

What is a Christian anyway?

A practical guide to being a Christian

by

Tony Higon

Introduction

What is a Christian according to popular opinion in the UK?

Many British people regard themselves as Christian. If they get married, many still want the ceremony to be in church. They have their children christened. Christmas carol services are popular, even the midnight Holy Communion on Christmas Eve. Then when a loved one dies they tend to want the vicar to give them a good send-off.

But there is more to Christianity than this. There are, of course, regular churchgoers. They are thought to be people who like religion: singing hymns, saying prayers, snoozing through the vicar's sermon and, of course, putting something in the collection. That doesn't make them any better than anyone else. In fact a few of them might even be hypocritical.

For many people, the thought of going to church is threatening (all that singing, and when do you stand up, and sit down?). It is also boring: solemn, formal, irrelevant. OK for those who haven't got a life: elderly people and children in Sunday School.

In this booklet Tony Higton shows that real Christianity is deeply meaningful and satisfying. It is life-transforming, whether life is easy or difficult. It inspires peace, joy and hope. It provides a supernatural power to live as we ought.

And it is all so simple. That's why some people miss it and go for a merely outward show of Christianity, or avoid it altogether.

Under God, this booklet could change your whole life – for the better.

The Christian Good News

Christianity is based on the fact that:

God is love: This is stated by St John (1 John 4:8, 16). God says: "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3). God is so loving that he is love. He is the source of all true love. He loves you infinitely and eternally. Therefore he wants you to be in a close relationship with him, as any good father wants his child to be close to him.

But God is also our Judge: "People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Heb 9:27)

God is absolutely perfect and holy, and one day every individual will stand before him.

We are all sinners: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom 3:23)

We may think we are not bad people. But if we only had one bad thought/word/deed per day and live until we are 70 that is 25,567 sins!

Jesus bore the punishment for our sins: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross." (1 Peter 2:24)

God has a dilemma: He loves us, so he wants to welcome us to be with him now and for ever. But he can't abide our imperfections any more than light can tolerate darkness. To solve this dilemma, God became man – in the person of Jesus - so that he could die (i.e. suffer the death penalty) for our sins. (God can't die. That's why he became man).

Jesus is both God and man: "Jesus ... Who, being in very

nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8)

So by faith in him we can receive eternal life: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 6:23).

It is as if we are convicted of a serious crime in court and fined very heavily, then the judge comes down and pays our fine. However, it wasn't a fine but the death penalty. God took upon himself the punishment for our sin, showing his infinite love for us.

But we can only receive eternal life because:

Jesus rose from the dead. Other people have been resuscitated or even raised from death to this life. But Jesus was the first person to be raised from death to eternal life. So if we put our trust in him, we too receive everlasting life. Read on to find out more about what is a true Christian....

A person who receives Christ

Being a Christian is not just being baptised (christened) or coming to church and taking the bread and wine in Holy Communion, important though those aspects are. It is first and foremost a growing personal relationship with Christ.

Jesus said: "He who receives me receives the one who sent me." St John writes: "To all who received him [Jesus] ... he gave the right to become children of God." But what does receiving Christ mean?

Firstly, it means recognizing him. That includes recognizing that he is very close to you, all the time, wherever you are - closer than anyone else. St John says (John 1:10): "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

Secondly, it means "believing in his name," that is, recognizing him for who he is: the eternal divine "Word" (revelation) of God and the glorious one from God. John writes (1:12-14) "To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Thirdly, it means acknowledging him openly. Jesus says (Mt 10:32-40) "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven ... he who receives me receives the one who sent me." You may not be an extrovert; you may not be an evangelist. But don't hide your light under a bushel: look for quiet, gentle ways of showing your faith.

Finally, it means receiving him in by faith giving him a hospitable welcome in your life, but (even more intimate and mysterious) “feeding on him.” Jesus said (John 6:51-54): “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

This shows how close and intimate receiving Christ is. Just as we take food into our bodies to be united with the cells of our bodies, so we take in/receive Christ. This does not only refer to taking Holy Communion and, in fact, it is possible to take Communion and not to receive Christ. The 39 Articles (official doctrine of the Church of England) state (in rather old-fashioned language) that it is only if we have faith in Jesus that we partake of the Body of Christ in Communion*

A PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus, I recognize that you are here, very close to me. I acknowledge that you are the eternal, divine Word, the glorious one from God. I now receive you and ask you to enter and dwell in my life in an intimate, mysterious way so that I might feed on you. Help me to acknowledge my faith in you with gentleness and sensitivity. Amen

“Insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the [sacrament], the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ. The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper, is Faith ... such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth ... the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ; yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing.”

A person who trusts in Christ

Some Christians tend to react against people who seem over confident – even arrogant - about “being saved” and going to heaven. They prefer what seems to be the more humble approach of hoping they’ll get to heaven. It seems more Anglican! But what does the New Testament say?

Actually, the New Testament says we can be sure we have eternal life (here and hereafter) without being arrogant or presumptuous.

Of course, if I am sure I have eternal life and will go to heaven because I think I’m good enough, I am a most arrogant and mistaken person! The New Testament says that if you sincerely trust in Christ as Saviour then you have eternal life – here and now, and for ever.

God sent his Son in love so that we may have faith in him. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

That is why Bible was written. “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31).

We cannot please God if we don’t have faith. Not having faith is like saying to God: “I don’t trust you.” “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Heb 11:6)

So the sincere believer, who trusts Christ, as the one who died for him/her to be forgiven, has eternal life. Eternal life is in Jesus, so to receive Jesus is to receive eternal life.

“Whoever believes in the Son HAS eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36). “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me HAS eternal life and will not be condemned; he HAS crossed over from death to life.” (John 5:24). “For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.” (John 6:40, 47)

Eternal life is knowing Jesus and Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (John 17:3). “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.’” (John 11:25)

Jesus makes it clear that the believer – the one who has childlike faith - will not be condemned.

To have faith in/trust Christ means: to believe he exists and is here (Heb 11:6); to believe he is the (eternal) Son of God from heaven (John 20:31); to believe he died for me (John 3:16); to believe he is the resurrection and the (eternal) life (John 11:25); to believe that receiving Christ means receiving eternal life – right now (John 3:36; 5:24; 6:40, 47) and to take the risk of stepping out in faith (John 7:17)

A PRAYER

Lord Jesus, I believe you are here and that you are the (eternal) Son of God from heaven. I believe that you died for me. I believe that you are the resurrection and the (eternal) life and that to receive you means to receive eternal life. I now take the risk of stepping out in faith to trust you with my life and accept you as my Lord. Amen.

A person re-born in Christ

Sadly, some people, even Christians, refer sneeringly to “Born again Christians.” Actually, according to Scripture, there is no such thing as a Christian who is not born again (or “born from above”)! A person who is not born again is not a Christian. Of course, there are Christians who call themselves “born again”, meaning they feel superior to other Christians who may not use that terminology. But that is simply spiritual pride – a very unpleasant sin!

In John 3:3-5 Jesus says to Nicodemus: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. "

What does being born again mean? It is referring to being born into God’s family and includes:

1. Receiving the supernatural life of Father-God (shown in Christ)

Being born again involves a supernatural change in a person who loves/receives/trusts Christ. Becoming a Christian is a supernatural event. A new Christian receives new life – eternal life (infinite in quality and eternal in duration). “Receiving Christ” is another way of describing it. Another description is “being baptized in the Holy Spirit,” which emphasizes the supernatural power available to Christians through faith. This is symbolised, but not automatically achieved, in baptism.

2. Receiving the characteristics of Father-God (shown in Christ)

Being born again means receiving the supernatural ability to manifest the character of Christ, also referred to as the fruit of the Spirit, namely: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This means that we Christians can, by faith, call upon all these divine qualities. For example, if, in our human weakness, we lack love or patience, we can call upon God to release his love and patience in us. If we really trust him this will happen.

However, this new life and its divine qualities are available to us “in Christ.” Therefore, in addition to “receiving Christ” we must “remain in Christ.” Jesus says in John 15:1, 4-5: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (Notice that God “prunes” us as “branches” in “the vine” – Jesus. That is, he can make us better Christians through experience of suffering)

How do we “remain in Christ”? By:

- Thinking of him often
- Thanking him often
- Praying to him often
- Reading his Word often
- Pleasing him always (including through repentance)

A PRAYER

Heavenly Father, work in me by your powerful Spirit so that I might fully experience the new birth and manifest the life and characteristics of Christ, the fruit of the Spirit. Help me to think of him, thank him, pray to him and read his Word so that I might live for him.

A person who loves Christ

The first and greatest commandment is to love God. Another way of putting this is that we are called to love Christ. This personal relationship with him should grow deeper all the time.

Jesus speaks of our loving him: “If anyone loves me....” (John 14:23). But how do we love Christ? Love is a total response: including mind, emotions and will.

We love Christ with our mind. Look at John 17:3: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

Love for Christ is partly based on facts. For example, remembering the facts that:

- Jesus is with me
- Jesus loves me
- Jesus died for me
- Jesus will welcome me into heaven

We can't make ourselves believe, but we can persevere in praying for faith, based on the facts in the New Testament, until the faith comes.

When we really believe these facts (and put our trust in Christ), we are accepted by God in this life and the next.

We love Christ with our emotion – affection. How is it possible to believe these facts without having your emotions stirred? So our love for Christ will include emotion. Inevitably, however, our emotions vary. We can't make

ourselves feel but we can persevere in praying for positive emotions, based on the facts in NT, until we feel love for God.

If you are a beginner, then concentrate on the mind and emotions aspects initially, but not for too long. They are the driving force and motive for what I am going to say now, namely:

We love Christ with our will.

If you believe the above facts about Christ, they will inspire emotional love for him, but all that will lead to a Christian life style. We shall (albeit imperfectly):

- Put him first in our lives (Matthew 10:37)
- Put ourselves out for him and others (sacrifice, deny ourselves) (Matthew 16: 24-26)
- Please him (John 14:23; Matthew 7:21; 12:50)
- Acknowledge him (sensitively share our personal faith with others) (Matthew 10:32-33) in word and by the way we live.

A PRAYER

Dear Father Thank you for your love. Thank you that Jesus is with me, Jesus loves me, Jesus died for me and Jesus will welcome me into heaven. I believe this with my mind and thank you from my heart. I love you Lord. Help me to love you more and to show it by seeking to put you first, before everything and everyone else, seeking to put myself out for you, seeking to please you in all I do, seeking to acknowledge you sensitively to others.

EPILOGUE

All this is impossible by ourselves, without the help of the Holy Spirit. This help is available to all who ask God for it.

If it sounds beyond you, remember it is very simple:

Ask God the Father to forgive your sins
Trust in Jesus Christ the Son
Pray for the help of the Holy Spirit to live as a Christian.

Simple enough for a child—yet deep enough for the greatest intellectual. As simple yet as deep as the love of God.

A PRAYER

Heavenly Father, because Jesus died for me, forgive all my wrong thoughts, words and deeds.

Lord Jesus, you died for me and rose again, triumphant over sin and death and hell. I trust in you alone for my eternal salvation.

Holy Spirit, fill me with your power so that I can live a life of gratitude to God.

If you need more help on the subject of this booklet, contact Tony Higton by email on tony@higton.info or by post at 17 Church View, Marham, King's Lynn, Norfolk PE33 9HW

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Tony Higton has been an Anglican Minister in Newark, Cheltenham, Essex, Jerusalem and now near King's Lynn. He and his wife produced church development strategies and resources, and have spoken at conferences around the world.



For 14 years Tony stood for biblical doctrine and morality in the General Synod and frequently witnessed on TV, radio and in the press. He has also written several books.

Later he became General Director of the Church's Ministry amongst Jewish People (CMJ), and also Rector of Christ Church, Jerusalem. In addition to evangelism, he emphasised reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. His email newsletter (tony@higton.info) informs Christians to pray about the Holy Land, taking the need, pain and fears of both sides seriously.