

What is a Christian?

As an engineer, I like numbers and facts because that's what we use to come up with that ideal solution or design. With that in mind, I thought I'd throw a few numbers at you. According to statistics, approximately 33% of the world population claims to be Christian. With a world population of about 6.4 billion people, that means there are approximately 2.1 billion Christians in the world. That's about 460 times the population of Toronto or about 1.6 times the population in China in case you wanted to know. According to statistics, it is the largest religious group in the world. Big numbers, but is this number an accurate fact?

Over the past four devotionals, I have been doing a series on who Jesus is. I've talked about the fact that Jesus claimed to be nothing less than God in human form. I talked about the fact that Jesus is Holy and cannot tolerate sin and that God is Just and must see Justice served through the punishment of sin. I talked about the resurrection and the fact that Jesus is our risen Saviour who died to redeem us and pay for the penalty of our sin. Finally, in my last devotional I talked about the fact that Jesus is the only path for salvation and the only path that doesn't lead to eternal death. It is the path of God's grace and mercy. In each of these devotionals I went through some of the evidence and logic behind each point while explaining the points themselves. My goal was to describe some of the foundational beliefs of Christianity while showing that the Christian faith is logical and isn't blind.

Today I'd like to shift gears and go in a slightly different direction. Instead of continuing on to ask who Jesus is, I'd like to answer the question of what a Christian is from a Biblical perspective. Over the years, I've heard plenty of misconceptions of what defines a Christian. Some examples are:

1. You are a Christian if your parents are Christian.
2. You are a Christian if you regularly attend church.
3. You are a Christian if you serve in a church.
4. You are a Christian if you were baptized.
5. You are a Christian if you claim to be one.

Now all of these points except the first one should be a part of the life of any genuine Christian, but the reality is that none of them can define a person as a Christian on their own or even together. For one thing, Christianity isn't genetic. It isn't passed on by your parents like your hair or eye colour. It's a personal decision that each individual must make.

So what about some of the other points I made? Why isn't a person a Christian if they attend church regularly, especially if they serve in it and spend a lot of time there? Doesn't baptism and membership in a church make a person Christian? At the very least, doesn't the fact that somebody claims to be a Christian mean that they are one?

All good questions, but the simple answer is no. Even saying you are a Christian can be empty words that anybody can claim. It can also be said genuinely but with an incorrect understanding of who God is and what a Christian actually is. The Bible makes it clear that it is all about who the object of our faith is and the core attitude and heart of the Christian. Let me give you an analogy. Let's say a man named John claimed to be a political Conservative. He officially joined the party, paid the yearly fees, and regularly attended meetings and conventions. Whenever elections rolled around, John would often talk to people about party policies because he was well versed in them. He'd also be sure to place Conservative signs on his front lawn to show everybody which party he supported. But if John ultimately went into the voting booth and consistently voted for a different party because he knew the vote was private and nobody would know, would he still legitimately be a political Conservative? Perhaps he hid his true feelings because of people's expectations of him, or it elevated his status among his peers. Whatever his motives were, his actions when it counted showed his true colours.

In the same way, a person is not automatically a Christian because they regularly attend church, give money to it, serve in it, or are even well versed in its teachings. It doesn't matter if they have a Jesus fish on their car, or wear a cross around their neck. It doesn't matter if they are a Pastor or a Priest, a Televangelist or the Head of a Christian organization. It all comes right down to their attitudes and their heart which are exposed by how they live their lives, what their thought life is like, and how they act when nobody is around. Although we as human beings may not always be able to know the heart of everybody who claims to be a Christian, God knows and can never be deceived. As **Psalm 139:1-4** says:

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. ² You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. ³ You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.

The Bible indicates that God knows everything about us ranging from what we do to what we think. He also knows who we vote for. For a Christian this is a comforting thought because it's just more evidence of how much God cares for us individually. But for one trying to conceal sin, it's either a scary thought, or just easier to dismiss it and claim that God doesn't exist at all in order to ease their conscience and do what they please. With that in mind, God will turn away many who even claimed to be Christian because their belief was not genuine. This can be seen in **Matthew 7:21-23**:

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Now just to be clear, I am not advocating the belief that a Christian can lose their salvation. The Bible is very clear that this is not the case (Romans 8:28-38). Secondly, what I am saying should not cause you to doubt your salvation as a Christian. In fact, salvation is guaranteed to all who have faith that Christ has redeemed them. Christians can be assured, even in the face of death. In fact, I'm reminded of someone who once told me her grandfather was dying of terminal cancer. When she shared this, she did it with a genuine smile because she knew how Godly he was. She reflected on the fact that he himself was excited that he would be seeing his Heavenly Father soon. I think of another case when our Pastor's father died back in June. The memorial service wasn't one of grief, but a celebration of his father's devotion to God and the joy of knowing he is with God today. This doesn't mean Christians won't experience grief when a loved one is lost, but we recognize that this grief is temporary and that true comfort comes from God Himself. Going back to my original point, I am simply saying that there are certain characteristics that all genuine Christians exhibit, and it's definitely not a Jesus fish on the back of their car.

So if the five points I mentioned earlier are not the main indicators of whether or not a person is a genuine Christian, what is? The Bible actually describes this extensively, and is especially clear in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) which describes the character of all Christians and the life they are to strive for: One that is driven to glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

In order to be a Christian, it starts first and foremost with the recognition of our own sin. It is to recognize that we all have fallen short of God's perfect demands and are subject to the punishment of not living up to the moral law God established. But it goes beyond recognition of sin; it is to also regret that sin, to mourn it and recognize our offense against God. It is to seek God's mercy and forgiveness which is readily given to all those who believe in the redeeming actions of the death and resurrection of Jesus on the cross.

But the story really doesn't end there. There are more indicators of genuine faith that come after these foundational points have already been made. For all those who have truly come to Christ, they will hunger and thirst for righteousness and have a desire to be obedient to God. They will show mercy to others because God has already shown them mercy. They will desire purity, because they recognize that is a prerequisite in order to see God and have a relationship with Him. They will be filled with the character and Spirit of God by reflecting the character of their Heavenly Father. Finally, they will remain true to God even in the midst of persecution and trial because of their faith. For those of you who are really observant, you will see that these points, even the order in which they come are in essence the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:1-12.

Genuine Christians have a desire to rid themselves of sin, and live a righteous and pure life. Their ultimate goal is to bring glory to God. That brings an obvious question to mind... so why aren't more Christians doing this? The simple answer is that Christians are imperfect human beings, no better than anybody else in this world and no less worthy of the punishment God has for anybody who has sinned. Let me put it this way: One common phrase people use to criticize Christians is the fact that Christianity is a crutch for people who can't make it on their own. Now it may be our first instinct to defend against that statement, but the truth is that statement is absolutely correct. Christianity IS a crutch for people who can't make it on their own. What most people don't recognize is that **none of us** can make it on our own. We are all spiritual cripples who have fallen short of God's demands for us. What separates a Christian from a non-Christian is that Christians recognize this fact and humble ourselves by asking God for mercy which is found through Christ alone. Yes, Christians are imperfect sinners. All genuine Christians will be the first to admit this. Fortunately, the Christian faith does not hinge on the perfect life of a Christian which doesn't exist, but on the perfect life of Christ alone.

Does this mean Christians are free to live immoral lives simply because Christ paid for our sins once and for all? The answer is a definite no. Anybody who says that is simply seeking a way of justifying their own selfish and sinful lifestyle and I would doubt that they have a genuine saving faith. It is the result of an incomplete understanding of who God is and what the Bible says on this topic. Just look at **1 John 2:3-6**:

³We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. ⁴The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. ⁵But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

No Christian can honestly claim to be without sin, but our standing before God is that of holiness because God sees us through the perfect life of His son. Although a belief in Jesus guarantees us eternal life, sin still has a negative affect on us. When we become Christians, the Bible indicates that we become adopted children of God. A relationship is established that cannot be broken... but when we sin, we lose fellowship with God. It's very much like a relationship between a father and son. If I were to get into a major argument with my dad, I don't cease being his son, but I may lose my opportunity to have a meaningful relationship with him. But the difference between a human father and our Heavenly Father is that God will *always* graciously forgive anyone who genuinely comes back to Him.

So what is a Christian? Quite simply it is a sinner who has been saved by grace through the mercy of God shown through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. As **Ephesians 2:8-9** says:

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

It ultimately is by faith in Jesus that we are saved. Even though I spent my first four devotionals talking about the evidence and logic that supports Christianity, it still requires faith. Despite the thousands of articles and books written by the world's top scholars describing the evidence for Christianity, it still boils down to faith. Without faith, we can quite easily become crippled in life. We don't need to analyze the mechanics of materials or the static force calculations when we step onto the second floor of a building to know that it will hold our weight. We don't need a doctorate in electrical engineering before we begin using electricity. In the same way, we can't expect to fully understand every aspect of God and know the answer to every mystery in the universe before we decide to believe in Him. There's nothing wrong with seeking answers and studying the evidence, but we cannot let our lack of understanding cripple us in life especially when there is so much that we do know.

After all the evidence and logic that I presented in the first four devotionals, it all boils down to faith and your decision to believe or not. The evidence is there for you to study, and the experience is there in the form of testimonies of the lives of the Christians around you. If you doubt, look at both before you reach a final conclusion. For those of you who don't know Christ, just look around and you will see the faces of many people who saw that it was well worth the effort to seek those answers. You will see the faces of those who have since then experienced the joy of knowing God in a personal way and are confident in the salvation they have in Christ. I am one of those people, and my prayer is that all of you will one day know that same joy if you haven't already.