

Acts #24
Who Is A Christian?
Acts 11:19-26

John Bisagno former Pastor of Houston's First Baptist Church tells the story of his coming there to candidate for the position of pastor many years ago. He said that as he entered the auditorium it was dimly lit, with just a few people huddled together. **They were singing an old funeral type song that was depressing.**

Later that day he took a walk in downtown Houston and came upon a jewelry store. It was some sort of grand opening and there were bright lights and a greeter at the door to welcome you in with a smile. **Inside there was a celebration going on. There were refreshments and people having a good time talking and laughing with each other.** They welcomed him and offered him some punch.

He said that after attending both the church and the jewelry store, if the jewelry store had offered an invitation, he would have joined the jewelry store!

I am convinced that today's church should involve dynamic worship, dynamic fellowship, dynamic opportunities to understand and apply the Word, dynamic opportunities to serve the Kingdom of God both locally and globally, and dynamic principles for living out the faith visibly and deliberately in the context of daily living.

This week we are going to continue in our study as we come to the place in the Bible where we see the first Christians. **Look at me at Acts 11:19-26,** "Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spoke unto the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord. Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church, which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a righteous man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith: and many people were added unto the Lord. Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that for a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught many people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."

There is a story that a little girl listening attentively, trying to comprehend the pastor's words about the necessity of one becoming a Christian. She leaned over to her mother and asked, "Mommy, what is a Christian?" And the mother whispered, "A Christian is someone who has given their life to Jesus Christ, to follow Him day by day, to try to live like Jesus wants them to live. That's a Christian."

The child pondered a few moments and said, "Mommy, do we know any Christians?" And that is a good question! So often the image is blurred. And I wonder, do we really know any real Christians!

It is certainly confusing to an outsider, who is not a Christian, who does not have a church background. They see all kinds of folks at a football game. There is nothing to indicate one is a Christian and that another is not. At the office Christmas party, there is no clear division between Christians and non-Christians. In the world in which we live and work every day, there are conflicts of personality, resentment, anger, spreading of gossip, and do we find that there is any real difference between those who say they have committed their life to Jesus Christ, who claim to be Christians, and those who claim to have had no such experience or commitment in life at all?

The real truth of the matter is simply this - sometimes the children of the world are better citizens than the children of God. Sometimes the children of the world have more compassion for the poor than the children of God. Sometimes the lost person seems to be more forgiving, kinder, sweeter in their dispositions; more mature in their character development, and even more wholesome in their outlook than those that call themselves Christians.

To be honest, there is even confusion in the church. By the means of television and radio, today we pick up many mistaken ideas, and all kinds of doctrinal conflicts. The Methodists seem to be against the Baptists, and the Baptists seem to be against the Catholics, and the Assemblies of God seem to be against the Unitarians, and the Churches of Christ are telling us that all of us are going to hell. How can a lost world understand what is right and what is wrong?

Tonight, as we look at the subject of "Who is a Christian?" I want you to do two things for me. (1) I want you to hang your religious hang-ups outside for just a little while, and (2) I want you to put on your thinking caps. I want you to examine your hearts according to the Word of God.

The truth of the matter, the name "Christian" was not given to the people as a compliment, but as a slander. It literally means, "Little Christ."

The first question that we must settle is *where to start*. This is part of the problem. **People start in many different places.**

1. **Some start with the *church*.** A Christian is to be defined in terms of the particular church and doctrine that they believe. **This has been a traditional starting point down through the years.**

Please do not misunderstand what I am saying, for the church is central in the Christian faith. It is the Body of Christ. **But we cannot make church membership and salvation synonymous.** They are not the same.

The church is an institution of saved people, but it is not a saving institution in itself! We must be committed to the church as Christians, but committing ourselves to the church does not make us a Christian.

2. **Some start with some rite or *ritual* of the church.** In talking to a young woman, I asked her if she was a Christian, and this was her answer, “I was born in a Christian home, and when I was a baby, I was baptized a Christian.” She was simply saying that the rite of baptism made her a Christian. **But this is in error.**

I must tell you that there are rites and rituals attached to the church that have Christian symbolism and meaning. But the rite of baptism, or the Lord’s Supper, does not make one a Christian.

3. **Some start with *deeds*.** These people feel that one must simply live by the Golden Rule, or live by the Sermon on the Mount.

Let me tell you that I feel that doing good is important and that the Christian life should bear fruit. But Christian conduct does not make you a Christian. **It is important that one seeks to pattern his life after that of Jesus, but it is not enough to say, “I give to charity,” or “I am doing as good as I can under the circumstance.”**

Jesus is more than just an *example*. He is more than just a great ***reformer***. **He is more than a great ethical *teacher*.** Christianity is more than a system of ethics, even though it is the most superior system the world has ever known.

4. **Some start with a belief or a *doctrine*.** There are the kind of people that tell you that a Christian is one who believes thus and so. **We formulate our own test of orthodoxy.** **And we draw the conclusion that a Christian is a person that believes in the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming of Christ, the inerrancy of the Scriptures, etc.** And then we say, “If a person does not believe that things they are not a Christian.” And we exclude anyone who does not accept these doctrinal statements of the Christian faith.

Now before you get too upset, put on your thinking cap. I believe in the Virgin Birth, but I did not get saved because I believed in the Virgin Birth. I believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, but I did not get saved because I believed in the Second Coming. I believe that the Bible is the inerrant, infallible Word of God, but I did not get saved, because I believed that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God.

I received Jesus Christ into my heart as my personal Savior when I was nine years old. I did not understand many things that I later came to understand and believe. About the only thing that I knew for sure that I was lost and needed to be saved. I knew that I asked Christ into my heart, and praise God in He came!

Now, to say that I believed in the Virgin Birth is not true. I didn't even know that was such a thing as a virgin. I had not the slightest understanding of the Second Coming of Christ. And I just knew the Bible was the Bible.

Let me tell you about the Christian life, you cannot start with a creed, or doctrine, and say, "If you believe this, then you can be saved. If you don't believe this you can't be saved." **But the reverse is true!** You start experientially with Jesus Christ and go from there!

In other words, there must be a fixed point if we are to find the answer about who is a Christian.

A Christian is one who has found a new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus said this in John 10:10, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Romans 6:23 tells us, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

A Christian is one who has new relationships because of Jesus Christ. Romans 8:14-17 says, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but you have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God; and if children, then heirs – heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ – if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together."

But the bottom line is this – a Christian is someone who has been saved by the grace of God and is being so conformed to the image of Christ, that we have taken on His character, His attitude, His passion, and His desire to see those who are lost saved! When that happens people will look at us and say, "There goes someone who is acting like Christ."

If you have never been saved, why not come tonight?