



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Who Is A Christian?

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The question, “who is a Christian?” continues to trouble many. On the one hand, there are some who display a party spirit which insists that only those who are members of the church as they have experienced it can possibly be Christians. Apparently, they cannot fathom the notion that anyone could discover and respond to that part of God’s truth which makes a person part of his church without also immediately learning other things which should characterize its faith and practice. On the other hand are those who would accept everyone who professes belief in Jesus, without regard to whether that person has met the stipulations set forth in Scripture.

Commitment to the principle of “speaking where the Bible speaks,” endorsed in both testaments (cf. Deuteronomy 12:32; 1 Peter 4:11), demands that we reject both extremes. In harmony with Christ’s law of faith (cf. Romans 3:28; Galatians 6:2), we must let God, and God alone, have the final say for who is and is not a part of his church. This does not require us to devalue the importance of either doctrine or sincerity. Neither does it mean that we think the maintenance of “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” is easy (Ephesians 4:3).

To maintain the proper balance between the extremes mentioned above, we must understand the idea of the covenant. Christians are not obligated to the Mosaic covenant, but are expected to keep the new covenant, ratified through Christ (Hebrews 8:7-13; 10:9-10). Since, by definition, a covenant involves stipulations for entering and sustaining the relationship governed by the agreement, we are not surprised to find that there are conditions for becoming a Christian.

One of the most important features of biblical covenants is the balance they maintain between grace and obedience. God was clear that the Israelites were his people only because he had chosen them, not because they had done anything which *required* him to accept them (Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:6-8). In the same way today, if we are saved, it is because God in his grace chose to save us (Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 3:5). This does not rule out the need for obedience, for only those who show their willingness to enter the covenant agreement by their compliance with God’s expectations can be members of his covenant community.

According to the New Testament, the conditions God requires for entrance into his covenant community are these: one must believe and be willing to acknowledge that he believes

that Jesus of Nazareth lived, died, and was raised from the dead, thus being shown to be the Son of God and Savior (John 8:24; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9-10); he must renounce any way except the way of Jesus, submitting to God in the admission that he cannot remove the sin which separates him from God any other way (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 4:10-12; 17:30-31); and he must willingly submit to an imitation of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection by being immersed in water, an observance which effects his forgiveness, grants him newness of life, and places him in God's covenant community (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-27; 1 Peter 3:21).

Any person who submits to God's will in this manner is a Christian. God said so. It is to assume the prerogatives of God to present any other plan for being saved. Both those who would allow less and those who require more presumptuously set aside God's authority in favor of their own. The one says God went too far, while the other declares he did not go far enough.

To be sure, it is possible for someone to have done these things and still need to be taught more. In some cases, the nature of the things a person needs to be taught may mean that other believers cannot conscientiously join with him in some actions (e.g., a man whose conscience will not allow him to engage in the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with the accompaniment of a mechanical musical instrument could not in good conscience join with a group of disciples who are so engaged, no matter how sincere they might be). But the fact that a believer cannot engage in a certain practice with another does not, in and of itself, mean that one is and the other is not a Christian. As we have seen, that issue is decided on other grounds entirely.

February 2001
Posted December 2020
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