

Are We Really Christians?

What is a Christian?

A definition of a Christian is one who professes belief in Jesus as Christ or who follows the religion based on His teachings.¹ This definition covers a broad spectrum of people. Professing Jesus as Christ can mean many things, such as simply acknowledging that Jesus is (or was) the Son of God and/or the Messiah. Following the religion based on His teachings encompasses every denomination that claims some connection with Jesus. In truth, Christianity is a religion—an ideology or system of beliefs in similar fashion to other religions. It is something that a person can convert to from another religion. However, truly identifying with Christ is a relationship, and it occurs by faith through an operation by God by His Holy Spirit instead of adopting or conforming to a system of beliefs.

What does the Bible say about being a Christian? The Greek word for “Christian” is *Kristianos*, and it is used only three times in the Bible. In the *King James Version* (KJV) and the *New American Standard Bible*, the Greek word is translated as “Christian” in Acts 26:28 and I Peter 4:16, and as “Christians” in Acts 11:26. The words “Christian” and “Christians” may appear multiple times in other Bible versions, but where they are used in other than these three verses, they are interpretations based on other Greek words such as those more correctly rendered as “brethren” or similar words.

In the three verses with the word *Kristianos*, “Christian” is used as a description of followers of Christ from an unbeliever’s perspective. In Acts 11:26, the disciples of Christ in Antioch were the first to be called Christians. They were called as Christians by whom? The verse doesn’t say that the disciples called themselves Christians; instead, the unbelieving population of Antioch called them Christians because the disciples were observed to be followers of Christ. In the Apostle Paul’s defense to King Agrippa of Judea regarding false accusations brought against Paul, Agrippa conceded that in a short time Paul might persuade Agrippa to become a Christian (Acts 26:28). It was Agrippa who considered Paul to be a Christian, not Paul himself. Finally, in I Peter 4:16, the Apostle Peter explained to the believers that it is good to suffer as a Christian, referring to persecution by the unbelieving authorities and population against those who were observed or known to be followers of Christ. **Would our unbelieving relatives, friends, or coworkers consider us to be Christians?**

If believers do not refer to each other as *Christians* in the Scriptures, what should we call ourselves? In the Bible we have 13 letters (Romans through Philemon) that we know were written by Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11:13). His letters, also called epistles, were written to those whom were taught the gospel (good news) of the grace of God and who believed the gospel of salvation. How did he refer to them? By far, he most commonly called them “brethren” (Romans 12:1; Philippians 3:1), but he also referred to them as *believers* or those who believe (I Thessalonians 2:10; I Timothy 4:12), *brothers* (Romans 14:13), *sisters* (Romans 16:1), and “my beloved” (Philippians 2:12).

Furthermore, Paul opened many of his letters by addressing the recipients as “saints” (Romans 1:7), referring to *all* of his fellow brethren (not just a select few as done by many denominations today). Believers are also “children of God” (Romans 8:16), “sons of God” (Romans 8: 14-15), “heirs of God”

¹ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.*

(Romans 8:17), and the “beloved of God” (Romans 1:7). We are also members of the body of Christ, which is also called the church (I Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23), and “ambassadors for Christ” (II Corinthians 5:20). We have a lot of ways, therefore, to refer to each other. In his letters, however, Paul did not refer to fellow believers as *disciples* or followers of Christ. That is because we are actually in Christ (Romans 8:1) and Christ is in us (Romans 8:10; Colossians 1:27)—each of us is a member of His body. Finally, is it wrong to refer to ourselves or our fellow brethren as Christians? No, as long as we are careful not to associate ourselves with the religious (worldly) concept of Christianity.

How Does a Person Become a Child of God?

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)²

Salvation is by the grace (undeserved favor) of God through faith apart from any works of our own. Faith in what and saved from what? We are to believe the gospel of salvation, which is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again.

Now I [*Paul*] make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (I Corinthians 15:1-4)

Why did Christ die for our sins? He did so because in our natural state we are unrighteous (Romans 3:10), enemies of God (Romans 5:10), and spiritually dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1-3). Therefore, we can't please God and can't improve ourselves in order to meet the righteous requirement of God—we fall short of His glory (Romans 3:23; 8:6-8). The wage, or earned outcome, of our sinful condition is spiritual death and eternal separation from God in hell (Romans 6:23; Revelation 20:14-15). Furthermore, because of our sin we are unable to earn our salvation through works of righteousness (Romans 3:28; 4:4-5; Titus 3:5-7). By believing that Christ died for our sins, therefore, we are acknowledging that we are sinful and separated from God and that we are unable to become righteous through our own efforts.

Believing that Christ died for us isn't merely an acknowledgment of a fact or adhering to an ideology. This belief must be from our heart, which is the depth of our being. If we hear (or read) the gospel of salvation and believe it (truly apply it to ourselves), then God makes us one of His own (Ephesians 1:13-14).

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (Romans 10:8-10)

² All references are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible* (1996) unless otherwise noted. Words in brackets are either equivalent words from the *King James Version* or, if in italics, were added by the author for clarification.

So then faith cometh from hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17 [KJV])

At the moment we believe the gospel of salvation, we are changed from being dead in sin to being alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5; Colossians 2:13; Romans 8:10-11), reconciled to God (Romans 5:10-11), and adopted by God as His children (Romans 8:14-15). Furthermore, we are spiritually made into a new creature or creation (II Corinthians 5:17; Titus 3:5-7) and automatically become citizens of heaven, seated in Christ at the right hand of God (Philippians 3:20-21; Romans 8:33-34; Ephesians 1:18-23; 2:6; Colossians 3:1). All of these things, and more, are accomplished by God according to His will—by His grace we are saved (Colossians 2:9-13). **Do you believe that Christ died for you?**

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

How Do We Know We are Saved?

Unfortunately, there are many people who consider themselves to be Christians, but who are not actually saved. Their reliance on church doctrine or good works demonstrates their unbelief. When asking a person how he was saved or why he considers himself to be a Christian, his response might include “I went forward in church,” “I was baptized,” “the pastor prayed for me,” “I accepted Jesus into my heart,” “I believe in Jesus,” “I follow the teachings of Jesus,” “I do more good than bad,” or maybe even “because I’m an American.” None of these things save a person from the consequences of his sins. We must *believe*, from our heart, the gospel of salvation. At the moment we do that, we are actually accepted in Christ and received by Him (Romans 15:7; Ephesians 1:6 [KJV]).

So, how can we be certain we are saved? First and foremost, by faith we must take God’s word for it. God is true to His word, so if He says that we are saved if we believe the gospel of salvation, then we are saved. Also, believing that Christ died for us changes us from being an enemy of God (because of our natural sinful condition) to a child of God. Therefore, we are now at peace with God (Romans 5:1-11). We are told that in our natural sinful condition we cannot understand the things of God or please Him (I Corinthians 2:14; Romans 8:6-8). As believers in Christ, however, we can begin to understand the things of God because we now have the Holy Spirit in us (I Corinthians 2:12-13; Ephesians 1:15-19). Furthermore, by the working of God, the Holy Spirit bears witness with our own spirit that we are the children of God.

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. (Romans 8:14-17)

Knowing these things, and putting our trust in God’s faithfulness, should bring the inner assurance and peace that we are truly in Christ and children of God (Philippians 4:6-9; Romans 8:26-28). **Do you know with certainty that you are saved?**

Can We Lose Our Salvation?

As we have seen, salvation is a gift of God bestowed on us when we believe from the heart that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. What if, after believing the gospel, we mess up our lives? Will God take the gift of salvation back? Can we lose our salvation?

First of all, all believers will continue to sin after they are saved. Upon believing the gospel of salvation, we receive a new spirit—the Holy Spirit of God (Romans 8:9-11; I Corinthians 2:12-13). However, by God’s design we do not lose our natural sinful spirit, which is our old self. Consequently, we have two natures within ourselves that battle each other (Romans 7:14-25). Can we become so sinful, or do something so bad that God rejects us? No, because all of our sins have been forgiven through Christ’s work on the cross, and God has reconciled us to Himself (Romans 3:23-26; 5:8-11). Each believer is God’s chosen possession, and nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:31-39). Because we are in Christ, there is no condemnation for subsequent sins that we commit (Romans 8:1). We are actually sealed as God’s own possession by His Holy Spirit, which is a seal that cannot be broken. Brethren, rest assured that we cannot lose our salvation.

In Him [Christ], you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Although our sins are forgiven (past, present, and future), we should not prove how gracious God is by continuing to live sinful lives (Romans 6:1-2). Instead, we are to live as if we are children of God, walking worthy of our salvation (Romans 6:12-13; 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:1-3; Colossians 1:9-12). We are to put off (not follow or adhere to) our old self and put on Christ, which is our new self (Romans 13:12-14; Ephesians 4:20-24). The more we set our minds on spiritual things, the less likely we are to revert to our old sinful habits (Colossians 3:1-17).

Therefore I [Paul], the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling [salvation] with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

Dick Johnson
April 2020