

WHAT IS A BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN?

by

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There are many matters concerning which total ignorance and complete indifference are neither tragic nor fatal. I believe many of you are probably totally ignorant of Einstein's theory of relativity, and if you were pressed to explain it to someone you would really be in difficulty. Not only are you ignorant of Einstein's theory of relativity, you are probably quite indifferent, and that ignorance and indifference is neither fatal nor tragic. I am sure there are few of us who can explain all the processes by which a brown cow eats green grass and gives white milk. It does not keep you from enjoying the milk. But there are some things concerning which ignorance and indifference are both tragic and fatal, and one such thing is the Bible's answer to the question I am about to set before you.

"What is a biblical Christian?" In other words, when does a man or woman, a boy or girl, have the right to take to himself or herself the name Christian, according to the Scriptures?

We do not want to make the assumption lightly that you are true Christians. I want to set before you four strands of the Bible's answer to that question.

1. ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE, A CHRISTIAN IS A PERSON WHO HAS FACED REALISTICALLY THE PROBLEM OF HIS OWN PERSONAL SIN.

Now one of the many unique things about the Christian faith is this: Unlike most of the religions of the world, Christianity is essentially and fundamentally a sinner's religion. When the angel announced to Joseph the approaching birth of Jesus Christ, he did so in these words: *"Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins"* [Matt. 1:21]. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:15, *"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."* He came into the world to save *sinners*. The Lord Jesus Christ himself says in Luke 5:31-32, *"Those who are healthy do not need a doctor, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* And the Christian is one who has faced realistically this problem of his own personal sin.

When we turn to the Scripture and seek to take in the whole of its teaching on the subject of sin, right down to its irreducible minimum, we find that the Scripture tells us that each one of us has a two-fold personal problem in relation to sin. On the one hand we have the problem of a bad record, and on the other the problem of a bad heart. If we start in Genesis 3 and read that tragic account of man's rebellion against God and his fall into sin, then trace the biblical doctrine of sin all the way through the Old Testament and on into the New right through to the Book of Revelation, we shall see that it is not over-simplification to say that everything that the Bible teaches about the doctrine of sin can be reduced to those two fundamental categories--the problem of a bad record and the problem of a bad heart.

What do I mean by "the problem of a bad record"? I am using that terminology to describe what

the Scripture sets before us as the doctrine of human guilt because of sin. The Scripture tells us plainly that we obtained a bad record long before we had any personal existence here upon the earth: *"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned"* [Rom. 5:12]. When did the "all" sin? We all sinned in Adam. He was appointed by God to represent all of the human race, and when he sinned we sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression. That is why the apostle writes in 1 Corinthians 15:22, *"As in Adam all die."* We passed our age of accountability in the Garden of Eden; and from the moment Adam sinned, we were charged with guilt. We fell in him in his first transgression, and we are part of the race that is under condemnation.

Furthermore, the Scripture says that after we come into being at our own conception and subsequent birth, additional guilt accrues to us for our own personal individual transgressions. The Word of God teaches that there is not a just man upon the face of the earth who does good and does not sin [Eccles. 7:20], and every single sin incurs additional guilt. Our record in heaven is a marred record. Almighty God measures the totality of our human experience from the moment of our birth by a standard which is absolutely inflexible. It is a standard that touches not only our external deeds but also our thoughts and the very motions and intentions of our heart, so much so that the Lord Jesus said that the stirring of unjust anger is the very essence of murder, the look with intention to lust is adultery. And God is keeping "a detailed record". That record is among "the books" which will be opened in the day of judgment [Rev. 20:12]. And there in those books is recorded every thought, every motive, every intention, every deed, every dimension of human experience that is contrary to the standard of God's holy law, either failing to measure up to its standard or transgressing it. We have the problem of a bad record, a record in which we are charged with guilt--real guilt for real sin committed against the true and the living God. That is why the Scripture tells us that the entire human race stands guilty before Almighty God [Rom. 3:19].

Has the problem of your own bad record ever become a burning, pressing personal concern to you? Have you faced the truth that Almighty God judged you guilty when our first father sinned and holds you guilty for every single word you have spoken contrary to perfect holiness, justice, purity, and righteousness? He knows every object you have touched and taken contrary to the sanctity of property. He knows every word spoken contrary to perfect absolute truth. Has this ever broken in upon you so that you awakened to the fact that Almighty God has every right to summon you into his presence, and to require you to give an account of every single deed contrary to His law which has brought guilt upon your soul?

Certainly we have the problem of a bad record; but we have an additional problem--the problem of a bad heart. We are not only pronounced guilty in the court of heaven for what we have done. The Scripture teaches that the problem of our sin is one that arises not only from what we have done but from what *we are*. When Adam sinned, he not only became guilty before God but defiled and polluted in his own nature. The Scripture describes it in Jeremiah 17:9: *"The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?"* Jesus describes it in Mark 7:21: *"From within, out of the heart of man, proceed..."* and then He names all the various sins that can be seen in any newspaper on any day--blasphemies, pride, adulteries, murder. Jesus said that these things rise out of this artesian well of pollution, the human heart. Notice carefully that he did not say, "For from without, by the pressure of society and its negative influences, come forth murder and adultery and pride and thievery." That is what our so-called sociological experts tell us. It is "the condition of society" that produces crime and rebellion. Jesus says it is the condition of the human heart. For from *within*, out of the heart, proceed

these things--lies, selfishness, self-centeredness, total preoccupation with my feelings and my desires and my plans and my perspectives.

We have hearts that the Scripture describes as "desperately wicked"--the fountain of all forms of iniquity. To change the biblical imagery, Romans 8:7 reads, "*The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be.*" Paul says that the carnal mind (that is, the mind that has never been regenerated by God) is not reflective of *some* enmity; he calls it enmity *itself*. "*The carnal mind is enmity against God.*" The disposition of every human heart by nature can be visually pictured as a clenched fist raised against the living God. This is the inward problem of a bad heart--a heart that loves sin, a heart that is the fountain of sin, a heart that is at enmity with God. And such is the problem that every one of us has by nature.

Has the problem of your bad heart ever become a pressing personal concern to you? I am not asking whether you believe in human sinfulness in theory. Oh, there is such a thing as a sinful nature and a sinful heart. My question is, "Has *your* bad record and *your* bad heart ever become a matter of deep, inward, personal, pressing concern to you? Have you known anything of real, personal, inward consciousness of the awfulness of your guilt in the present of a holy God?--the horribleness of a heart that is "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked"?"

A Biblical Christian is a person who has in all seriousness taken to heart his own personal problem of sin.

Now the degree to which we may feel the awful weight of sin differs from one person to another. The length of time over which a person is brought to the consciousness of his bad record and his bad heart differs. There are many variables, but Jesus Christ as the Great Physician never brought his healing virtue to any who did not know themselves to be sinners. He said, "*I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*" [Matt. 9:13]. Are you a Biblical Christian, one who has taken seriously your personal problem of sin?

2. A BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN IS ONE WHO HAS SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED THE ONE DIVINE REMEDY FOR SIN.

In the Bible we are told again and again that Almighty God has taken the initiative in doing something for man the sinner. The verses some of us learned in our infancy underscore divine initiative in providing a remedy for sinful man: "*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...*" "*Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*" "*But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us...*" [John 3:16; 1 John 4:10; Eph. 2:4]. You see, the unique feature of the Christian faith is that it is not a kind of religious self-help where you patch yourself up with the aid of God. Just as surely as it is a unique tenet of the Christian faith that Christ is a Savior for sinners, so it is also a unique tenet of the Christian faith that all of our true help comes down from above and meets us where we are. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. God in mercy breaks in upon the human situation and does something which we could never do for ourselves. Now when we turn to the Scriptures we find that that divine remedy has at least three simple but profoundly wonderful focal points:

(a) *First of all, that divine remedy is bound up in a Person.* Anyone who begins to take seriously the divine remedy for human sin will notice in the Scriptures that the remedy is not in

a set of ideas, as though it were just another philosophy. Nor is it found in an institution. It is bound up in a *Person*: "*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*" "*Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save...*" He himself said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father but by me*" [John 14:6]. That one divine remedy is bound up in a *Person*, and that *Person* is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ--the eternal Word who became man, uniting to his Godhead a true human nature. Here is God's provision for man with his bad record and his bad heart--a Savior who is both God *and* man, the two natures joined in the one *Person* forever. And your personal problem of sin, and mine, if it is ever to be remedied in a biblical way, will be remedied only as we have personal dealings with that *Person*. Such is the unique strand of the Christian faith--the sinner in all his need united to the Savior in all the plenitude of his grace; the sinner in his naked need and the Savior in his almighty power brought directly together in the Gospel. That is the glory of the Gospel!

(b) *It is centered in the cross upon which that Person died.* A cross that leads to an empty tomb, yes! And a cross preceded by a life of perfect obedience, yes! And when we turn to the Scriptures we find that the divine remedy in a unique way is *centered* in the cross of Jesus Christ. When he is formally announced by John the Baptist, John points to him and says, "*Behold the Lamb of God who is bearing away the sin of the world*" [John 1:29]. Jesus himself said, "*I did not come to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give my life a ransom for many*" [Matt. 20:28]; and true preaching of the Gospel is so much centered in the cross that Paul says it is the word, or the message of the cross. The preaching of the cross is "*to them who are perishing foolishness, but unto us who are being saved it is the power of God*" [1 Cor. 1:18]. And this same apostle went on to say that when he came to Corinth--that bastion of intellectualism and pagan Greek philosophy with its set patterns of rhetorical expertise--"*I came among you determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him as crucified*" [1 Cor. 2:2].

You see, God's gracious remedy for sin is not only bound up in a *Person*, it is centered in the cross of that *Person*. It is not the cross as an abstract idea or as a religious symbol, but the cross in terms of what God declares it to mean. The cross was the place where God heaped upon his Son, by imputation, the sins of his people. On that cross there was substitutionary curse-bearing. In the language of Galatians 3:13: "*God made him to be a curse for us.*" In 2 Corinthians 5:21: "*God made him to be sin for us*"--Jesus, the one who knew no sin. It is not the cross as some nebulous, indefinable symbol of self-giving love. It is the cross as the monumental display of how God can be just and still pardon guilty sinners; the cross where God, having imputed the sins of his people to Christ, pronounces judgment upon his Son as the representative of his people. There on the cross God pours out the vials of his wrath, unmixed with mercy, until his Son cries out, "*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? why have you forsaken me?*" [Psa. 22:1; Matt. 27:46]. There in the visible world at Calvary, God, as it were, was demonstrating what was happening in the invisible spiritual world. He shrouds the heavens in total darkness to let all mankind know that he is plunging his Son into the outer darkness of the hell which your sins and my sins deserved. Jesus hangs on the cross in the place of an undefended guilty criminal. He is in the posture of one for whom society has but one option: "*Away with him*", "*Crucify him*", "*Hand him over to death*", and God does not intervene. There, in the theater of what men can see, God is demonstrating what he is doing in the realm where we cannot see. He is treating his Son as a criminal. He is causing him to feel in the depths of his own soul all of the fury of the wrath that should have been vented upon us.

(c) *A remedy that is adequate for and offered to all without discrimination.* Before we have any felt consciousness of our sin, about the easiest thing in the world is to think that God

can forgive sinners. But when you and I begin to have any idea at all of what sin is (we, little worms of the dust, creatures whose very life and breath is held in the hands of the God in whom "we live and move and have our being"), when we begin to take seriously that we have dared to defy Almighty God who holds our breath in his hands (the God who, when angels rebelled against him did not wait to show mercy but consigned them to everlasting chains of darkness with no way of mercy ever planned or revealed to them), *then* our thoughts are changed. Once we take seriously the truth that it is this holy God who sees the effusions of the foul, corrupt human hearts which are yours and mine, then we say, "O God, how can you be anything other than just? And if you give what my sins deserve, there is nothing for me but wrath and judgment! How can you forgive me and still be just? How can you be a righteous God and do anything other than consign me to everlasting punishment with those angels that rebelled?" When you begin to take your sin seriously, forgiveness becomes the most knotty problem with which your mind has ever wrestled. It is then that we need to know that God has provided in a Person, and that Person *crucified*, a remedy that is adequate for and offered to all without discrimination. When God begins to make us feel the reality of our sin, if there were any conditions placed on the availability of Christ we would say, "Surely I don't meet the conditions, surely I don't qualify." But the wonder of God's provision is that it comes in these unfettered terms: "*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. He who has no money, come! Buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you labor for that which does not satisfy?*" [Isa. 55:1-2]. "*Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. He who comes to me I will in no wise cast out*" [Matt. 11:28; John 6:37].

Oh, the beauty of the unfettered offers of mercy in Jesus Christ! We do not need to have God step out of heaven and tell us that we, by name, are warranted to come. We have the unfettered offers of mercy in the words of his own Son: "*Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*"

3. A BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN IS ONE WHO HAS WHOLEHEARTEDLY COMPLIED WITH THE DIVINE TERMS FOR APPROPRIATING THE DIVINE PROVISION. The divine terms are two: repent and believe. That is what Jesus preached. "*At that time Jesus came preaching, Repent and believe the gospel*" [Mark 1:15,16]. It is what Paul preached. He says, "*I testified to Jews and Greeks wherever I went, repentance toward God, faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*" [Acts 20:21]. This is the Gospel that Jesus told his own to preach [Luke 24:45,46]. He opened their minds to understand the Scripture and told them it was necessary for Christ to die and to be raised again from the dead the third day, that repentance unto remission of sins should be preached in his name among all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

What are the divine terms for obtaining the divine provision? We must *repent*, we must *believe*. Now because we have to speak in terms of one word following another, or preceding another, we must not think that this repentance is ever divorced from faith or that this faith is ever divorced from repentance. True faith is permeated with repentance; true repentance is permeated with faith. They inter-penetrate one another so that whenever there is a true appropriation of the divine provision, there you will find a believing penitent and a penitent believer. The one will never be divorced from the other.

What is repentance? The definition of the *Shorter Catechism* is an excellent one: "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of (that is, a laying hold of) the mercy of God in Christ, does with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience."

Repentance is the prodigal down in the far country coming to his senses. He left his father's home because he could not stand his father's government. Everything about his father's will and ways irritated him. It was a constant block to following the desires of his own foul, wretched, sin-loving heart. The day came when he said he wanted what was due to him. He went into the far country. When he left he had a notion of his father, of his government, and of his ways which was entirely negative; but the Scripture tells us in Luke 15 that down in the far country he came to himself: *"And when he came to himself he said, I will arise and go to my father and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants."* And then the Scripture says he did not sit there and think about it and write poetry about it and send telegrams home to his dad. It says, *"He rose up and came to his father."* He left all those companions who were his friends in sin. He loathed and abominated and abhorred everything that belonged to that life style. He turned his back on it. And what was it that drew him home? It was the confidence that there was a gracious father with a large heart and with the righteous rule for his happy, loving home. And he said, *"I will arise and go to my father."* He did not send a telegram saying, Dad, things are getting rough down here. My conscience is giving me fits at night. Won't you send me some money to help me out and come and pay me a visit and make me feel good?" Not at all! He did not need just to feel good; he needed to become good. And he left the far country.

It is a beautiful stroke in our Lord's picture when he says, *"While he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and threw his arms around him and kissed him."* The prodigal did not come strutting up to his father talking about making a decision to come home. There is a notion that people can come strutting into inquiry rooms and pray their little prayer and so do God a favor by making their decision. This has no more to do with conversion than "my name is Abraham Lincoln." True repentance involves recognizing that I have sinned against the God of heaven, who is great and gracious, holy and loving, and that I am not worthy to be called his son. And yet, when I am prepared to leave my sin, to turn my back upon it and to come back haltingly, wondering if indeed there can be mercy for me, *then--wonder of wonders!--the Father meets me and throws the arms of reconciling love and mercy about me.* I say it not in a sentimental way, but in all truth. He smothers repenting sinners in forgiving and redemptive love.

But note, the father did not throw his arms around the prodigal when he was still in the hog pens and in the arms of harlots. Do I speak to some whose hearts are wedded to the world, who love the world's ways? Perhaps in your personal life, or in relationship to your parents, or in your social life where you take so lightly the sanctity of the body, you show what you are. Maybe some of you are involved in fornication, in heavy petting, in looking at the kind of stuff on television and in the cinema that feeds your lust, and yet you name the name of Christ. You live in the hog pens and then go to a house of God on Sunday. Shame on you! Leave your hog pens, your haunts of sin. Leave your patterns and practices of fleshly and carnal indulgence. Repentance is being sorry enough to *quit* your sin. You will never know the forgiving mercy of God while you are still wedded to your sins.

Repentance is the soul's divorce from sin, but it will always be joined to faith. What is faith? Faith is the casting of the soul upon Christ as he is offered to us in the Gospel. **Forsaking All I Take Him.** That is faith! *"As many as received him, to them gave he the right to become the sons of God, even to them that believe in his name"* [John 1:12]. Faith is likened to *drinking* of Christ. In my soul-thirst I drink of him. Faith is likened to *looking* to Christ. Faith is likened to

following Christ, fleeing to Christ. The Bible uses many analogies, and the sum of all of them is this: that in the nakedness of my need I cast myself upon the Savior, trusting him to be to me all that he has promised to be to needy sinners.

Faith brings nothing to Christ but an empty hand by which it takes Christ and all that is in him. And what is in him? Full pardon for all my sins! His perfect obedience is put to my account. His death is counted as mine. And the gift of the Spirit is in him. Adoption, sanctification, and ultimately glorification, are all in him. And faith, in taking Christ, receives all that is in him. *"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, whom God has made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption"* [1 Cor. 1:30].

What is a biblical Christian? A biblical Christian is a person who has wholeheartedly complied with the divine terms for obtaining the divine provision for sin. Those terms are repentance and faith. I like to think of them as the hinge on which the door of salvation turns. The hinge has two plates--one that is screwed to the door and the other screwed to the doorjamb. They are held together by a pin, and on that hinge the door turns. Christ is that door, but none enter through him who do not repent and believe; and there is no true hinge made up only of repentance. A repentance that is not joined to faith is a legal repentance. It terminates on yourself and on your sin.

A professed faith that is not joined to repentance is a spurious faith, for faith is faith in Christ to save me, not *in*, but *from* my sin. Repentance and faith are inseparable, and except you repent you will perish. He that believes not shall be damned.

4. A BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN IS A PERSON WHO MANIFESTS IN HIS LIFE THAT HIS CLAIMS TO REPENTANCE AND FAITH ARE REAL. Paul said that he preached that men should repent and turn to God and do works meet for (answering to, consistent with) repentance [Acts 26:20]. *"By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God before ordained that we should walk in them"* [Eph. 2:8-10]. Paul says in Galatians chapter 5 that faith works by love. Wherever there is true faith in Christ there will always be implanted genuine love to Christ, and where there is love to Christ there will be obedience to Christ. True faith always works by love, and what does it work? A life of obedience! *"He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. He who loves me not keeps not my sayings"* [John 14:21-24]. We are not saved by loving Christ; we are saved by trusting Christ. But a trust that produces no love is not real. True faith works by love, and that which love works is not the ability to sit out on a beautiful starlit night writing poetry about how exciting it is to be a Christian. It works by causing you to go back into that home and to obey your father and your mother as the Bible tells you to do, or back to that university campus to take a stand for truth and righteousness against all the pressure of your peers. True faith makes you willing and prepared to be counted a fool and crazy, willing to be considered anachronistic because you believe that there are eternal, unchangeable, moral, and ethical standards. You are willing to believe in the sanctity of human life and to take your stand against premarital sex and the murdering of babies in mothers' wombs. For Jesus said, *"Whoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels"* [Mark 8:38].

What is a Biblical Christian? Not merely one who says, "Oh, yes, I know I am a sinner with a bad record and a bad heart. I know that God's provision for sinners is in Christ and in his cross,

adequate, freely offered to all, and I know it comes to all who repent and believe." That is not enough. Do you profess to repent and believe? Then can you make that profession stick, not by a life of perfection but by a life of purposeful obedience to Jesus Christ? *"Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven,"* Jesus said, *"but he who is doing the will of my Father who is in heaven"* [Matt. 7:21]. In Hebrews 5:8 we read, *"He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him."* And in 1 John 2:4, *"He who says I know him and keeps not his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him."*

Can you make your claim to be a Christian stick from the Bible? Does your life manifest the fruits of repentance and faith? Do you possess a life of attachment to Christ, of obedience to Christ, and confession of Christ? Is your behavior marked by adherence to the ways of Christ? Not perfectly, No! Every day you must pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who trespass against us." But you can also say, "For me to live is Christ", or

*Jesus I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow thee.*

The world behind me, the cross before me, I have decided to follow Jesus. That is what a true Christian is. How many of us are real Christians? I leave you to answer in the deep chambers of your own mind and heart. But remember, answer with an answer that you will be prepared to live with for eternity. Be content with no answer but that which will find you comfortable in death and safe in the day of judgment.