

What Does it Mean to Be a Christian?



by bill helm

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This is a very loosely worded question and the answers can be very broad. Though I grew up in an old fashioned Christian family, my idea of what it means to be a Christian has changed over time. Let me begin with some 'splainin', as Ricky Ricardo used to say.

Before we discuss this question, let us first define what a Christian is. Being a Christian means a number of different things to many people. Some will say, it is a person who goes to church. Based on that line of thinking, many people will say, they are Christian, because they go to church. Others may say they are Christian because they obey the Ten Commandments. In some parts of the world, the word Christian refers to a political affiliation. Another answer may be that a Christian is someone who does a lot of good things. However, the word Christian actually means, "Like Christ."

There are those who may think being a Christian is irrelevant in today's society. For them, a better question might be, "what good is being a Christian? And so, why even be a Christian?" So now that we have started by asking a question and attempted to arrive at an answer, we have opened up several other questions. In the interest of knowing what it means to be a Christian, let's first consider why we should even want to be a Christian

God created the human race so, that we may have fellowship with Him. We learn this in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. He wanted us to be able to love Him and to talk with Him and to do the acts of righteousness that He does. That is, He made us that we would be like Him, not in power, but in action. This is what is meant by being made in His likeness. When He made us to be in His likeness, He made us, not looking like Him, but with something called free will. Humans have free will, the same as God does, because He gave us that will.

Having free will means we have the ability to do what we want. Now why would He give us free will? He gave us free will, because in order for us to love Him and show Him our love, we have to be free to love or not love. He didn't create us to be robots; He created us to have a choice. How gratifying would it be for God to create us if we had no choice but to love Him and do His will?

Perhaps at some point in time, you have had someone do something for you that caused them to give up their own plans. It may have been a parent, who gave up buying something for themselves, in order to give you what you wanted. Did that not mean much more to you than if they did not have to make that choice? That is, being willing to give of ourselves, in order to help another. This is a sacrificial love. God created men and women so that we could love Him so much, that we would do what He wants, instead of what we want. The problem however, is that man continues to do that which is opposed to God's will. This is, of course, what we call sin. God is righteous, so when we sin, we choose to be unrighteous, which means being unlike God. This act, called sin, entered the world when Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden. From that point on, man has been a part of a sinful world. In other words, it has been our nature to be sinful. Being sinful takes us out of fellowship with God.

Have you ever been somewhere that there was such a terrible odor, that it makes you sick, even to just think about it? Years ago, my wife and I used to travel a road that passed a rendering plant, where dead and decaying animals were rendered into products. The odor was so repulsive that we put up our windows as we passed, even without air conditioning and drove as quickly as possible to get beyond

the plant. After we were well away from it, we would open the windows to get the odor out of the car. Imagine being around someone who smelled like that, and even looked like the dead animals. That is an analogy of how repulsive sin is to God. He can't be around it and will not associate with those who participate in it.

It would be inconsistent with His holy nature and righteousness for Him to even be close to someone who sins. Therefore, sin has placed us at an infinite distance from God, meaning there is a great divide between ourselves and God.

The result of sin is eternal separation from God; or death forever. The Bible calls this, the "wages of sin".

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 NIV

Wages are something that someone has to pay. We could call it the cost of sin. The cost of sin is death. You see, there is a price to pay for our sins. We will look at this scripture again shortly, but let's focus on the first phrase; "For the wages of sin is death." What this is saying is that we can expect death for our sins. That's a pretty horrifying thought. You see it is an eternal death. This I know is hard for us to take and none of us wants to think about it. However, there is a second thought in this scripture. The statement here is a contrast of two thoughts. The wages of sin is death, but there is a gift that will pay off that debt. Suppose you have a job that pays a great deal of money, but then when you receive your pay, you find out that the money is play money. You could take that anywhere you like and try to pay for something with it, but it is worthless. Your

debtors will foreclose on you and you will not be able to pay your bills. You might even starve if you can't buy food with it. How long would you stick with a job like that? Not long. So then along comes someone who says, "Don't worry, I have already paid your debts. You can throw that money in the trash, because it is worthless and I will pay for all of your needs. All you have to do is to trust me as the one who will pay your debts, you just need to follow me and I will guide you. As long as you follow me, love me and stay within my family, I will take care of your debt and your needs." And that is the other great part of this gift; we get to be a part of a great big wonderful family.

So, let us now come back to the question, "what does it mean to be a Christian?"

My father, whose name was Eldon Richard Helm, had five brothers. His parents were very sincere Christians. In fact, Grandpa Helm was a Methodist minister.

In the days when my dad was a boy, there was very little political correctness about being a Christian. Most protestant church goers would probably say, they were "saved" and they could talk about it anywhere, without others verbally attacking them. If you were a public school teacher, you could even tell your students you were saved. That vernacular, nowadays, has practically disappeared from modern speech. In those days, most people knew what that meant. That era, would have been in the 20's and 30's; in other words, nearly a century ago. When I was a boy, about 50 to 60 years ago, we referred to saved folks as "religious".

My idea of those who were saved was a group of people who had taken a vow to give up everything in life that makes

us happy. In my perception, you had to give up anything that was fun. Perhaps, this is because there was such a drastic difference in the life Christians like my Grandparents lived, and others I knew. For example, it was considered a sin to play cards. Not only would you not dare to play cards in church, you wouldn't even have a deck in your home. It was considered sinful to show your legs by wearing shorts and dancing was strictly prohibited. Many churches did not permit blue jeans. It's no wonder, many people, including me; thought that you would lead a boring life, if you were saved. I would eventually learn that the question of being a Christian didn't have anything to do with playing cards or wearing blue jeans. My grandparents chose those differences in lifestyle because they felt that was the way to honor God.

Over the decades, many people, including professing Christians, began to use a different lingo. We started to refer to being "Born again" instead of being saved. (See the 3rd chapter of John) Still, there was that old label of "religious" attached to those who were committed to following Christ. Sometimes it seems people have even added the word fanatic or nut as a way of labeling those who are devout in their faith. We have often heard replies to the question, "Are you a Christian?" to the effect, "Well, I go to church, but I'm not one of those 'religious fanatics'. In other words, "I go to church, which makes me a Christian, but I'm not going to live a fanatical lifestyle."

That line of thinking, brings us to the point of the question, does going to church make you a Christian? Let me ask a question that I think will help in defining what I believe on the subject. Does going to school make you a teacher? Of course, going to school can help you achieve the status of

teacher. Becoming a teacher isn't really the objective for most people going to school. Still, chances are, someone seeking to be a teacher most likely will go to school. To be a teacher, one must first be educated themselves. Some people have managed to educate themselves without a public education. By the same token, some have attended school many years; yet they have remained uneducated. There have even been a few cases where someone actually made it through college without truly learning to read or write.

I have now placed two questions before you. The second question is presented as an analogy to help answer the first. Let us further complicate the subject with a third question that will also help define the answer to the question, "Can you become a Christian without going to church?" Consider this question; is it possible, to teach without going to school? Of course it is. Anyone who has ever helped someone find the answer to a question is a teacher. If you were able to show someone how to do something, you are a teacher. If you were able to give directions to someone looking for the way to a destination, you were a teacher. That doesn't make you a certified teacher in public education, but it illustrates an ability to teach. In the early days of education in this country, you didn't even need a degree to teach. Those folks were teachers. The reason the government doesn't allow people to teach in the schools without a degree and certification, isn't because they can't teach anything without them; it's to better equip those who seek to do so. There are also things we can learn without a formal education. Some people are self-taught. Yet those who are self-taught may do so out of necessity or perhaps there are no classes for the subjects they seek to learn.

Just like in the case of education, you can also become a Christian without going to church. You can also maintain your faith in Christ without attending church. However, that concept reminds me of a television commercial that used to air in the 1990's. The product was a breath mint, which was sure to keep your breath fresh. The question the commercial asked was, "can you breathe without it?" The answer given was, "Of course! But I wouldn't recommend it." So, my answer about trying to be a Christian without attending a church is, "Can you be a Christian without going to church? Of course! But I wouldn't recommend it." We will look at the maintenance of our faith later in this publication, but let's not stray from the question; "Does going to church make you a Christian?" My answer is, no more than going to school makes you a teacher. It can help, but going doesn't form the basis for commitment and there is much more to achieving it than just attending.

Why would you want to be a Christian?

Certainly we have partially answered this question already when we spoke about sin standing in the way of our relationship with God. We know there is an eternal reward for becoming a Christian and that would be more than enough in itself. But wait! There is more advantage to being a Christian than the eternal benefits. There are wonderful advantages for us now.

When we become a Christian, we are adopted into God's family. We enter a worldwide family of other Christians, called the body of Christ. We gain many new friends who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. This new family becomes a great support system. Our Christian family will give us help in a way that goes beyond just regular friendship. This Christian family is a great help in times of

loss, such as the death of a family member or when we are faced with health issues and even employment woes. Beyond that, we share each other's joy. We share the celebrations of life events and triumphs. We often refer to the church as the body of Christ. You know of many churches and denominations, but the body of Christ goes across denominational lines. Those who receive Jesus as Lord, may belong to a church such as Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, or others, but they also belong to the greater Church of believers, known as the body of Christ. We may not all worship in the same building, but we often fellowship with other Christians outside of our church buildings. We share each other's burdens and lift each other up in prayer. This is a very large family that is worldwide. I recently visited another country and found other Christians who I was able to connect with and to fellowship with even briefly. We exchanged requests for prayer for each other's fellow countrymen. It is difficult to fathom the many ways in which we benefit from becoming a Christian. Of course the greatest benefit is the privilege of becoming a child of God. As Jesus told us, He came that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

So, what must you do to be a Christian?

Let's look at a story in the book of Acts. The Apostle Paul, along with Silas, who was another leader in the church, were put in prison because they had converted a slave woman who was being used to make money by her satanic abilities. In the night, as Paul and Silas were singing and praying, the Lord sent an earthquake and everyone's chains fell off and the locked gates opened. The jailer knew he would be executed if the prisoners escaped, so he was about to kill himself when Paul called out and stopped him, saying no one had left and not to hurt himself. When the jailer checked

and found them all there, he knew they had something that he wanted. There must be something wonderful about knowing the Lord Jesus if these men were willing to remain in prison for the cause of Christ. Read what the jailer said and the response of Paul and Silas:

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household. Acts 16:29-34 NIV

So we see here, and in other scriptures, that we must Believe. Many people will say, “Oh, I definitely believe in Jesus.” However, the word that was translated into English means more than just to acknowledge Jesus. We will not get into the original language, but perhaps we can get a little better understanding by looking at another translation of the word.

Verse 31 in the Amplified version of the Bible reads: “And they answered, Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (give yourself up to Him, take yourself out of your own keeping and entrust yourself into His keeping) and you will be saved, (and this applies both to) you and your household as well.”

Using the translation above, we can interpret that to mean, we must give over control of our lives to the Lord Jesus.

Here we are actually doing more than just acknowledging Jesus.

We may already know that He exists; that He is the Son of God the Father. That is not much different than saying; we know who the president of the United States is. Sometimes, people disagree with who won the election as president and they will not be willing to think of him in terms of being their president. In other words, a person may admit that someone is president; and yet not submit to him as their president. Believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior, means we submit ourselves and our intents and purposes to Him. Notice, I said, Lord AND Savior.

There is a reason we refer to Him as both Lord and Savior. Savior indicates He is the person who saves us. What does He save us from? Remember the scripture we spoke about earlier?

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 NIV

He saves us from our sin. As we said earlier, God's word tells us that there is a price to pay for our sins. This scripture tells us that we have a gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. He has paid the price as a gift to us.

The word Lord indicates that He becomes the governing force in our life. The word lord is often used to refer to someone of royalty or nobility. In the United States, we have sort of lost the connection with that word, because we don't have a government position with that title attached. In the United Kingdom, the word lord refers to someone who sits in the House of Lords, a governing body much like our senate.

When we speak of Jesus as our Lord, we are saying we accept his position as the government of our lives. In His own words, Jesus called this following Him.

Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."
Luke 9:23 NIV

To do that, we will obey His will in our lives. That means following His teachings. Please remember the words above, "Lord and Savior". You see, following His will and teaching is not the way of salvation; it is He who saves or as He said in His word,

"I am the way and the Truth and the Life." John 14:6
NIV

He first saves us from our sin, then we follow Him as Lord. In the third chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us, we must be born again. The person He was speaking with, Nicodemus, who was one of the religious leaders at the time. When Jesus told him, he had to be born again to be saved, he didn't know what to make of it:

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, You must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you

cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” John 3:3-8 NIV

Jesus spoke of a spiritual rebirth. When we are attracted to Him and we receive Him as Lord and Savior, it is what we call a work of the Holy Spirit. He referred to the wind, which helps us understand the Holy Spirit. Spirit is like the wind. We can feel the effects of it and now we can even measure its speed and direction, but we can't see it and we can't really touch it despite being able to see the results of its power. So also, we can see the result of the spirit in the lives of those who are saved.

So far, we have discussed that in order for us to have eternal life, we must be without sin and that means we must be born again. We must be cleansed of our sin. We also discussed that there is a price, or wage for sin. Someone must pay the price and provide a way into salvation. You might say, someone has to purchase the ticket. This is also called redemption. When you enter a place or event that requires a ticket, you must redeem that at the door. If you don't buy the ticket, either someone has to buy it for you, or give it to you. Either way, you are counted, or permitted to enter. The price and way into salvation is, through Jesus who paid that price, by giving His life on the cross.

Jesus was crucified, for our sin. He had done nothing deserving of death, yet He was killed. The Bible says He was bruised for our iniquities. He suffered the punishment for our sin. He paid the price for us. He redeemed us. So does that mean we are automatically saved? We don't have to do anything? Well, not exactly. There is something we must do. We have to actually place our sins at the foot of the cross. When Jesus was on the cross, there were two thieves on crosses, one on each side of Him. One was

cursing and asking Jesus why he didn't get off of that cross and take them down too, if He really was the Son of God. The other thief chastised the first thief and pointed out to him that they were deserving of their sentence of death, but that Jesus had done nothing wrong. He then asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Jesus told him that he would be together with Jesus in paradise.

So how do you actually place your sins at the cross? We see that we do have to believe. When you read about those who believed in Jesus and received Him as Lord and Savior, you will see that the believer actually did that verbally. We call this confession. The thief, who accepted Jesus, admitted that he was a sinner and asked Jesus to bring him into the kingdom. He verbalized it. There is more than one confession here. He admitted his sin, recognized Jesus as the Son of God and asked to be a part of the kingdom. The thief didn't have the opportunity to show how his repentance would affect his life, for he was dying. Jesus knew that he was sincere in his confession.

If you continue to read the rest of the Bible, you will see that those who became Christians had changed lives. The Apostle Paul would write later in the New Testament, that we are new creatures or a new creation. Our actions are changed. This is called repentance. Repentance is a turning around in our thoughts and actions. We start doing things based on what we believe to be God's will in our lives. Remember that definition of believe we talked about earlier?

Verse 31 in the Amplified version of the Bible reads: "And they answered, Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (give yourself up to Him, take yourself out of your own keeping and entrust yourself into His keeping) and you

will be saved, (and this applies both to) you and your household as well.” (Italics added)

We must take ourselves out of our own keeping and entrust ourselves into His keeping. This means doing as He would have us to do instead of what we would want to do. Repentance means that instead of walking away from God, we turn around and walk toward Him. Not in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense. We have then, a whole new thought process. We begin to be controlled by Him. We ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?” Not necessarily in those words, but in how we conduct ourselves. Of course this might take some time to become habitual for us, but that is why Christians tend to read the Bible. God’s Word helps lead us in following Christ. So we may not find ourselves being perfect, but we will try our best to follow Him. If we fail in that, we pray and ask Him to forgive us and then we try harder the next time. This thing of repentance is leaving your sins at the foot of the cross. Not only do we take our sins to the foot of the cross, we also need to leave them there. He will guide us by His Holy Spirit and His Word, the Bible, in following him. Going to church and hearing His word preached is another way of following Him.

So we need to pray, acknowledging Him as the Son of God, admitting that we are sinners and asking Him to come into our lives as Lord and Savior. We also pray that we repent or turn away from our sins and thank Him for giving His life for ours and saving us.

Let me say that again with some defining words: We need to pray, acknowledging Him as the Son of God (**believe**), admitting that we are sinners and asking forgiveness (**confess**) and asking Him to come into our lives as Lord and Savior (**accepting – receiving**). We also pray that we

repent or turn away from our sins and thank Him for giving His life for ours and saving us (**repentance**).

You can pray this in your own words, or you can pray the following prayer as you believe them and make them your own prayer to Him:

Lord Jesus, I know that you are God's own Son and that you gave your life for me to pay for my sins and that you raised from the dead on the third day. I ask you to forgive me and to give me a new birth in you. Please come into my heart and live as Lord and Savior. I repent of my sins and ask you to lead me and help me to resist the temptation to sin. I thank you and trust you as my Lord and Savior.

When I accepted Jesus as my savior, I didn't know this prayer. All I said was "Lord, I don't know how to be a Christian. I ask you to make me a Christian." Later, I would pray words similar to those above. The exact words are not necessarily the prayer above. There are many different prayers that mean the same thing; however the one thing consistent is that salvation comes by no other way than through Jesus Christ, God's Son. This Particular prayer is called the "sinners prayer." You will see it stated in many other ways and this is just one. Feel free to pray in your own words. Then, be sure to tell others about your decision. Perhaps you can start with a pastor or friend you know to be a Christian. This is a part of the new life and is also a part of what we call confessing.

Be sure to seek fellowship with other Christians and read God's Word daily. Going to church, doesn't make us a Christian, but it does make it easier to live a Godlier lifestyle. We gain strength through a fellowship with other Christians,

by hearing the Word of God preached and by reading His word. The other thing that helps us to grow and develop a close relationship with Christ is to pray daily. Most Christians have a special time of day that they pray and then they often pray when they feel the need to pray throughout the day. Prayer is conversing with God. We can't exactly expect to hear Him answer audibly, but we can trust that He is listening and will lead us as we see ways He is speaking to us by His word and in communicating with other Christians. As we continue in fellowship with Him and other believers, we learn how to follow His leading.

BELIEVE - (GIVE YOUR LIFE TO HIM)
ADMIT - (CONFESS)
ACCEPT - RECEIVE and THANK HIM
REPENT – (FOLLOW)

This publication is an outreach ministry of Washington Center UMC
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Here are some other verses from the NIV version of the Bible to consider as follows:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

Acts 4:12

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

Acts 16:31

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Acts 2:21

For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

Romans 10:10

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.

Titus 2:11-12

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Mark 16:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.

John 10:9

And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 3:21

As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Psalms 103:12

So where do you go from here?

The spiritual life has a need for nourishment; just as the physical body does. without it, you perish. Many people fail to seek the essentials for spiritual life and they starve spiritually. Soon they are back in the same rut they were before salvation.

So, to keep your spirit alive; seek the spiritual food groups; Prayer, God's Word, Fellowship, and Service. Pray and read the Bible daily. Seek to be with other Christians and join a Jesus preaching Church. Serve Him through the Church and personal ministry. Don't delay, do it today.

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