



WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
PART I: WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE	5
PART II: PICTURES OF YOUR SALVATION.....	11
PART III: THE FRUIT OF FAITH.....	15
PART IV: MEANS OF GRACE.....	21
PART V: BELONGING TO A PEOPLE	25
CONCLUSION	29

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?



INTRODUCTION

The reason there are Christians is because God is merciful, and the Christian life is our ongoing response to the ongoing mercy of God. The previous sentence used the word “Christian” twice, and it’s a word people might use often in order to refer to a group of people or to make a claim about their own lives. But what is a Christian? Where does the word originate?

The label “Christian” was initially a word spoken by non-Christians. Opponents to disciples used the word “Christian” to refer to those who followed Christ. In Acts 11:26, “the disciples were first called Christians” in Antioch. The word Christian means a “Christ follower,” and this label is one that the disciples embraced, for they were indeed Christ followers. If that’s what the word means, what does it mean to be a follower of Christ?

This field guide is a reflection on what it means to be a Christian.

1

WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE

About Jesus

Christians are identified, first, by what they believe about Jesus. When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15), they needed to answer this most important question, because you can’t believe whatever you want about Jesus and be a Christian. This is central to understanding what is a Christian in the first place.

If someone says Jesus “was only a man,” “was just a good teacher,” “never claimed to be God,” or “was a prophet like other ancient prophets,” such statements are out of step with Christian teaching and fail to recognize who is Jesus Christ according to Scripture.

In *Mere Christianity*, author C. S. Lewis bluntly addresses the deficient notion that Jesus was just a great moral teacher.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

The New Testament is very preoccupied with who Jesus is, and so we must get this point right in order to understand what is salvation and what is faith in the Bible, both of which depend entirely on his identity.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

For example, the four Gospels introduce Jesus' identity at the beginning of their works. In Matthew 1:1, we learn that Jesus is the Christ, "the son of David, the son of Abraham." In Mark 1:1, he is called "the Son of God." In Luke 1–2, Jesus is the divinely-conceived son born of Mary. In John 1, he is the eternal Word — the one who became incarnate.

When readers explore the four Gospels, they are beholding the one for whom all things were made, as well as the one who came to redeem all things. Jesus is truly divine, and he took to himself a human nature without compromising his deity. Christian tradition has provided us helpful language to describe the person of Christ. Jesus is one person who has two natures — divine and human. These truths form the core of what do Christians believe about him.

Written in the fourth century AD, the Nicene Creed summarizes the Bible's teaching about the person of Christ by saying the Son of God is "begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made."

New believers must grow in their understanding about who Jesus is, and this means reflection on the doctrine known as Christology. A study of Scripture, buttressed by the long-standing Christian creedal tradition, will lead us to affirm the one person and two natures of Jesus. Because we only know what it is like to be a person with one nature, we must receive the revelation of Scripture about who Jesus is. Proper Christian confession will acknowledge the uncompromised deity and genuine humanity of Jesus. These truths shape our understanding of what is a Christian and how we confess Christ.

In light of who Jesus is, Christians confess his lordship. Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev. 19:16). We confess his total sovereignty (Matt. 28:18), his righteous judgment (John 5:22), his exalted reign (Phil. 2:9), and his unsearchable wisdom (Col. 2:3). By the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, we confess that "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3). Understanding these confessions also helps clarify what is salvation, since salvation is rooted in the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

About Salvation

In addition to reflecting on the person of Christ, we must consider the work of Christ. The person and work of Christ are the twin pillars of our christological confession.

FIELD GUIDE

Christians believe that the incarnation of the Son was accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit upon the virgin Mary, and this virginal conception ensured the sinless human nature of Jesus. As Jesus grew, he was tempted yet never sinned (Heb. 4:15). The four Gospels narrate the earthly ministry of Jesus during which he healed the sick, subdued the demonic, and fulfilled his earthly mission.

The climax of his mission was the work of the cross. The sinless one became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Crucified in our place, the Son of God bore the wrath of God so that we could become children of God (Rom. 3:25). The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), but the message of the gospel is that Jesus has paid these wages for us. Understanding this truth is essential to grasping what is repentance in the Bible, since repentance is our Spirit-enabled response to the saving work Christ has accomplished. So Christians confess that Jesus is our faithful substitute, the sin-bearer and justice-satisfier.

The death of Jesus on the cross, then, is not a defeat but a victory. The work of the cross occurred not because everything had derailed but, instead, because everything in his ministry had been leading to that point, to that spot outside the city of Jerusalem. He, the promised king and deliverer, was “crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5–6).

Through the cross, the Lord Jesus brought salvation to sinners. How did he do this? He established a new covenant by his body and blood (Heb. 8:6–12). In this new covenant, there is deliverance from wrath. The victory of his cross was followed by vindication. This vindication of Jesus was his resurrection from the dead. The incarnate Son was raised in glorified humanity, a body that could not die, a body of embodied glory and immortality. These truths shape our entire understanding of what is salvation.

Christians confess and sing of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The cross is the power of salvation and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18–25). We preach the cross, rejoice in the cross, and boast in the cross, because “the cross” is shorthand for the victory of Christ at the climax of his earthly ministry. Bearing our sin and shame, he accomplished a substitutionary atonement. Understanding this is foundational to knowing what is a Christian and why salvation is found in Christ alone.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Given who Jesus is and what he has done, he tells us, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). His claim is exclusive: there is no other way of salvation or eternal life except through Christ. The apostles proclaimed this as well, as Peter told his hearers, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). This exclusive call to turn to Christ helps us grasp what does it mean to be born again, since new birth is the Spirit-enabled response to the saving work of Jesus.

The triumph of the cross and the empty tomb is the ironclad proof of the one whom God has given us for salvation and eternal life. Forty days after Christ’s resurrection, he ascended to the Father (Acts 1:9–11; Heb. 1:3), where he reigns over all things as he subdues his enemies and prepares for his glorious return (Matt. 25:31–46; 1 Cor. 15:25–28). These realities also shape our ongoing walk with Christ and our understanding of what is sanctification, the lifelong process of being conformed to his image.

Christians confess the truth about who Jesus is and celebrate the wonder of what he has done. We say, with the Nicene Creed, that Jesus “was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father.”

About Faith

Christians are those who believe — they are believers. They don’t believe only in an abstract sense, though. It’s possible to believe something exists without counting on that thing as your refuge. Biblical faith is the response of trust to what God has revealed; it’s coming to Christ with empty hands ready to receive all that Christ is for his people. This is foundational for understanding what is salvation and how to follow Jesus in daily life.

Christians are people of faith, and the object of our faith is Christ. We’re trusting his claims, his works, his victory, his power, his promises, his covenant. Biblical faith is looking to Jesus.

Christians also care about deeds — also known as obedience — but these are the fruit of true faith. Faith is dependence, a reliance on Christ to be Savior and Redeemer. This faith is not blind; it is the response to what God has said about his Son. Faith, therefore, is taking Jesus at his word. All of this helps explain what is a Christian, because a Christian is someone whose trust is rooted entirely in Christ.

FIELD GUIDE

John 3:16 points the reader to faith in Christ by promising that “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Christians are those who have believed in Christ. The presence of such faith is itself a gift of God, as Paul describes in Ephesians 2:8–9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

A Christian’s faith cannot be reduced to a mere decision, an act of the will. Trusting Christ is something we do as we rightly perceive who he is and what he has done. And this perception of Christ is the result of the prior work of the Spirit. Jesus spoke of the Spirit’s work and our response in terms of being “drawn.” He said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). Furthermore, “No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father” (John 6:65).

Faith is coming to Christ, and coming to Christ is something sinners do when God’s Spirit regenerates them. Faith is the believing response to the mercy of God: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13). This new birth is central to understanding what does it mean to be born again in the Christian life.

When sinners believe in Christ, God is to be glorified for his regenerating and merciful work in them.

About Repentance

A pair of words often spoken together are “faith” and “repentance.” Having thought about the first, we should think about the second.

When Jesus was preaching through Galilee in Mark 1, he said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). After Peter preached a sermon in Acts 2, listeners were cut to the heart and asked what they should do. Peter said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

If faith is about turning to, repentance is about turning from. When we trust Christ to be our Savior and Lord, we will inevitably turn from false idols and God-dishonoring ways of living. Therefore, faith and repentance are related — though not identical — notions. Paul was aware of a report about the Thessalonians that went like this: “For they themselves report

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9).

Since conversion does not mean immediate moral perfection, the Christian life will continue to face the snares and lies of sin, and thus repentance is not a one-time act. Christians are not just sinners who have repented; they are sinners who are repenting. Martin Luther captured this idea in the first of his Ninety-Five Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

Believers persevere in both faith and repentance. We keep looking to Christ and we keep turning from sin. We keep trusting Christ's promises and we keep rejecting the idols of the age. Faith and repentance, therefore, mark a Christian's life at conversion but also in discipleship.

Christians confess that God saves those who come to Christ in faith and repent of their sin. As Paul put it in Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." All of this flows into a deeper understanding of what is the church in the Bible, because the church is the gathered community of those who believe, repent, follow Jesus, and live out the implications of salvation together.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Are there ways you need to grow in your knowledge of Jesus, salvation, faith, and repentance? What are you doing to grow in this way?
2. Try writing out brief summaries of each topic above to see if you can clearly and concisely articulate these truths, including how Scripture explains what is salvation and the difference between justification vs sanctification.
3. What other areas of Christian truth do you want to pursue?

2

PICTURES OF YOUR SALVATION

In addition to thinking and believing rightly about Jesus, salvation, faith, and repentance, Christians should be attentive to the way the Bible describes God's saving work in their lives. The Bible gives many such descriptions, pictures for our imagination. In order to think through the reality of our salvation, let's consider five pictures that frame your new identity in Christ and help clarify how to be saved according to the Bible.

From Darkness to Light

Because of divine mercy, our spiritual standing has changed. Formerly we belonged in spiritual darkness, but the work of the Spirit has brought us into the light. A change of spiritual realms has occurred.

Paul wrote that God has “delivered us from the domain of darkness” (Col. 1:13). We are now “children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness” (1 Thess. 5:5). The darkness is the domain of unbelief and disobedience. In spiritual darkness we did not know God.

Through the message of the gospel, Christ has “called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Think of the light as the realm of salvation, and that is where the mercy of God has brought us. This “light” is our permanent domain. We do not vacillate back and forth between domains. The saving grace of God has transplanted us, spiritually. Darkness was our past, but the light is our present and future. Understanding this transition is foundational for defining what is a Christian, someone who has been brought from darkness into the light of Christ.

From Death to Life

Spiritual darkness is the realm of spiritual death. Before conversion, sinners are dead in their sins because they are void of spiritual life.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Though physically alive, sinners dwell in a spiritual condition described by Paul in Ephesians 2. He wrote, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world” (Eph. 2:1–2). This spiritual death is a helpless condition that the individual cannot overcome.

The only thing that can overcome spiritual death is spiritual life, and the one who gives this life is God. Therefore, every Christian’s testimony is the words of Ephesians 2:4–5: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”

The Lord Jesus claimed to possess in himself the life we need. “I am the bread of life,” he said (John 6:35). And “whoever feeds on this bread will live forever” (John 6:58). Salvation means you are no longer spiritually dead. Because you have Christ, you have life — eternal life in him. “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

From Slavery to Freedom

In the domain of spiritual darkness and death, sinners are bound. There is a slavery to sin that confirms the gravity of our problem and the oppression of transgression. Our will is committed to wickedness. Our will isn’t neutral, but is hostile to God.

What we need is freedom. We need a spiritual exodus out of bondage. Paul depicts salvation as just that. He says, “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin” (Rom. 6:6–7).

The Israelites knew what it was to be a people shaped by an exodus. In the book of Exodus, God overcame their captivity and set them free. That Old Testament template shapes the redemption that sinners experience in Christ. Once captive to sin, we are liberated by the Lord Jesus. We have been “set free from sin” (Rom. 6:18).

Sin was once our master, and the wages of sin was death. But God, by mighty power and abundant mercy, has brought us out of captivity and into the freedom of his light and life. The Spirit “has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). These realities also help Christians understand justification vs sanctification, since justification frees us from the penalty of sin, while sanctification progressively frees us from its power.

FIELD GUIDE

From Condemnation to Justification

When we dwelt in the darkness of spiritual death and bondage, we deserved condemnation, the righteous judgment of God. The message of the gospel, however, is that in Christ, God pardons sinners and justifies them by his grace. Understanding this is essential for grasping what is a Christian, because Christians are those who have moved from condemnation into the gracious gift of justification.

This justification isn't based on the sinner's merit. The sinner deserves judgment, not justification. The radical good news of the cross is that there is pardon for the guilty because Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. This is why Christians treasure what is justification by faith, the truth that God declares sinners righteous because of Christ's finished work.

Justification is what happens when God no longer counts our sins against us. He declares us to be in the right — not because we're innocent but because Christ has become our refuge through faith. By grace through faith, God justifies the ungodly. No sinner can be justified by his own works, his own efforts, or improvements. Justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

In Romans 4:3 Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, and in Romans 4:7–8 he quotes Psalm 32:1–2, in order to show that justification by grace was good news for sinners both in the Old Testament and in the New. Sinners are not justified by their own works. Rather, sinners come to Christ in faith and receive, by grace, salvation that justifies them in the sight of God.

Our sins are not counted against us because they were counted to Christ on the cross. God now counts a “righteous standing” toward us in his Son.

From Hostility to Friendship

As those who have been brought from darkness to light and from death to life, who have been freed from the bondage of sin and justified by grace through faith, we are not enemies of the cross any longer. Through the reconciling power of the gospel, God has made his enemies his friends. As those who have been brought from darkness to light and from death to life, who have been freed from the bondage of sin and justified by grace through faith, we are not enemies of the cross any longer. Through the reconciling power of the gospel, God has made his enemies his friends. This transformation is at the heart of what does it mean to follow Jesus, because following Him means moving out of hostility and into restored fellowship.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Paul wrote that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8) and that before God reconciled us through Christ, we were his “enemies” (5:10). Because our will has been renewed and our eyes have been opened, we experience the friendship of communion with God rather than the hostility of an unreconciled relationship. Abraham was a friend of God (Isa. 41:8), and so is everyone who has the faith of Abraham — a faith that trusts the Lord.

The purpose of forgiveness is that we might have a right relationship with God. The purpose of God’s merciful salvation is that he might cover our sin which has alienated us from his blessing and favor. In this way, salvation brings together forgiveness and repentance as part of the restored life we have in Christ. Peter puts it this way: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). Brought now to God, we have fellowship with him in Christ.

Hear the words of Jesus to us: “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends...” (John 15:15).

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Do any of the above pictures of your salvation seem to describe your experience particularly well? When you share your testimony, do you utilize these biblical images?
2. Take some time to praise and thank God for his work in your life in accomplishing all that these glorious pictures describe.

3

THE FRUIT OF FAITH

Recalling an earlier picture of salvation, the realm of light is where we live. God has rescued us from the spiritual darkness. While the merciful work of God's Spirit is something he has done to us, the life of the disciple is not passive. We must now "walk in the light, as he" — Christ — "is in the light" (1 John 1:7). Understanding this helps clarify what is a Christian, because Christians are those who walk in obedience and in the light. What does it mean to walk in the light? It means we walk in obedience.

Taught to Obey

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he commissioned his disciples with these memorable words: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19–20).

Following Christ involves being taught, and the content of what we're taught includes the commands of Christ to observe (obey). Obedience is proper to the Christian life because of the authority of Christ over all things. He possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). Given this scope of authority — which extends over every aspect of our lives — we should heed the commands of Christ as we follow him. This is central to living a Christian life.

Not only do we have the responsibility to obey Christ, we should also exhort others toward obedience. According to Matthew 28:19–20, part of making disciples is teaching them what Christ wants for the lives of his disciples. How do we learn? We learn through instruction and imitation.

Instruction and Imitation

Disciples are learners, and learners care about instruction. We don't become Christians already knowing everything we need to know to follow Christ faithfully. A disciple's journey of learning is lifelong. We need instruction from a Bible-preaching, Scripture-saturated local church, and we need the fellowship of believers who are walking wisely with God so that we can imitate them.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Instruction takes time because we can't learn everything all at once. Christian teaching about a biblical subject is called doctrine. All doctrines are important, but not every doctrine is equally important. There are primary doctrines to process, such as doctrines about the Trinity, the person and natures of Christ, and the grace of salvation. We must also learn about other doctrines which take us into secondary issues, such as the government of the church and the administration of the ordinances. Some doctrines occupy a third-tier position, like the view of the millennium or the age of the earth.

While we value learning as disciples of Christ, our learning cannot remain cerebral. The application of knowledge is necessary because such application is what results in a wise life. Learning what the Bible teaches helps to form a biblical worldview in our minds for all of life.

In addition to formal instruction, the examples of godly believers around us can affect our lives. The Christian faith is taught and caught. When we share lives with others who seek to walk in the light, we have firsthand access to how they use their words and what actions they perform. Certainly all disciples are imperfect disciples, but we must not underestimate the power of example and imitation.

Carrying a Cross

Jesus calls us to a life that follows him, and that life is a holy life. Through instruction and imitation, we're learning what it means to live set apart for the glory of God.

Jesus taught, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Following Jesus involves turning from sin, and turning from sin requires self-denial. Our sinful desires crave fulfillment, so Jesus speaks of denying the self. This self-denial is the refusal to walk according to our dishonorable desires. Understanding this is central to what does it mean to follow Jesus.

While the world tells us, "Follow your heart," Jesus tells us to follow him and deny yourself. The term "cross" is an image of execution. In our modern day, crosses are worn as jewelry and put on walls as decoration. Consider, though, the brutality of the cross. The cross was a method of execution — a tortuous death.

The words of Jesus in Mark 8:34 are a call to life through death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is right: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

The disciple walks a cross-shaped path. It is a path of costly discipleship. Because of our union with Christ, our relationship to sin has changed. Paul wrote, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God

FIELD GUIDE

in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions" (Rom. 6:11–12).

Carrying a cross is a picture of being dead to sin. And just as the path of Christ was through the cross and on to resurrection life, the disciple's path is life through death. Being dead to sin means being alive to God — life that is truly life. This life is nurtured through obedience, community, and the importance of prayer in Christian life, which strengthens our walk and keeps us dependent on God.

The Importance of Works

What should we say to someone who claims we do not need to obey the Christ we confess? We must clearly teach Scripture's call to obey, and we must warn that a refusal to obey Christ may suggest a lack of spiritual life. This is part of understanding what is a Christian, because genuine faith is always accompanied by a life shaped by obedience. Let's reflect on these two points.

In Ephesians 2, Paul records the testimony of all Christians: we have been raised spiritually from the deadness of our transgressions, and we are now alive with Christ (Eph. 2:4–6). Paul says we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (2:10). As James explains, "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26). Good works are not the basis for true faith, but they confirm the reality of true faith.

Those who claim to know Christ but don't seek to obey him should consider the warning of John the apostle. He says, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:6). And, "Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (2:4). These verses from 1 John should not lead believers to be obsessive navel-gazers, constantly looking to their own works for assurance. But these verses do unabashedly teach that those who are in the light will walk in the light.

If you approach a firepit that emits bursting flames, you know that those flames will produce smoke and heat. Imagine asking someone, "Is this the kind of fire that gives smoke and heat, or is it the kind of fire that doesn't do those things?" The question is laughable! Everyone knows that real fire produces real heat and real smoke.

When Scripture tells us that true believers follow Christ in obedience, we can understand the relationship of faith and works as having an analogous relationship to fire and heat. Just as flames produce heat, true faith produces

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

works. If someone claims to know Christ but lives in rebellion against the Lord, the biblical authors urge that person to rethink that profession of faith.

Fruit of the Spirit

Warfare against sin is a sign of spiritual life. Paul told the Galatians, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17). The believer discerns the presence of competing desires. There is the allure of sin, and there is the desire to please the Lord.

The pursuit of holiness and the fight against sin is known as sanctification. This process is the believer’s growth in Christlikeness, and this growth is the result of genuine salvation. The root of salvation bears the fruit of obedience. Paul listed the fruit of the Spirit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). Those virtues accurately describe the character of Christ, and they are the desirable characteristics for those united to him.

Being united to Christ means we abide in him. Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4–5).

As branches on the vine, the disciples of Christ receive their spiritual life from Christ himself. Since Christ calls us to “abide in him,” we should receive that command as something to obey. Abiding is something we do. Later in John 15, Jesus said, “Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (15:9–10). Abiding, then, is associated with obedience. Keeping Christ’s commandments means walking in the light as he is in the light.

As those brought from death to life, we will live with the signs of such life in our words and deeds. We want to take discipleship seriously, and that means taking obedience seriously. The Scripture gives a variety of pictures of what it means to obey the Lord as a disciple: walking in the light, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, abiding in Christ. Understanding what is a Christian helps frame these images of obedience.

Changing Clothes

One more image: in letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, Paul depicts Christian living as changing clothes.

FIELD GUIDE

Our old life in Adam is like a garment we must put off, and our new life in Christ is what we must wear. Putting off and putting on — these are pictures of sanctification, of holy living.

Paul said to “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires” (Eph. 4:22), and that we need to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:24).

We are to adorn our lives with the words and actions that correspond to the new birth we have received from God. We are to live who we are in Christ. We are to be who we now are.

To the Colossians, Paul said, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col 3:9–10). Again we see the imagery of putting off and putting on, like garments to discard versus garments to now wear.

Paul is not ambiguous about what putting on the new self involves. He said, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:12–14).

Living a holy life means putting on the garments of godliness — ways of living which correspond to the new life we have in Christ. In Christ. Now that is an important phrase.

Union With Christ

The reason Christians have spiritual life and have been transferred from darkness to light is because we have Christ. The Lord Jesus is our Savior, and his work of salvation begins with our conversion. He does not save us and then send us away on our own. He is with us and never forsakes us (Matt. 28:20). We are united to Christ.

Union with Christ means that we have, through faith, an inseparable connection to his person and life. As we become more acquainted with the New Testament’s teaching about our “union with Christ,” we will notice the concept and language all over the place. In Romans 6, we have been spiritually buried with Christ and raised with Christ (6:4). And because we are united with him, we shall be raised physically like him as well (6:5).

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Union with Christ is the Christian life. Everything flows from this gracious reality. We can grow in wisdom and holiness, we can fight against the flesh and turn from sin, we can stand courageously for the truth and even die a martyr's death. All because of our union with Christ.

The life of the disciple flows from this union. This new covenant arrangement is something we cannot sever. Nothing present or future, nothing visible or invisible, can separate us from God's love for us in Christ (Rom. 8:38–39). Because of our union with Christ, we can be confident that the work he has begun in us will be brought to completion (Phil. 1:6). Because of our union with Christ, we can be confident that he who has justified us by his grace will not undermine that verdict on a future date (Rom. 8:33–34). Because of our union with Christ, we have a sure hope in a bodily resurrection unto glory and everlasting communion with God in a new heavens and new earth (Rom. 8:18–25).

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Which of the sections above helped clarify what it means to live as a Christian?
2. One of the sections described the value of imitation in the Christian life. Who are some of the good examples of godly living around you?

4

MEANS OF GRACE

In our pursuit of knowing and following Christ, the Lord has given us what theologians have called “means of grace.” These practices help clarify what is a Christian, because they show how believers grow, persevere, and commune with God. The means of grace are practices through which the Lord blesses, strengthens, sustains, and encourages his people. Particularly paramount in the writings and testimonies of saints in history are the practices of Scripture, prayer, and the ordinances.

Scripture

God has revealed himself in his Word, the Scriptures of Genesis to Revelation. Because this special revelation tells us what is a Christian to believe about God and about God’s plan for the world, we should cultivate a discipline to read and study it. Becoming acquainted with the big story of Scripture takes time and patience, yet joys and blessings are in store for those who commit themselves to studying and understanding the Word of God (Ps. 1:1–3; 19:7–11).

Christians should get a readable and accurate translation of God’s Word, such as the ESV or CSB or NASB. Rather than playing the game of opening-the-Bible-to-random-verses-and-reading-them, it is best to have a plan that you’re seeking to fulfill. Select a book from Scripture to read in several sittings. Newer believers may especially benefit from reading through the Gospel of Mark, the book of Proverbs, the letter of Ephesians, or the book of Genesis.

Our practice needs to be reading Scripture thoughtfully and digestibly. That may require reading slowly, out loud, and reading a passage multiple times. Reflect on what themes or ideas stand out from the text. Using study notes — from a good Study Bible or an accessible Bible commentary — can illuminate more of what you’ve read. Consider incorporating a journal alongside your Bible reading. Write down thoughts or questions about the passage. Ask yourself what truths about God or about others are evident in the text.

Besides personal Bible reading, we need the preaching and teaching of God’s Word in corporate worship. Gathering with the saints to hear the

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Word of God proclaimed is a means of grace. The communal embrace of God's Word can guard us from individual errors and heresies that we might not have discerned on our own. We are not the first to interpret Scripture, so we should humbly receive the interpretive wisdom of our contemporaries and the cloud of witnesses that has gone before us.

Prayer

The discipline of prayer is evident in Genesis 4, where the biblical author says, "At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD" (4:26). The people of God are marked by their dependence on the Lord, and dependence expresses itself through prayer. A prayerless Christian is an oxymoron — prayer is central to understanding what is a Christian in practice.

When Paul told the Thessalonians, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), he wanted them to have an attitude and practice of prayer that shaped their lives. Jesus even encouraged prayer "in secret" (Matt. 6:6), a practice undermining the tendency of religious people to display their devotion for the sake of admiration. To be clear, Jesus didn't forbid corporate prayer, but he warned of the danger of vocalized prayers stemming from a heart that wanted to impress others (6:5–8).

We need to pray not because God needs information but because we need to be humble and dependent. We call upon the Lord for things like forgiveness, strength, blessing, justice, and wisdom. The book of Psalms demonstrates how prayer can characterize all the emotions of life, including despair, hope, joy, sorrow, confusion, frustration, celebration, and desperation.

The discipline of prayer is great to pair with Bible reading. These means of grace can enrich our times of devotion. Let's resolve never to read Scripture without accompanying the act with prayer. Pray for understanding and delight, pray for encouragement and help. Allow the words of the Scripture passage to supply certain words or phrasing for prayer and to prompt particular themes for prayer.

Prayer is warfare. We may convince ourselves we don't need to pray or don't have time to pray. We might prioritize other things that crowd out the focus of our hearts upon the Lord in prayer. Given our weakness and God's might, we need to remember the urgency and importance of prayer. Paul wants us to be equipped to walk with God in evil days, and that means thinking about spiritual armor for spiritual battle.

FIELD GUIDE

After listing spiritual armor in Ephesians 6:14–17, he speaks next of “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (6:18). Notice the frequency of prayer that Paul assumes we need: “at all times.” Not only do we need to pray for ourselves, we need to pray for others. A privilege and responsibility in our discipleship is to pray — or intercede — for others, a practice Paul calls “making supplication for all the saints” (6:18).

The disciplines of Bible reading and prayer are spiritually beneficial to our souls, and therefore the enemy despises these practices. Let’s be disciples who know that the means of grace are a means of spiritual vitality and nourishment. Through these disciplines, we delight in and enjoy God’s grace and love toward us in Christ.

Ordinances

The two ordinances in the New Testament are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both ordinances take place in the life of the local church.

Jesus refers to the ordinance of baptism in Matthew 28:18–20. He commissions his disciples to make disciples, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Baptism is the sign of the new covenant which Christ has inaugurated (see Jer. 31:31–34; Mark 1:8), and thus is for those who belong to the new covenant by faith.

Immersion in baptismal waters is a picture of our union with Christ (Rom. 6:3–4), and it is a step of obedience after we respond in faith to the Lord’s gospel call (Matt. 28:19). What a wonderful thing it is to remember your baptism, when you made public your profession of faith before the gathered people of God. Being baptized is soul-strengthening, and witnessing a baptism is joy-inducing. Indeed, the ordinance of baptism is a means of grace for the people of God.

The Lord’s Supper is the other ordinance for Christians. On the night Jesus had the last supper with his disciples, he said about the bread, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). And he said about the cup, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (22:20). Paul the apostle reiterated these instructions to the Corinthians, confirming the importance of this ordinance in the life of God’s people (1 Cor. 11:23–26).

Taking the Lord’s Supper — also known as communion or the eucharist — is a means of grace. The people of God are focusing their minds upon the

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

power of the cross, on which the Lord Jesus gave his body and blood. Disciples are recalling the new covenant, the victory of Christ, and his substitutionary work. As we deliberately meditate upon these things, the Spirit strengthens those who gather to remember.

To benefit from the means of grace in the corporate teaching of Scripture, the exercise of prayer, and the administration of the ordinances, Christians need to belong to a church. Understanding what is a Christian also includes understanding that discipleship is never meant to be lived in isolation.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. What are your reading and prayer habits like? Are there ways you can be growing in these habits of grace?
2. How can your mentor challenge you and hold you accountable to be faithful in the word and prayer?
3. How does the above material enrich your understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper?

5

BELONGING TO A PEOPLE

The biblical authors do not conceive of an obedient and flourishing disciple who is separate from the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to belong to a local church, so that we might learn to love what Jesus loves. And Jesus loves the church.

A Ransomed Bride

When Jesus died on the cross, he died for his bride — the church (Eph. 5:25). He is “the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior” (5:23). The people of God are the bride and body of the Lord Jesus, and he has secured his covenant with his people through the victory of the cross. He ransomed a people from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev. 5:9).

Understanding the corporate nature of Jesus’ people is important because our surrounding culture is very individualistic. Yet conversion involves a corporate, and not only individual, reality. Paul told the Corinthians, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27). Just as a human body needs its various parts, so does the church need its professing Christians to join, serve, and edify the local body.

The early church gathered on the Lord’s Day to sing, pray, hear the Word of God, give from their resources, and administer the ordinances. Professing Christians have the responsibility and privilege to connect to a local community of believers. Fellow Christians are people for whom Christ died (1 Cor. 8:1), and therefore our commitment to the Lord will not leave us indifferent toward his people. Christians are called to a certain disposition toward the church of Christ. What does this disposition involve?

The One Anothers

In order to obey what the biblical authors instruct Christians to do, there is an assumed connection to a local body of confessing believers as the context for such obedience. When the letter of Romans arrived, it was read

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

to a church. When the letter of Philippians was sent, a church received it. When Paul's two Thessalonian letters were read, they were read at churches. When John sent the book of Revelation to its readers, he sent it to seven churches in Asia.

The New Testament letters assumed the presence and importance of local church communities that confessed the gospel. These churches, which initially gathered in homes, consisted of believers from various sectors of society. Slave and free worshiped together. Men and women worshiped together. Jew and Gentile worshiped together. Young and old worshiped together. All these, united in Christ, are exhorted to relate to one another in ways that display the fruit of God's redeeming work in their lives.

Paul called Christians to bear with one another (Eph. 4:2), sing truth to one another (Eph. 5:19), forgive one another (Col. 3:13), teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16), care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25), serve one another (Gal. 5:13), show hospitality toward one another (1 Pet. 4:9), and love one another (1 Pet. 4:8). These "one another" passages can only be obeyed when believers recognize the vitality of the local church for Christian obedience.

Loving God and God's People

If someone says, "I can follow Jesus, but I don't need the church," they are trying to separate what the Scripture holds together, and they have no authority to do that. In the letter known as 1 John, there are exhortations throughout its chapters about loving God's people. Consider the following examples.

In 1 John 1:7, walking in the light is connected to Christian fellowship. Loving your fellow "brother" or "sister" in Christ is a sign of abiding in the light (1 John 2:9–11). A lack of love for Christians is a sign of spiritual death (1 John 3:10). In 1 John 3:11, a long-standing message that the readers were to know is that "we should love one another." The example of Christ laying down his life for us should shape our own love in a sacrificial way, that "we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16).

Loving others is costly. It will often take time, patience, investment, and resources. In a society that prizes expediency, efficiency, and the self, biblical love is countercultural. And belonging to and loving a local church is countercultural. But John's reasoning is blunt and clear: if someone says, "I love God," but despises his fellow Christian, the claim is empty, because "he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

FIELD GUIDE

According to the reasoning of the biblical authors, loving God and loving his people are not rival paths. Rather, obedience to God involves orienting our lives toward what matters according to God's Word. And the church of Christ matters. God has commissioned his people to take the gospel to the world — a task that helps us understand what is a Christian in both belief and practice.

A People with Treasure

Believers have the light of Christ and the gospel within them (2 Cor. 4:6–7). We are jars of clay with a glorious treasure. The Lord has commissioned his vessels of clay to proclaim the excellencies of Christ (Matt. 28:19–20; 1 Pet. 2:9). Belonging to a local church is a commitment to this larger mission of God in the world.

In Bible-saturated and Word-centered churches, believers hear the gospel (in preaching, teaching, and praying), sing the gospel (in doctrinally sound lyrics of songs for worship), and see the gospel (in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper). Christians don't possess this treasure in order to hide it but in order to display it, exult in it, and herald it. We need the local church in order to flourish spiritually and to fulfill the mission of God among the nations.

Among societal delusions and confusions, Christians know, teach, and hold to the truth. The treasure of Christ and the gospel shines brightly against the darkness of a Genesis 3 world. Indeed, we are the light of the world because we have Christ (Matt. 5:14; John 8:12). And as Christians, we have the responsibility to contend for “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). We steward what's been passed on to us, and we steward it faithfully by passing it further on to the next generation.

The treasure of the gospel preceded us, and it will outlast us. What a privilege, then, to be part of the people of God and join the triumphant purposes of God in the world.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Describe your involvement in your church. Are you finding ways to serve those around you?
2. Are there ways you've viewed the church that are unhealthy? For example, it can be easy to view the church as simply something to attend and consume. How does the above material change how we ought to think of the church?

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

3. Who are some people in your church you can pray for and love? Are there burdens you can help bear?



CONCLUSION

What does it mean to be a Christian? It means a variety of true things. We are forgiven and made new by the power of the Spirit through the gospel. We are disciples following Jesus on a path of life. We are those who confess the victory of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension. We walk according to the rhythms of faith and repentance in order to direct our hearts toward wisdom and away from folly.

Being a Christian is to be saved and sustained by the grace of God. It is to be justified through faith, joined to his church, and commissioned by his Spirit. Being a Christian is the result of the mercy of God at work on a dead heart in the darkness and bringing it to life in the light.

The Christian life is one of abiding in Christ, keeping his Word, and bearing the fruit of his Spirit. It is a cross-bearing life that leads to glory. It is union with Christ, through whom we have died to sin and been raised from sin's power and dominion.

In Paul's memorable words in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.



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