

What Is a Christian? - Part 1

by T. Austin-Sparks

A Christian is someone who has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, recognising Him as alive, enthroning Him as Lord, and having Him as an inward presence and power by the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Matthew 7:23-24, Acts 9:17, Acts 22:10, Acts 26:28, Colossians 1:27

Topics: "True Christianity", "Personal Relationship with Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the true meaning of being a Christian, emphasizing that it is not merely about adopting a religion, joining a church, or participating in a movement. He highlights that true Christianity begins with the realization of Jesus as a living person, followed by a commitment to His Lordship and the indwelling of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Sparks warns against the dangers of assuming religious identity without genuine transformation and stresses the importance of a personal relationship with Christ. The essence of being a Christian is encapsulated in the experience of Christ living within us, guiding our lives.

Transcript

"And Agrippa said unto Paul, With but little persuasion thou wouldest fain make me a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

Let us say at the outset that we are using the word "Christian" strictly according to what is found in the New Testament, and it is assumed that this will be accepted. Our enquiry will take the form firstly of a process of elimination, and we shall observe

What a Christian is Not

(1) To become a Christian is not to become 'religious', or to adopt a new 'religion'.

Among non-Christian peoples, a turning to Christ is often referred to as 'accepting Christianity', and in what are called Christian countries conversion is frequently referred to as 'becoming religious'. Such expressions, with their associated ideas, are altogether inadequate and indeed fundamentally false. There was no more religious man on the earth, in his time, than Saul of Tarsus. Read what he says of himself in Acts 22 and 26, and Philippians 3. Here was a man who was just aflame with religious zeal and passion. No argument is necessary, with history before us, to prove how wide of the mark religion can be.

And that is true of 'Christianity', when it is merely a matter of religion. To be a true Christian is not to accept a creed or statement of doctrine, to observe certain rites and ordinances, attend certain services and functions, and conform more or less diligently to a prescribed manner of life. All this may be carried very far, with very many good works; but those concerned may still be outside the true New Testament category of 'Christian'. Herein lies the danger of an assumed acceptance with God, which may bring that bitter disillusionment foretold by our Lord Himself in those startling words: "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not... by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me (Matt. 7:23,24).

No, religion is not Christianity, either more or less; it may be only a deception. So that when we seek that people should become Christians, we are not asking them to change their religion, nor are we asking them to become religious. Religion, as such, has never made this world happier or better.

(2) To become a Christian is not to join an institution called 'The Church'.

If the truth were known, there is no such thing as 'joining' the Christian Church. We never took any steps, either of word or deed, in order to get our limbs to become members of our bodies. There is no distinction between our members and our bodies - our members comprise our bodies; but they do so, not by organization, invitation, examination, interrogation or catechism, but simply by life. So, in the Church of Christ, provided that a true life-relationship exists, a 'membership' in the technical sense is a superfluity, and may be a menace. If there is not that relationship, then no 'membership' can constitute the Church of Christ.

There are multitudes, we fear, who have 'membership' in what is called the 'Church', who are not able to stand up to the test which will be presented when we come to speak of what a Christian is. But let us say here that when we appeal to people to become Christians we are not asking them to 'join the Church'. And it must be realised that Christianity is not just one more institution or society. You may go to many places called 'churches', and never really meet Christ, or find satisfaction.

Of course, that is negative. We must realise, however, that when we become Christians we share one new life in Christ with all other born-again believers, and thus we become one in Christ. That really is the Church. It is for us, then, to cherish that relationship and jealously watch over its sacredness. There are immense values in it.

(3) To become a Christian is not to become a part of a new movement.

It is true that there is a sense in which Christianity is a movement, a Divine movement from Heaven. But there are very many who conceive of Christianity in terms of a great enterprise for world betterment or even evangelization. The appeal is so often made that people will come and associate themselves with this great 'work'. There is that in most people which makes a response to such an appeal, and would like to be in a great movement. But such a way of approach is to court trouble, or at least to be found sooner or later in a false position. Moses got the 'movement' idea in Egypt - and then had forty years' inaction in the desert.

There is that which comes before the 'movement', and the movement is with God, not with us. The greatest value in movement, when God's time comes for it, often is that we have learned not to move without Him.

We do not appeal to you to join a movement. We do not invite youth, saying, 'Here is something into which you can throw all your natural powers and youthful enthusiasm!' We would say: 'God has a purpose: you are of concern to Him in relation to that purpose. But - you cannot even know or enter into that purpose until something has happened in you which has made you another person. In that purpose you will need much more than natural powers and youthful enthusiasm.'

That brings us to the positive side

What a Christian Is

In seeking to show what a Christian really is, we can do no better than take the case of one who not only was a great instance himself, but whose experience has been that of every true Christian since. We refer to the one who was addressed by a Roman 'King' in the words at the head of this chapter - the Apostle Paul. While the method of his conversion may not be the usual or general one, the principles are always the same.

Here, then, are the first three principles and realities of a true Christian life.

(1) "Who art thou?" "I am Jesus."

The first thing is the inward realisation that Jesus is (not was) a living Person.

The very first words of Paul when confronted by Christ were: "Who art thou?" To which the answer came clear and strong - "I am Jesus!" It was a startling discovery, and Paul might well have exclaimed, 'What, Jesus alive?' Jesus had been put to death, crucified. All that remained to do was to blot out the memory of Him and destroy what represented Him. To this work Paul (then Saul) had committed himself. We can hardly imagine, then, what a startling and paralysing thing it was to be confronted with the fact that Jesus was not dead, but alive, and in glory. And not only with the fact, but with the Person Himself.

All that this implied and involved has been the teaching of many centuries since. But for those to whom these present lines are addressed, this can be resolved into a very simple matter. We begin our Christian life by an experience of this living reality. Not a Jesus of history, but a Jesus of heart experience. That He really is alive is the one thing which is open to be proved by us, and it is the most serious matter as to our eternal destiny. We have only to drop our traditions, our prejudices, our suspicions, our questions, our mental problems, and, quietly kneeling, speak to Him (although unseen) as we would speak to one whom we could see; telling Him out of the honesty of our heart what we would tell Him if we were face to face. The first step is definitely to speak to Him, as to a Person.

This is the way of a discovery. We learn from the New Testament that the Spirit of God is abroad in the world just to bring about this discovery - to make real that Jesus lives to save and be our very life. This wonderful realisation, that Jesus lives, comes to the heart of every one who honestly turns and puts it to the test; and everything springs out of that.

There is only one way, really, of knowing Jesus, and that is by coming to Him. It may seem very unreal and foolish to say something to someone of whose existence you have no inward proof; but might this not be the same in other circumstances? You have heard of a physician. What you have heard makes you feel that he is just the man for your case. Will you say that you don't believe that there is such a person? Will you say that there is plenty of evidence available that he was killed some time ago? Will you go as far as going to his house and seeing the man spoken of, and then telling the man that you don't believe that

he is the physician? If you will do this, then either your case is not very serious, or you are refusing to admit its seriousness. If you are really alive to your need, the very least that you will do will be to go to the physician, tell him your trouble, and say: 'I am advised that you can meet my need, and I ask you to do so. My coming to you represents an honest enquiry and committal, in spite of many doubts and questions.'

My friend, Jesus Christ was ever ready to make the desired gesture to an approach like that. The discovery that Christ is a living reality is the first thing in the Christian life. This is a test as well as a testimony.

(2) "What wilt thou have me to do, Lord?"

The second thing - in Paul's case, as in every true Christian life - is represented by one sentence: "What wilt thou have me to do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10).

This represents a new position and a new relationship. How very different from that of the old Saul! Hitherto his life and activity had been out from himself - what he thought he would do, what he proposed, purposed, planned, determined, and desired. Self-determination had been his way of life, although he would have said that it was done in a good cause - even done for God. What an example Saul was of the fact that a man's very best intentions and devotions, in what he believes to be God's interests, may yet be doing God the greatest disservice - and he himself be totally blind to the fact. We shall speak of this again later (chap. 2, sect. 2).

We see here, then, that one thing is a clear evidence of a life truly acceptable to God; it is the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. Paul first used that word, "Lord", at his conversion; it came out spontaneously when he realised that Jesus lives! From that moment Jesus was his Lord, his Master. We know from his life afterward how utter was that surrender and change of government. Everything from that hour was on the basis of "What wilt Thou?"

Yes, it is the hall-mark of a true Christian life when, with the same inward realisation and abandonment, we say to Jesus, "Lord", and thenceforth have our whole lives governed by Him as Master.

(3) "Christ in you".

There is one more indispensable mark and feature of the Christian life to which we will point at this time. It is shown in the words addressed to Paul by one Ananias: "The Lord Jesus... hath sent me that thou mayest... be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17).

The consummation of this basic work, by which we become Christians in the true sense, is that everything which is true of Christ is made an inward thing with us. Up to this point, although everything has been very real and deep changes have taken place, it has been mainly as in an outward relationship with Christ. But it would have been fatal to have left it there, however great the discovery. We cannot live upon something which happened at a certain time. We cannot meet all the tremendous forces of evil which will oppose us, in the strength of a mere memory, however vivid. We shall never live triumphantly, or serve effectively, or satisfy God truly, on any basis of what is merely outward and objective.

The fact is that only Christ can really satisfy God; only Christ can do God's will and God's work. Only Christ can overcome the spiritual forces of evil. Yes, only Christ can really live the Christian life. Hence, the one great inclusive and crowning reality of a Christian is - Christ Himself WITHIN! Paul later put this in these words:

"Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

This becomes true by a definite act when we believe. The Holy Spirit takes possession of us in an inward way. This indwelling of Christ had never been known by any man in history until Christ had died and risen and been glorified. It is therefore the peculiar wonder and glory of the Christian. It is this very thing that explains the New Testament term - "born anew". There was nothing like it before.

So, then, in a word, our question, 'What is a Christian?' is answered in three initial things.

(1) Realising that Jesus is alive.

(2) Enthroning Him as absolute Lord.

(3) Having Him as an inward presence and power by the Holy Spirit.

The testimony of a true Christian must ever be -

'He lives! He lives!

Christ Jesus lives today!

He walks with me, He talks with me

Along life's narrow way.

He lives, He lives,

Salvation to impart!

You ask me how I know He lives?

He lives within my heart!

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