

526 Who Is A Christian?

Phil Sanders

God's Answers to Life's Questions

Surveys from Barna and Gallup say that 85 percent of Americans call themselves Christians. However, only 43 percent attend church regularly. One survey showed that Christians were more likely to divorce than other religious groups. It's true that Christianity does not have the political or moral influence in America that it once had. Perhaps that is because we do not understand what it means to be a Christian or just who is a Christian. We talk about Christianity but have lost sight of the Biblical meaning. Who is a Christian?

Only Jesus Christ has a right to determine who is and is not a Christian. I have no right to do that. What men think or believe is irrelevant. Our task is to ask if Jesus has spoken on such matters and to find out what He has said. Our focus in this lesson is not to determine WHO is right but to determine WHAT is right. Nor is it our purpose to be sectarian. Our goal is to go to heaven and to lead others there, based upon the only accurate guide we have--the Bible. So we are asking the Bible for God's answers to this very important question, "Who is a Christian?"

You might find this hard to believe, but the New Testament uses the word "Christian" only three times. The first time the word appears is in Acts 14:17, "And for an entire year they (Paul and Barnabas) met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." This passage reveals two things: (1) Christians were first known as disciples, and (2) Christians could be found in the church. To talk about Christians is to talk about people who follow Christ and who are members of the church Jesus built.

The name "Christian" at first was a term of derision. It was a means of mocking the disciples who had become followers of Christ. The word is a noun and means, "one who belongs to Christian." Many people today use the word "Christian" as an adjective: a "Christian" school, a "Christian" book store, or a "Christian" church. But the word is a noun, describing the people who belong to Christ, His followers or disciples. What the enemies of the church meant as a slap, the disciples took as precious. To belong to Christ and suffer for his name was a great blessing. They were glad to wear the name of Christ.

The second use of "Christian" is found in Acts 26:28. Paul is here on trial before Roman governor Festus and King Agrippa. He is defending his faith in Jesus by proclaiming that he arose from the dead. Paul said, "King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." Agrippa *replied* to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." And Paul *said*, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains."

Paul believed everybody ought to be a Christian, ought to belong to the Lord and follow Him. In spite of his chains, Paul knew that following Christ was the most wonderful life anyone could live. Paul said to the Philippians, "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8). Paul was willing to give up everything to become a Christian.

There must be a reason why a man would endure the loss of everything to be a Christian. Paul was willing to be beaten, to be imprisoned, and even to give his life to serve Christ. Why? Paul was willing to do this because he believed in Jesus, that he was indeed the Son of God, raised from the dead, and seated at God's right hand.

Paul believed Jesus Christ was the one and only Lord of lords and King of kings. Paul loved the Lord Jesus more than life itself, because the Lord saved him from sin and from being lost eternally. Christians love Christ, trust Christ, and are willing to follow Him to the death. Would you?

Jesus said to his disciples in Luke 9:23-26, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and *the glory* of the Father and of the holy angels." This is the kind of commitment Jesus wants from his followers.

The third time the word "Christian" is found in the New Testament is in 1 Peter 4:14-16, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name." Christians live with the understanding that they were the name of Jesus Christ. If they live sinful lives, they shame the name of Jesus. Christians are to glorify the name.

Many people think that the word "Christian" means "Christ-like." While Christians should be "Christ-like," the word means "one who belongs to Christ." The unfortunate thing is how many Christians shame the name of the Lord by living such immoral lives, that no one could Christ living in them. A person who belongs to Christ should live a godly life of integrity with pure thoughts, pure speech, and pure behavior. Can people see Christ living in you? Do you glorify the name of Jesus by the way you live and talk? Sometimes the lives of Christians keep people out of Christianity.

Many people today are "nominal" Christians, that is, they are Christians in name only. They call themselves Christians but don't live the life of a Christian, don't go to church, seldom pray, and rarely read their Bible. If a Christian is one who belongs to Christ, who is a disciple and a church member, who is willing to follow the Lord at any cost, who loves the Lord and trusts completely in Him, and who lives a life that glorifies Jesus, how does one become a Christian? Are there people who think they are Christians but really have no relationship with the Lord?

Jesus said in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Thinking I have a relationship with the Lord and having a saving relationship with the Lord are two different things. Discipleship means I am willing to follow the Lord and do His will. Many people want the blessings of Christianity, but true disciples actually do His will. They don't play Christianity; they live it, talk it, walk it, love it, and share it. #A

Real Christians take their faith seriously. They truly believe Jesus died on a cross for their sins and was raised from the dead on the third day. They believe in more than "going" to church; they believe in being involved in church. When the Bible discusses a Christian who has quit going to church, it regards that person as "fallen away." When the Bible discusses a Christian who doesn't live his faith, it regards his faith as vain. James said for instance, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless" (James 1:26)

Now, no Christian is going to be perfect. Every Christian says and does things that are not right. But when a person has no intention of living the Christian life but still thinks he is a Christian, this

person, as James says, is “deceiving his heart.” A Christian who does God’s will wants to do it the way the Lord teaches. Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). Jesus said true disciples, true Christians stay with His teachings in the Bible. They want to be Scriptural in everything. They are not interested in leaving the Bible.

Jesus lays down some important standards that help determine who is a Christian. In John 8:24, Jesus said, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins.” Unless a person believes Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, he is still in sin and cannot please God.

Jesus also said in Luke 13:3 and 5, “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” No person can be right with God and be counted a follower of Jesus who is unwilling to forsake his sins. Repentance is necessary!

Being a Christian is not entirely a private matter. The Lord asks us to confess him before others. Jesus said, “Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33). Jesus also said in John 3:3, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” If one is a Christian at all, he is born again. Being born again means one is transformed by God into a new creature. Paul said, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:4-5). The new birth Jesus mentions is comprised of water and the Spirit. The early church fathers understood this to be baptism, and they are right.

Jesus said in Mark 16:16, “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.” It is obvious that an unbeliever has no reason to be baptized. However, if we want to be saved, we will believe and be baptized *into* Christ. At that time we become a new creature and enter the kingdom of God, the church. The New Testament never contemplates a Christian who isn’t baptized. In Acts 2:38, Peter told the people to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

Ananias told Saul of Tarsus, “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). Baptism (immersion in water) is that time when the old man of sin dies, and we rise to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4). It is the turning point between the sinner and the saint. We die with Christ to the old man and are raised up by God to walk a new life, as God forgives our sins and causes us to be born again. We are baptized into the death of Christ and come into contact with the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin. We are baptized into Christ and put Him on (Gal. 3:26-27).

I don’t know where you are in your spiritual journey, but if you haven’t come to the Lord in faith, repentance and baptism, you haven’t yet become united with Christ. To belong to Him, to enjoy His gracious gift of salvation, you must meet His conditions. I can think of many reasons why you should become a Christian, but I can’t think of even one reason why you shouldn’t. What are you waiting for? Why not come to the Lord today and put him on in faith, repentance and baptism?

Earlier I mentioned “nominal” Christians, people who say they are Christians but haven’t entered a church door in many months or years. Perhaps that is your situation. Jesus meets with his family every first day of the week at church. Yes, there is a sense that once one becomes a Christian, one is always a Christian. But if I call myself a Christian and yet never commit myself to the church for which Jesus shed his blood (Acts 20:28), I can hardly claim I am following the Lord. The church was the Lord’s idea. He built it, bought it, and is the head and Savior of it.

If you haven’t attended church in a while, why don’t you decide now that you are going to start back to church. The Lord wants you to meet with Him, and the brethren at church would welcome you. Going to church keeps you spiritually strong, keeps you focused on the faith, and keeps God’s promises and Word in front of you. There are few experiences in life more joyful than worshiping the Lord. Don’t fall away from the Lord and His blessing. Come back to church with a heart full of faith, hope, and love.

Today we’re offering a pamphlet free of charge, entitled, “Ten Things God Wants in Your Life.” It tells of all the wonderful things God wants for you. With all the blessings of God, it is no wonder that we should draw near to Him always. Where are you in your life? Do you have a close, loving, peaceful relationship with God? Do you have peace of mind and heart inside? God hasn’t left you; it may be that you have left God. The greatest need of our time is to know God and to draw close to Him again by listening and obeying His Word. Won’t you do that?

Copyright 2005, Phil Sanders
Concord Road Church of Christ
8221 Concord Rd., Brentwood, TN 37027
1-877-226-5747
phil@God-answers.org www.God-answers.org