

What Is A Christian?

By Preston Graham Jr.

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That a *Christian* has something to do with “Christ” is self-evident. But here is where the obvious stops and the questions begin. Is a Christian related to Christ as a philosopher is to Plato? Or is a Christian related to Christ as an ethicist is to an ethical code of conduct, a Christian ethicist to the Christian Bible? Or perhaps a Christian is merely a person who has an experience that is attributed to the spirit of Jesus that is in league with the legions of spirits that are in the universe, so that to be a Christian is also to affirm all religions.

To be sure, while some of the above things may hold true to some degree at least, they all seem to fall short of the words of the apostle John in the Bible when he dared to believe:

John 1:12 To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

According to John, a Christian is related to Christ by faith alone in order to become a child of God! What does it mean to “believe” exactly? What is the context for “belief” such that we are then “born of God” to be God’s children, with all the rights and privileges that accompany such an exalted and privileged status! Imagine, having a kind of relationship with a personal God that is so secure in His love and acceptance, that we could be called “children of God.” This is how the Bible describes a “Christian,” not as a philosopher or ethicist, not even as someone moved by a religious experience per se, but as a “child of God” by faith, even one who is by faith “born of God.” Given this incredible promise, we should consider then what faith is, and is not, such as to become a “Christian.”

What Faith Isn't As To Distinguish A Christian

First, faith should not be confused with attending a worship service of the church or participating in church sacraments, even if such participation in the church can be an instrument used of God to give us faith. To be sure, while the church and especially her ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care are essential means that God uses to bring people into saving faith, saving faith does not *necessarily* result from church participation. □ E.g. □ “Tasting” of God’s grace through the appointed instruments of grace in the church is not the same as actually receiving God’s grace in a way that affects a person to believe and trust in Christ. □ There is a big theological word for this error. □ It is called “sacerdotalism.” □

It was this false understanding that was behind the words of the author of Hebrews when He wrote:

Heb. 4:1

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. □ 2 For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

Again, notice the centrality of “faith” in order to enter into God’s “rest” in the Hebrews passage. □ To be sure, the church is an essential element of the gospel, not as the “agent” of grace, but as an instrument or means of grace. □ The agent of grace is then the Holy Spirit enabling us to believe. □ But notice especially, that “faith” is somehow related to “rest” as say

distinguished from “work.” This then raises yet another confusion as related to the idea of faith.

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Faith should not be confused with “getting it all together” such as then to “live the good life.” Some will confuse this with faith both in terms of morals but also in terms of church rituals. □ E.g. As if doing some good things is the same as *being* intrinsically good enough to BE a child of God on our own merits and qualifications. To think we could ever be “good enough” will inevitably lead to one of several things: □

1) We will inevitably try to reduce God's holy standards of “good” quite significantly in order to have any hope of being good enough to satisfy God's justice. □ This is what the Pharisee's did. □ By reducing the law to the negative, as related to what we “can't do” (legalism) they negated what the law required in its positive dimensions and what we should do. □ E.g. It is one thing to *not* kill, it is an entirely different thing to “love your neighbor as yourself.” □ Who, according to the law of love, is without sin? □

2) We will inevitably need to be very shallow in our self-evaluation such as to be blind to our shortcomings. □ Perhaps we will say, “well, I am not so bad as x” or “at least I haven't done “z.” □ Or even, “I try.” □ These are all ways that assume a position that in order for God to accept us and give us eternal life, we most ourselves satisfy God's holy standards. □

3) □ Finally, given that we are trying to gain God's approval by our own works and morals, we will inevitably need to make ourselves feel better by finding faults in others. □ As if to see other people “sin” makes us feel more righteous or acceptable to God. □ The logic goes like this—“surely God is not going to condemn everyone. □ Relative to the folks I know (selectively), I'm not so bad, in fact, I'm better than a, b, and c person who happen to fall at those things that I seem able to do—therefore, I must be good enough for God to accept.” □

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□ In all of these ways, “having faith” such as to be a Christian is synonymous with self confidence as a religious or moral person... Whereas true and saving faith is just the opposite! This has been called “moralism” and seems to have been behind the concerns of Paul in Ephesians when He wrote:

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Eph. 2:1ff

You were dead through the trespasses and sins **2** in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. □ **3** All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. □ **4** But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us **5** even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--*by grace you have been saved*-- **6** and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, **7** so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. □ **8** *For by grace you have been saved through faith*, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- **9** *not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* □ **10** For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

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Notice again, the crucial issue is faith. Not faith plus going to church (although church is God's instrument in giving us faith). □ Not faith plus this or that ability to not sin or do good works □ (although faith is accompanied by good works). Rather, the very heart of Paul's statement is this-- that whatever else being a Christian is, it is not predicated on anything

that we can do for ourselves, on "self confidence." That's his point exactly, "lest anyone can boast." Faith has more to do with "rest" than "work."

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What Faith Is As To Distinguish A Christian

And so with these two very fundamental errors exposed, what does it mean to "believe in Christ" such as then to "be a Christian?" Very simply, it is a person who trusts not in him/herself to be right with God, but who trusts in Jesus Christ on their behalf to be right with God, and if the truth be known, even this ability and disposition to "believe" is itself a free gift of God! E.g. God, working through His word, sacraments and pastoral care in the church, will give to some a new disposition such that they are enabled to "rest" completely on the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ in order to be set free from the fear of condemnation. No longer under the fear of being rejected by God, judged for our sins without hope of gaining the rights and privileges of a child of God, a Christian is someone who by faith puts their trust and confidence in Christ and what he did for us in order that we might become the children of God, heirs of eternal life itself!

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If the reader were at this time to read Ephesians 1 you would notice the *doxological* language "to the praise of God's glorious grace" repeated three times as regarding the work of the Trinity in salvation. From beginning to end—it is the father who calls us and sent Jesus the Son, who accomplished our salvation by his blood who is then mediated to us by the Holy Spirit who applies Christ's work by giving us faith and sealing us into God's family. The point is again very clear—a Christian is someone who is completely and eternally restored to God only because of God's work both in and for us from beginning to end. Our salvation is by God and for God's glory. There is no room in Paul's theology for a salvation that is even partially attributed to anything inherent in the person who is being saved, lest God's glory be compromised!

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This is also Paul's point exactly in Romans 8. Having raised the question in the most dramatic of ways "wretched man that I am! Who will set me free..." The answer is cheerfully given, "there is therefore no condemnation in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1) Any attempt to define "Christian" whereby our right relationship with God is predicated on both God and us, has missed the point entirely, as this will inevitably result in falling back into one of the above errors, with serious consequences to one's assurance of salvation, one's ability to unconditionally love and forgive others, one's full transformation as by the power of the Holy Spirit leading to further gratefulness, less pride.

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Said another way, even as we are all born with a natural bias against God, becoming a Christian starts with God, who by the Holy Spirit working through God's word, sacraments and Christian fellowship/pastoral care, who changes our natural bias enabling us to embrace Christ as our savior. This bias is such as to turn away from self-confidence and trust and to rely upon God's provision for the forgiveness of our sins and to rely upon God's provision every day to live more and more in obedience to Him. The key language here is "God's provision." E.g. A Christian is someone who most essentially "rests."

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More specifically, in an attempt to "unpack" the kind of "rest" in God that distinguishes a person as a Christian, we must:

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1. Know that there is a God, that He is our maker and that we are therefore accountable to Him such as to acknowledge His authority in our lives as evidenced by obedience and submission to His Holy commands.

Acts 24, 25, The God who made the world and everything in it is he who is Lord of heaven and earth... he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things... indeed he is not far from us.□

Gen. 3:16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."□

(note: "the knowledge of good and evil"-- to assume for ourselves the authority to determine a rule of faith and practice rather than to live in humble submission to God as the rightful authority.)□

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2. Admit that we don't do #1 such that we are in need of God's forgiveness and without any hope of it if left to ourselves since there is nothing we could possibly do or say that could merit God's favor. (Confession)

1 John 1:8-9, If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.□ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.□ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

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3. Turn away from trusting in our own abilities in order to be on good terms with God together with a desire to stop sinning. (Repentance)

1 John 1:7, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin...

1 John 2:1b-2, if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins...

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4. Turn to God's provision in Christ for the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life such as to "receive" Christ as our savior and commit ourselves to a life of living for God. (Faith)□

1 John 1:25, And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

Eph. 2:8, For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Romans 5:1, Therefore since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.

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5. Understand that over and over again, the above three dynamics will characterize our life on earth until our being finally perfected in heaven by God's grace and strength. (Perseverance)□□

Heb.4:14, We who are partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end

Mat.10:22, He that endures to the end, the same shall be saved.□

1 John 2:28, And now little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

1 John 5:2, By this we know that we love the children of God,, when we love God and obey his commandments.□ For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome.□

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A Christian is NOT someone who stops sinning even though this is his/her desire, but someone who stops thinking that he/she could ever stop sinning in order to save themselves and get right with God. A Christian acknowledges that as a Christian, God is both crediting to us a standing based on Christ's standing, and yet God is working in us more and more-- gradually over time-- to complete and perfect us so that in heaven, we will actually be good and righteous.

What then is the basis for our being right with God by God's grace? More specifically, what exactly did God do through Jesus Christ so as to provide what we couldn't for the forgiveness of sin and life eternal? Again, very simply, God the Father sent God the son, the second person of the Trinity, who, being in the form of God, was willing to set aside his privileges as God so as to assume the humiliated condition of humanity, in order to do for us what we could not do for ourselves—namely, to satisfy God's holy standard and take the punishment we fairly deserve in substitution for us. This second person of the Trinity was and is fully God and fully human. What this meant was that the interest of two parties, God and humanity, were rightly represented in Jesus Christ such that he could be the mediator between them unto reconciliation and salvation for humanity. No one else in all of history satisfies this criteria.

1Tim. 2:5

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human,

1 John 1:7, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin...

1 John 2:1b-2, if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins...

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In summary, from beginning to end, a Christian is someone who puts his/her confidence and trust wholly on God's free and unmerited grace! While a Christian will go to church where God has appointed special instruments in order to work into us confession, repentance, faith and perseverance, this in itself doesn't make a person a Christian. And while a Christian will have in him/herself a disposition to try to do good and will in fact do many good things, this in itself doesn't make a person a Christian. In fact, it is entirely probable that many non-Christians are better all around people than some Christians due to God's common grace granted to all people of all faiths and none as through upbringing or natural disposition! The point is that to be a Christian, is ultimately not about the person's morality, but about Christ's on their behalf as by faith! A Christian is someone who receives and rests upon God's free, unmerited gift as accomplished for him/her by Christ.

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It's that simple. It's that profound. We are now free to see the law of God in its high standard of holiness, and where the law increases, so does our knowledge of personal sin increase, BUT NOW, in Christ by faith alone, *so does our experience of grace increase since where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more!* (Rom.5:20)

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Humility: The Essential Quality of Faith

As this all plays out in the posture or, perhaps better "fundamental disposition," of a Christian, the Bible teaches that to know God, really, is to know him in *humility*. (...for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the *humble*." 1Peter 5:5) In other words, a *for real* Christian is distinguished by a fundamental disposition of humility as this will be expressed in the following ways.

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1. The *humility* to know that we are not the center of the universe, that God is. □ That we belong to God as those created by Him and for him.
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2. The *humility* to know that we really are not very humble as #1 has suggested. We really don't live even a few moments in a given day with a God centered attitude, much less a lifetime. □ And this "pride" has rightly offended God resulting in our being justly sentenced to God's condemnation and eternal death. □ Left in this state, God's ultimate promise of eternal life promised to those who maintained a humble posture toward God (as promised in creation) has been rightly taken away from us.
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3. The *humility* to NOT trust in ourselves to get things straightened out with God, but instead to trust in God's provision on our behalf. □ God has directed us to this provision in the principle of substitution. □ That like in the Old Testament, God always provided a sacrificial substitute to satisfy God's justice, this ultimately has directed us to the ultimate substitute-- the God-man Jesus Christ who became for us what we couldn't be ourselves... a perfectly *humble* person such as to merit God's eternal favor. □ And then to do this as an eternal person that all those who would rest in Him might be given, freely given, the rewards of *his* labors *on our behalf*.
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4. This initial *humility* will further evidence itself by our now asking God to help us live more and more in trust and reliance upon God's rule of faith and practice as given to us in the Bible. □ We will have as a new disposition to want to trust God's counsel before our own even, knowing that God can be trusted.
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5. *Humility* will further evidence itself by recognizing that our own, private, reading of the Bible is never a "perfect" reading of the Bible such that we need to be reading the Bible in league with those who are also reading it, and especially those that have been "organized" after a pattern that was given to us by God in the Bible as named "the church." (Mt. 16)-- as founded by Christ and patterned after the teachings that Christ gave through the apostles.
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What Can We Do To Become A Christian?

In summary, if you are not sure that you are Christian, I would urge you to:

- 1. Observe in yourself if this is in fact something you desire. □ If it is, we know this is in itself God's doing.
 - 1Cor. 2:14**
Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are **spiritually** discerned. □
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 2. Humbly ask God to give you the faith to put your life in God's hands as especially for the forgiveness of your sins based on what Christ has done and is doing even now for you. □
 - 1Pet. 5:5**
In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the **humble**."
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3. Find a church and go to it, making immediate contact with the pastor(s) in order that you might be rooted and grounded in the teachings of scripture and be rightly admitted to the sacraments of the Church through which God will continue to strengthen and "persevere" you in faith!□

Acts 2:37

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"□38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.□39 *For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.*"

The Riches of God's Grace

The benefits of being a "child of God" by faith in Jesus Christ are nothing short of remarkable—to think that one can live life without the ordinary defensiveness and blame-shifting that comes from carrying around the guilt of sin within our souls, to be free from the fear of rejection from God, and consequently others, to have the certain hope that this life is not all there is and that what awaits the children of God is a life so beautiful, so peaceful, so filled with the joy of living that the mere glimpses of real living that we get now in this world cannot even compare, to think that we have direct access to the one who created us and everything as to one we are privileged to call "our Father," to know that God's infinite wisdom and love is directed for us, and not against us, so that all things that happen to us are first passed through the counsel of our Fathers will for the sake of our continued salvation, to acknowledge that we are much worse in our sin than we ever dared to admit even as God's love for us is greater than we ever hoped to experience as proven by the fact that even *while* we are sinners, Christ died for us, to think that God's love for us is predicated upon his own immutable will to love us because of his love for Christ who is now identified with us by faith, and that we are sealed in that love by a greater power that lives within us than the power that is in this world—on and on it goes, the exploration of what Paul describes as the "riches of his grace which he lavished upon us" all because of the "redemption through his blood" even to those who are the children of God by faith in Christ! (Ephesians 1:7-12) And so, we leave with the prayer of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

... that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge...

Ephesians 3:18-19

For Further Reading:

On the web:

How Can I Know God, by Tim Keller

(www.redeemer2.com/resources/index.cfm?fuseaction=tkeller)

Two Ways to Live, Matthias Media 1995

(www.matthiasmedia.com.au/2wtl/)

How To Have Eternal Life

(www.pcanet.org/general/eternal.htm)

Books:

John Stott, *Basic Christianity*
C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*
Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*
Rose Marie Miller, *From Fear to Freedom*
Alister McGrath, *I Believe, Exploring the Apostles Creed*
William Edgar, *Lifting the Face of Truth*
Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*
J. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*
L. Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*
Miller and Juliani, *Come Back Barbara ("Prodigal Daughter Come home to faith)*
Os Guinness, *Long Journey Home, A Guide to Your Search For Meaning of Life*
John Blanchard, *Ultimate Questions*
Case VanKempfen, *Hard Questions People Ask about the Christian Faith*
Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*
Philip Ryken, *Is Jesus the Only Way?*
R.C. Sproul, *Reason To Believe*

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