. The only good news he wants to hear is that he received an A. But for the other student the message that he passed would be the best news he could hear. "You receive an A" and "You passed" are both good news, but with quite different content. Both are "gospels" but different gospels. (C.C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*)

When Jesus began teaching, his first words were: *"The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"* (Mark 1:15). We often talk about the "gospel" or "the good news." What is it? Paul defines it very precisely: *"What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

The Gospel is the good news about the death and resurrection of Christ. He died - and he lives! The fact of Christ's burial proves the reality of his death. He did not merely swoon only to be revived later. He actually died. And he died for our sins. He rose and was seen by many witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:5-8), most of whom were still alive when he wrote these words. **Everyone who believes in that good news is saved, for that truth, and that alone, is the Gospel, the good news of God.**

"Christopher Wright writes, "We are not saved because we are Christians and do all the Christian religious things. We are saved because God has acted, in Christ, to accomplish salvation for us, and then simply calls on us to trust him. Nothing religious that we do is the means of cause of our salvation. Our Christianity is the response we make, in faith and life, to the saving acts of God. Salvation belongs to God."

Sometimes we are told that to be a Christian means you have to be baptized. The Bible doesn't say that. Sometimes we are told that we have to receive a second baptism of the Holy Spirit or display certain behaviours (like speaking in tongues). The Bible doesn't say that. Sometimes we are told that we have to do certain things - be involved in certain activities - give up certain bad habits - in order to be a Christian. The Bible doesn't say that.

Paul simply says that the Gospel - the good news - is believing that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. That's what saves us. that makes us Christians. Period. Nothing else is necessary. *"For God so loved the world," says Jesus, "that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

The issue is this: *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). We've all sinned. That's true, isn't it! And sin separates us from God. We are not good enough to relate to the perfect, holy, pure, spotless God! We have a problem! Most of us - no matter how secular we are, sense that there is a huge gulf between ourselves and God. We need God. We know that. But God is so far beyond us. So the issue is: How can I get to know God? How can my sins be forgiven?

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this," Paul comments, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us ... The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 5:8, 6:23)

The Gospel - the good news - is this. God loves us. He has provided the gift of salvation: Jesus

died for us and rose again from the dead. Do you believe that?

What does it mean "to believe"?

The Devil believes Jesus died and rose from the dead, but the Devil isn't a Christian! So what does it mean to believe?

Consider two people deep in the jungle. All of a sudden the jungle ends and a huge gorge lies before them. Sheer cliffs plummet down to an angry river and sharp rocks. Across the chasm swings a rather fragile-looking rope bridge. One man sits down on a rock and looks sceptically at the structure. He begins doodling on his sketch pad and estimating measurements. "The good news is I know it will hold us," he says. "Will you cross it?" his companion asks. "After you!" the first man replies.

Is there a difference between "knowing" something and really "believing" it? You bet! Just ask these two adventurers!

A lot of people know a lot about Christianity and Jesus Christ, but it doesn't affect their lives one bit. Other people really believe the gospel. By believing in it, they actually change their lives. They do something about what they know! They step out in faith. There is a world of difference between simply "knowing" about Jesus Christ and actually "believing" in him! It's the difference that the early believers emphasized when they called themselves "Followers of the Way." There is a dynamic sense to that that is far more powerful than the Roman authorities giving you the label "Christian."

Believing in Jesus involves three things:

First, it means believing that Jesus really can forgive me. It means believing that Jesus' death really can help me put the past behind me. It means accepting his free gift of forgiveness. More than just intellectually believing that "*Christ died for my sins*", it means allowing the Holy Spirit to help me feel cleansed and forgiven (1 John 1:9).

Second, it means believing that I need to change the direction in which my life is going. The Bible uses the word "repent" to talk about this (Mark 1:14-15). Repenting doesn't simply mean feeling sorry for what I've done. It means being sorry enough that I am going to change the way I live ... right now! Jesus always welcomed people, no matter how sinful they were, and offered them forgiveness. But his challenge to them also was, "*Go, and sin no more.*" (John 8:11).

This is hard, because this is where our faith changes the way we live, the way we relate, how we make decisions, how we spend our time and money, and what our future plans might be. Real belief - more than just knowing - means we try to act, live and think the way Jesus would want us to. It means we choose to step out onto the bridge, believing that Christ's way is the right way.

It mean having faith in the principles of Scripture, because we genuinely believe they come from a good, gracious God. We become different people. We're changed.

The Bible calls this "bearing fruit." Somewhere, sometime, somehow, people will see evidence that we believe God is real! It may involve growing in Christian character: *"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23). Peter says: *"Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (2 Peter 1:5-8).

Right character results in right conduct. As we live a life increasingly marked by Christian character we produce fruit: we do good things (Colossians 1:10). *"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast,"* Paul says. *"We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"* (Ephesians 2:8-10). Our good works don't save us! But are the natural result of our decision to believe.

Third, believing means that we see ourselves as "followers of the Way." People who believe in something don't hide the fact! Those who believe in the Edmonton Eskimos wear their green and gold proudly - even in Calgary! Members of the armed forces wear their country's uniform proudly. Christ's ones don't beat people into submission with large Bibles, but they do live consistently Christian lives. That involves acknowledging our faith. It means being willing to share with others what believing in Jesus means to us.

So, What is a Christian?

Concisely put: A Christian is a person who believes that Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Nothing less. There are no if-and-or-buts. Nothing more. If you believe that, you are part of God's family (John 1:12)! We are secure in God's hands! We are saved! Yes, there are some things that ought to happen as a consequence ... but the starting point is faith in what Christ did for us on the cross. Eternal life is the free gift of God. Will you accept it?

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