

What Is a True Christian?

What does it take to be a Christian? According to the Bible, there is much more to being a true follower of Jesus Christ than most people realize. How does God's Word define a true Christian?

by Larry Neff

The term “Christian” is widely used to describe those who believe in Jesus Christ. However, there are many differing ideas as to just what this term means. Believers in Christ are generally anxious to be considered true Christians—but just what is a genuine follower of Jesus Christ? Is there any way to know for sure?

The Bible uses the word *Christian* only three times (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). However, various aspects of Christianity are mentioned abundantly. For example, the apostle Paul stated that we should imitate him just as he imitated Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). This is a major step in defining a true Christian, but there is more.

Called, chosen and faithful

The Bible gives us additional details. For instance, an individual must be *called by God* to be considered a Christian. In the parable of the wedding feast, our Savior stated that “many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). The calling has to do with an invitation. Many are invited, but only some answer the call.

What is this calling from, and what is it a calling to? It is a calling “out of darkness into [God’s] marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). God calls whom He will out of the spiritual darkness and deceit that smother this world and reveals to them His wondrous truth. That calling entails an *understanding* of that precious truth. If we obediently respond to that calling and come out of spiritual darkness, we are also among the *chosen* (same verse).

Then, if we remain faithful, we can claim the promise that we will join the King of Kings in the family of God (Revelation 17:14). As this verse explains, to be eligible to receive that promise we must be “called, chosen, and faithful.”

But what kind of people does God call? “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty” (1 Corinthians 1:26-27; compare Matthew 11:25-26).

Jesus emphasized that tax collectors and harlots would enter the Kingdom of God

before those who were often perceived as being righteous in His day. Typically, those looked on as righteous were in reality *self-righteous*. On the other hand, those of low standing are more likely to see their inadequacy and their need to repent of their sins. Generally speaking, they also will be more inclined to appreciate the forgiveness made possible through Jesus’ sacrifice (Matthew 21:23, 31-32).

Therefore, God most often calls people who don’t view themselves as high and mighty but who instead see problems in themselves. They

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are more humble and teachable because they can more readily recognize and acknowledge their human weaknesses. They are people who have made mistakes and know it.

That is part of the reason God chooses “not many wise, not many noble,” but rather those that the world often views as foolish and weak. They more readily see *their need for God’s help*. On the other hand, those who see themselves as powerful and self-sufficient usually fail to see a need for God or His help.

Who is God calling now?

Is God now calling the majority of humanity? Most people think so. But if He is, He clearly has not succeeded. After Jesus Christ’s 3½-year ministry, only 120 disciples were gathered on the day of Pentecost to become part of the Church Jesus began. Christ’s true followers are described as a “little flock” (Luke 12:32), following a narrow and difficult pathway of life that very few find amidst the prevailing culture of “this present evil age” (Matthew 7:13-14; Galatians 1:4).

Even if all people who are classified as “Christian” were considered to be called of God, there still are far more who do not recognize Christ and in many cases have not even

heard His name. This is difficult to reconcile with the idea that God is calling everyone now.

God has revealed in His Word, however, that He has a magnificent plan through which all will ultimately come to know His way of life. Through studying this plan of salvation, we learn that God is not attempting to call the majority now, in this present age of man, but is letting most live the lesson of human experience under Satan’s sway.

After they learn hard lessons through this experience, many more eventually will want to go God’s way than would have otherwise. In



the future the contrast between God’s way and Satan’s will be abundantly evident. (To more fully understand God’s great plan, be sure to request *What Is Your Destiny?* and *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

At that time, people who decided to determine for themselves what is right and what is wrong finally will come to realize that only the Great God can define what is right and wrong, holy and unholy, good and bad.

Tragically, this lesson extends throughout all human history. Just as Adam and Eve did, human beings have long tried to determine for themselves what is right and wrong, rejecting God’s revelation. Sadly, we have reaped the painful fruit of those wrong choices (Galatians 6:7).

Proper worship required

Could these wrong choices and decisions extend to the way we worship God and Jesus Christ? Jesus Himself made it clear that merely *using* His name does not make one a Christian. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, *but he who does the will of My Father in heaven*” Matthew 7:21, emphasis added throughout).

Did you catch that? It is possible to worship God and His Son, *but still not be a real Christian!* Christ warned of those who would institute *their own* practices and doctrines and wrongly expect God to honor such worship: “Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, *but their heart is far from Me.* And in vain they worship Me, *teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*’” (Matthew 15:7-9).

Jesus noted that although God is clearly the object of their worship, since they choose to worship Him *in their own way*, as opposed to the way God *tells us* to worship Him, such worship is *vain and useless*.

By contrast, a true Christian will worship God *according to God’s instruction* in His holy Word, the Bible, and not according to his own devices and imagination (Deuteronomy 12:32). The Bible emphasizes that we should strive daily to live “by every word of God” (Luke 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). While no one can ever earn salvation—as it is God’s freely given gift (Romans 6:23)—God will not give salvation to anyone who stubbornly persists in doing things his own way.

Ever since Adam and Eve yielded to Satan’s deception, most people simply have not correctly understood God’s truth. They do not realize that Satan the devil has continued to deceive the overwhelming majority of humankind (see 1 John 5:19; Revelation 12:9). In so many cases, people are sincerely doing what they think is right. They simply do not understand that Satan, the real “god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4), has extended his deceitful, lying ways even into teachings and practices embraced by mainstream Christianity (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

The real test begins when God opens one’s mind to His truth. Once the Creator begins to reveal truth to a person, that individual bears a responsibility to *act* on it. If that person doesn’t show a willingness to *live* by what he or she has learned, God will add nothing more to his or her understanding. The person has shown that he really doesn’t want to do even what he has already learned.

God requires a change

To be a true Christian, a person must take a vital step: He or she must truly *repent*. After the apostle Peter’s powerful sermon on the day the New Testament Church began, many were “cut to the heart” when they recognized that it was their sins for which Jesus was crucified (Acts 2:37).

Peter’s striking sermon had made it clear just who Jesus was—the promised future King whom God had raised from the dead and by doing so had made Him both Lord and Christ (verses 29-32, 36). Their sins had necessitated

the death of the very Son of God!

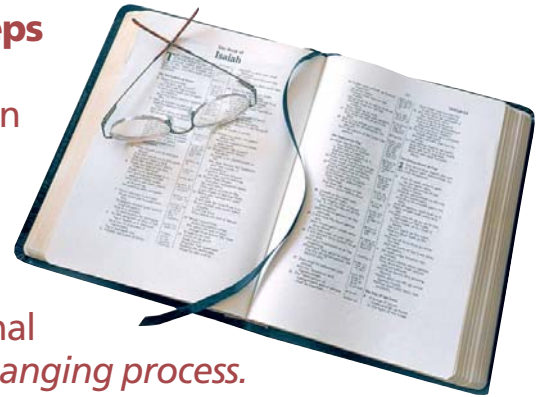
They then “said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ Then Peter said to them, ‘*Repent*, and let every one of you *be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you *shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call’” (verses 37-39).

We see here several crucial steps to becoming a true Christian. First, a person must *be called* by God. Then he or she must *repent* of past sins. Although repentance is a major subject requiring more explanation than is possible here, we should realize that it is far more than merely an emotional experience. It is truly a *life-changing process*.

To repent means to *change*, to *turn around*, to *stop going the way you are going*. It is to be truly sorry for your sins, as well as to have sorrow for your inclination and desire to do the wrong things.

In biblical terms, this process of change, of surrendering yourself and turning your life over to God, is called *conversion*. Obviously a human being cannot change everything at

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once, but one can have a repentant attitude and turn in the right direction, making basic changes as he or she embarks on a new path and a new life of overcoming—bearing “fruits worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:8).

(To understand this process of repentance and conversion, request or download the free booklets *The Road to Eternal Life* and *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.)

To be repentant, it is essential to have some understanding of *what to repent of*. If one doesn’t realize stealing is sinful, he cannot repent of it. If he isn’t aware that profaning God’s name or profaning God’s Sabbath constitutes sin, he cannot repent of those transgressions. This is where God’s calling—His *revealing of truth* so that we might become a true Christian—applies. The Creator reveals His truth through His Word, the Bible, so we can understand what sin is and so we might comprehend the way of life to which He has called us.

We see, then, that a person cannot truly become a Christian unless he *truly repents*.

Another step required

After genuine repentance, Peter instructs that we must be baptized (Acts 2:38). The Greek word *baptisma* (baptism) refers to the “processes of immersion, submersion, and emergence” (*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, “Baptism, Baptist, Baptize”).

Water baptism is a physical act designed to teach us a vital spiritual lesson. “Baptism” performed through sprinkling or pouring fails to fulfill the symbolism of this important ceremony. Baptism is described in Romans 6 as representing our *death, burial and resurrection to new life* through Jesus Christ. Through baptism our “old man” or self is symbolically buried in a watery grave and we rise from the water as a new person to live a new life (verses 3-13).

The experience of Noah’s family in the ark during the great Flood as well as ancient Israel’s passing through the Red Sea figuratively represent water baptism (1 Peter 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 10:2).

Both events culminated in salvation—albeit only physical deliverance for those involved—and also signified the passing from an old world and sinful way of life to a completely new one where righteousness prevails. Baptism represents our salvation and deliverance from our earlier way of living that leads to death to a new way of righteous living, leaving our old self behind in a symbolic watery grave.

In the light of these verses, can one still be a Christian and be saved *without* baptism? Read Mark 16:16 for additional biblical evidence: “He who believes *and is baptized* will be saved.”

The gift of God’s Spirit

Following water baptism, God offers His Holy Spirit to the repentant believer. Can a person be a Christian without God’s Spirit? The Bible answers: “. . . You are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. *Now if anyone does not have the Spirit*

of Christ, he is not His" (Romans 8:9).

Notice how "Spirit of God" and "Spirit of Christ" are used interchangeably. There is only one Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:4), and one cannot be a Christian without it.

That Spirit enables the Christian to understand spiritual things—"the things of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11). Through the Holy Spirit, a Christian builds godly character and shows evidence of God at work in his or her life through proper fruit (Galatians 5:22-23). The Spirit works in a Christian to provide power, love and a sound, godly mind (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

Another element tied to repentance is what Jesus Christ called "counting the cost." He cautions those who would follow Him, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it . . . so likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:28, 33).

This means that whoever would become a true Christian must be willing to give his or her life to God, to always put God first (Matthew 6:33). True Christianity is not cheap; the cost is to *surrender your life*. It requires *total commitment*. A Christian may stumble or falter along the way. He may even hesitate. But with God's help, he or she will work through the obstacles and put God first in all aspects of life.

Walk as Christ walked

A true Christian will have a very different perspective on life. He will have an overriding goal to live like Jesus Christ. "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6). A true Christian's understanding of how to live will be deeply rooted in the example of the life of the Messiah and that of His followers, the apostles.

Included in the concept of walking as He walked is the aspect emphasized in 1 Peter 2:20-21: "For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. *For to this you were called*, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps."

A true Christian will look, in faith, to God, realizing his total dependence on the Creator. He or she will demonstrate the fruits of God's Holy Spirit and true Christianity through good works.

It is a fantastic privilege to be a Christian in this age, but one that requires dedication and carries heavy responsibility. The rewards are enormous for all those who choose to serve God and become true followers of Christ—*Christians as defined in the Bible*. **GN**

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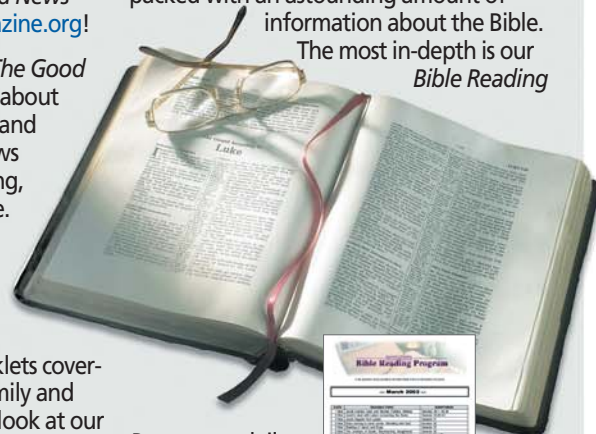
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