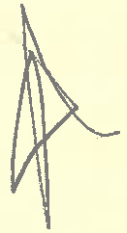


Are You a

REAL CHRISTIAN?

By Ronald L. Dart



Throughout the world there is a bewildering array of people who call themselves *Christian*. All calling themselves by the same name, they profess an incredible diversity of beliefs, practices, philosophies, teachings, doctrines, and liturgy.

In fact, if there is any way Christians can differ from one another it would seem they have long since found it. There are Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Christian Churches, and Churches of God. And the divisions don't stop there. Among the Baptists alone, we have Freewill Baptists, Hardshell Baptists, Old German Baptist Brethren, Northern Baptists, Southern Baptists, American Baptists and even "Two Seed in the Spirit Predestinarian Baptists"!

All these people claim, in one way or another, to be "Christian." Some of them even recognize that other church groups—radically different from their own—are also "Christian." Then there are those who believe that only *their* church or denomination is truly Christian, and all the rest are "Christians falsely so-called."

Just what does it take to *really* be a "Christian" in the biblical sense? Maybe you've just *thought* you were a Christian and really aren't one after all. For, truth to tell, you can be sure that there are people somewhere who, looking at your lifestyle, your belief system, or your religious habits, would declare that you are not a "true Christian," but only *think* you are.

Could they possibly be right?

It may surprise you, but there is no indication that the apostles Paul, John, Luke or Peter ever considered themselves Christians at all! In fact, there is reason to believe they didn't even care very much for the term.

We know that in succeeding generations the term "Christian" was adopted and worn with a certain amount of pride, but not at first. In New Testament writings, no one is *ever* addressed as a "Christian." In their letters, the apostles addressed God's people as "brethren," "saints," "the elect," and "beloved," but *never* as "Christians." The term "Christian" is only used three times in the New Testament. The very first use of the term comes almost as an aside in Luke's

account: "And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (Acts 11:26).

The term was used very early, but for some reason the apostles and the brethren nowhere adopted the term among themselves. Was it because it was considered a *derogatory* term?

Later, when Paul was on trial before King Agrippa, the king was moved to respond, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28). Was Paul *really* that persuasive, or was Agrippa being sarcastic?

Remember that "Christian" was not a complimentary term at this stage of history.

The only other place in the New Testament where the term is used is in I Peter 4:16, "Yet if any man suffer as a 'Christian' let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf." The term, "Christian" in this context is connected with suffering and shame. "Christian" may have been an epithet hurled at the brethren by their persecutors!

The Disciples

According to Luke, it was the "disciples" who were first called Christians at Antioch. Keep in mind that the word "disciple" does not imply *conversion*. A disciple was simply a "learner," a "pupil" or a follower. The word implied *nothing* about a person's acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, or the Creator of the universe, or even as his own personal Savior.

Even today there are people who would call themselves "Christians" who do not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. They do not believe He existed before His human birth. They do not believe He is the Creator. They do not believe He is any more the Son of God than was Buddha or Mohammed. But they believe that Jesus was a great philosopher and moral teacher, and they generally subscribe to His teachings. Therefore, they consider themselves "Christian," as opposed to being a disciple of one of the other great religions of the world.

It doesn't seem inaccurate to categorize people who believe in Christ as "Christian." And yet from earliest times there has been a curious diversity of practice

among people who styled themselves "believers."

John records a surprising reaction on Jesus' part to these "believers": "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, *many believed in His name*, when they saw the miracles which He did but *Jesus did not commit Himself unto them*, because He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for He knew what was in man" (John 2:23-25).

Notice that *believing in His name did not accomplish a change in the nature of man!* They were *believers*—maybe they could be styled *disciples*—but something was still missing.

Later John records another remarkable incident: "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on Him; but because of the Pharisees *they did not confess Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:42-43).

It is shocking to realize that discipleship—even *believing* discipleship—can leave a person unwilling to confess Christ, and still loving the praise of men more than the praise of God! How can this be?

One of the most striking illustrations of this is found in the eighth chapter of Acts. You may wish to read the entire account in your Bible. Persecution had descended upon the Jerusalem church, and the brethren were scattered abroad through all the regions of Judea and Samaria. Only the apostles remained in Jerusalem. Luke tells us that those who were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word. One of them, Philip, went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them (verse 5).

As it happened, there was a certain man in Samaria named Simon who previously had used sorcery and witchcraft and had set himself up as some great personage. The people were duly impressed and said of Simon, "This man is the great power of God."

Picking up the story in verse 12, "But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the Kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. *Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.*"

Notice that this man not only was a believer, but he submitted to water baptism as an outward sign of the *confession* of Jesus Christ. He was a believer. He was a disciple. He had confessed Christ. But was he right with God? Had his *heart* been changed?

Luke continues in the account to explain that when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the Word of God, they sent Peter and John north to confirm the brethren. These two, when they had come down, prayed for them; they laid their hands on the people, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Continuing with the account in verse eighteen: "And

when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, *he offered them money*, Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Spirit. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because you have thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. You have neither part nor lot in this matter: *for your heart is not right in the sight of God.*

So we see that a person can become a believer, a disciple, be baptized, and still not be right with God.

Peter continued, "*Repent* therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that you are in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (verses 22-23). As it turned out, Simon still needed to repent!

The fifteenth chapter of Acts records yet another interesting illustration. You may wish to take time to study through the entire chapter. Here we are told that "certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved" (verse 1).

Who were these men? What right did they have to teach such things? They're described more specifically in verse 5 as "certain of the sect of the Pharisees *which believed.*" They were believers, and yet they were teaching rank heresy to Gentile members of the church. All of the leadership of the church agreed that these men were *dead wrong*. And yet they are described as "believers."

And so a person can be a believer, confess Christ, be baptized, and *even be a teacher*, and *still* not be right with God!

Are we then saying that it is not a good thing to be a "believer" in Jesus Christ? God forbid! Believing in Christ is the starting point along the road to salvation.

But *belief* in Jesus Christ is *not enough!* *Belief* in Jesus *starts a process which must be finished.*

Jesus Himself recognized the great gulf that yawned between belief and substance. After pointing out to His disciples the far-reaching demands He was making upon them, He asked, "And why call ye me Lord, Lord, and *do not the things which I say?*" (Luke 6:46). There has never been a shortage of those who are anxious to appropriate the name of Jesus Christ—to call themselves "Christian." But where are the Christians who are willing—even *anxious*—to do the things Jesus commanded?

One of the most contradictory things about twentieth century Christianity is the number of preachers busily going about telling the world *how easy* it is to be saved. It seems all you have to do is give your hand to the preacher and your heart to the Lord and you're on your way. Hundreds, even thousands, can be "converted" in one campaign.

All this seems in strange contrast to the words of Jesus

Christ: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Did Jesus, then, declare that the way of salvation was *hard*? Not really. What He said was that it was *narrow*. Salvation is not a high mountain that only a few men can climb. It is a narrow passage that few men seem to find.

But why? What is involved in salvation? Nothing very complicated. Paul tells us that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). He then tells us that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). And John tells us that sin is the transgression of the law (I John 3:4).

This tells us that all of us have earned the death penalty through transgressing God's holy and righteous law.

We are *saved* from that death penalty because Jesus died for our sins (I Corinthians 15:3). It is only through Jesus Christ that we have forgiveness (Colossians 1:14). If we expect to be forgiven, we must repent (Acts 2:38). And, people who are repentant don't keep on breaking the law (Romans 6:1-2, 12-15, 23).

In other words, although one cannot be saved by keeping the law, one cannot be saved if he keeps on breaking the law. Notice this interesting contrast from Paul's writings. First, he says: "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20).

Could Paul be so careless as to contradict himself in such a short space? It seems unlikely. What, then, is he trying to say? The answer is simple and obvious. He is saying that it is impossible for any man by his own works to accomplish his own salvation, but in order to qualify for salvation, one must have repented of breaking the law. That means a man must become a lawkeeper instead of a lawbreaker.

This may seem simple enough, but half the Christian world believes there is more to salvation than this, while the remainder seem to believe there is less.

From the very earliest times, the apostles encountered men who felt there was much more than this to salvation. There were converts from among the Pharisees, for example, who argued for circumcision, sacrifices, fasting, and meticulous observance of all the customs of Judaism *in order to be saved* (Acts 15:1-5). It was not merely that they felt these things were beneficial in living the Christian life, but that they were actually instrumental in effecting salvation!

Of the Jews of his day, Paul wrote, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about

to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1-3).

Paul had no argument with the law saying, "For Moses describes the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them" (verse 5).

But Paul knew the Pharisees—even the *believing* Pharisees—had missed the point. He described the righteousness of faith as speaking in this way, "Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; That if you shall confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (verses 5-9).

When we fully understand that it is the life, ministry, and resurrection of Christ that saves us, just how much do *we* have to do with all that? The answer, of course, is *nothing*! There is not one thing you and I can do for ourselves to accomplish our salvation.

The apostle James, on the other hand, encountered quite a different sort of "Christian." James encountered people who argued against works, saying that *faith alone* was required for salvation. James answered, "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he has faith, and has not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding you give them not those things that are needful for the body; what does it profit? Even so faith, if it have not works, is dead, being alone" (James 2:14-17).

That makes sense. All the words in the world mean little if they're not backed up by action. James continues: "Yea, a man may say, thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and *I will show you my faith by my works*." According to James, works are the strongest and clearest statement of faith.

Of what value was "belief" in James' thinking? "You believe that there is one God; you do well; the devils also believe and tremble" (James 2:19).

That also makes sense. The devil believes that God exists—in fact, he *knows* that God exists. The devil even knows that Jesus Christ died for our sins.

Since Abraham is often cited as an example, James appeals to Abraham as well: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the friend of God. You

see then how that *by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.*"

To James, Abraham's *statement of faith* was not simply a verbal confession, or a nebulous belief, but the act of offering his son Isaac.

It may not be difficult to cause one to become a *Christian*. There are *many* who call themselves by that name. But apparently it's quite another thing to find the narrow gate that leads to *life*. Merely being a "Christian" doesn't seem to get you there.

James continued to warn: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves. *Ye shall know them by their fruits* (Matthew 7:15-16). Talk is cheap. A minister can have a powerful, imposing presence. He can be very persuasive. He can be a silver-tongued orator. But Jesus says you will not know them by these things. You will know them by what they *produce*.

The same thing is true of the *Christian*.

Jesus continued in the same vein: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but *he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven*" (verse 21).

Have you ever noticed a placard on the wall in a place of business that says "Jesus is Lord"? Or perhaps you've seen it on a bumper sticker, on stationary, or even on a business card. Why do people do that? Probably because of the statement found in I Corinthians 12:3, "Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God called Jesus accursed; and that no man can say that *Jesus is the Lord*, but by the Holy Spirit."

But how are we to understand Paul's statement? Does he mean that the phrase "Jesus is Lord" is some sort of magic *password*? Can you *always* trust anyone who mouths those words? Or is it possible for a man to put Jesus' name on the wall of his restaurant while he cheapens the quality of his food? Is it possible for a man to put "Jesus is Lord" on his business card and engage in price gouging? Has anyone ever been *cheated* by someone who claimed that Jesus was his Lord? One who uses the name of Jesus Christ to advance the cause of his business may be breaking the third commandment: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."

No, Paul is not giving us some sort of Christian password. He didn't mean that any lying blasphemer who took Jesus' name upon his lips was doing so "by the Holy Spirit." Paul was talking about the man who calls Jesus his Lord, and, like Abraham, *shows it by his life!*

Listen again to Jesus' words: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but *he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.*"

When we think about it it makes sense, doesn't it?

We all know that when the chips are down it's not what we say, but what we *do* that counts. Why then should we think otherwise when it comes to true Christianity?

Jesus continued: "*Many* will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:21-23).

Did you realize that there are people who call Jesus their Lord, who call themselves Christian, who have prophesied in Jesus' name, cast out demons in His name, *who will not be in the Kingdom of Heaven?*

After all we've been told, it's shocking to realize that invoking Jesus' name, calling ourselves Christians, engaging in all sorts of religious works, and even performing miracles in Jesus' name may gain us no recognition with God at all! You can do all these things and have Jesus look straight into your eyes and say, "I never knew you." And why? Because *instead of doing the will of God*, you have "worked iniquity."

Then comes the familiar parable of the man who built his house upon the rock: "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, *and doeth them*, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock" (verses 24-25).

Is it enough to *hear* the words of Jesus Christ? Do you somehow make progress by going to church and listening to the preacher preach Christ's words? Jesus continued: "And every one that *heareth these sayings* of mine, and *doeth them not*, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; *and it fell*: and great was the fall of it."

On another occasion, the disciples came to Jesus asking Him, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" (Matthew 18:1). In reply, Jesus called a child to Him and set him in the midst of the disciples. He said, "Verily I say unto you, *Except you be converted* and become as little children, you shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

The word Jesus used when He spoke of conversion means literally "turn again." The English word "converted" means, broadly, "changed." Biblical conversion, however, involves not just any change, but a "turning again"—a *return* if you will, to a childlike innocence and trust of God.

Jesus continued: "Whosoever therefore shall *humble himself as this little child*, the same is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven."

Have you noticed how often religion expresses itself in pride, self-righteousness, and even *arrogance*? Where is the *humility* Jesus called for?

Maybe it doesn't take very much to be a "Christian." But if it doesn't, then being a Christian isn't going to get you very far.

What, then, does God want from us? What does it take to go beyond mere Christianity to being one of "the brethren," to being a "saint?"

On the day of Pentecost shortly after Jesus' ascension to heaven, all the disciples were gathered together with one accord in one place. The Holy Spirit descended upon them that day in great power, and Peter preached a strong, convicting sermon to the people who gathered round them. He concluded by saying, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus *whom you have crucified*, both Lord and Christ."

When the people heard this saying and became convicted of their personal guilt, "they were pricked in their heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, *what shall we do?*" (Acts 2:37).

Peter's answer is classic and is the fundamental message to anyone who wants to know how to *begin* the Christian way of life: "Then Peter said unto them, *Repent, and be baptized* every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Later he would tell another group: "Repent ye therefore and *be converted*, that your sins may be blotted out when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

"Repent and be converted," Peter urged. Unfortunately, these are "religious" words to many people and have been used and misused so long that they may have lost their impact. What Peter is calling for is quite simple. He is asking us to *be sorry* for what we have

done and to *turn again* to God.

Now think about it for a moment. Who is going to believe that you are sorry for what you have done if you're still doing it? Who is going to believe that you have truly turned back to God when you won't keep His commandments?

Is *obedience* to God required for salvation? We have already heard what Jesus expects of us. What does Paul say? "What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid" (Romans 6:15). Remember, James tells us that sin is the transgression of the law.

Paul continues, "Know you not, that whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" And the Psalmist defines righteousness saying, "All thy commandments are righteousness" (Psalm 119:172).

"But God be thanked, that you were the servants of sin, but you have *obeyed* from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of *righteousness*" (Romans 6:17-18)

No, you cannot save yourself by works of law or any other acts you are able to perform.

Yes, you are required to keep the spirit and intent of God's law if you expect to be in His Kingdom.

You may be a Christian, but what if being a Christian is not enough? Isn't it about time you took a closer look at what God requires of you?

If you'd like to study these important matters further, write for our free booklets, "Why Should You Repent?"; "The Ten Commandments," and a Bible study lesson entitled, "In Search of the Will of God."

Please mail your request for any literature mentioned in this article to: Garner Ted Armstrong, P.O. Box 2525, Tyler, TX 75710.