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A Personal Analysis of the Individual Christian Today

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A PERSONAL ANALYSIS OF
THE INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN TODAY

A Thesis
Presented to
Dr. Cecil Sutley
Ouachita Baptist University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Honors Program
H491

by
Randy Maxwell
April 1971

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN TODAY?

I. COMMON QUESTIONS IN CHRISTIANITY

II. EXPLANATION OF CHRISTIANITY

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III. SOME ANSWERS FOR CHRISTIANITY

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN TODAY?

What does it mean to be a Christian?
What does it really mean?
Does it simply mean to accept some facts,
To believe that God is and that Christ is His,
Just to walk down an isle and to change for a while?
What does it really mean
If a Christian one would be?

What does it mean to be a Christian?
What does it really mean?
Oh it means much more than we've heard before
For to have in the heart is to act out the part
To receive is to give; to believe is to live.
That's what it really means
If a Christian one would be.

That's what it means to be a Christian.
That's what it really means.
For to have the joy that the Lord can bring
One must live in the love of the Lord above.
For the Christian the way must be walked every day.
That's what it really means
If a Christian one would be.¹

These are the words to be found in one of the modern Christian folk musicals crying out the problems to be found in our Christian religion. Youth are asking questions. And they want answers. So composers have written musicals such as "Purpose", "Tell It Like It Is", "Life", "Natural High" and the many others. Bob Oldenburg began the entire movement with "Good News" that caught on like lightning all over the Southern Baptist Convention. Ours is the first generation in quite some time that will not accept something

merely because someone has stated it without asking "Why". We want answers to so many of life's questions. Answers are not always available to the youth, yet the questions continue. One of these questions is suggested in the song that began this paper. What does it mean to be a Christian? A great many Christians today could not give you the answer to that questions. Yet they would not hesitate one second to tell you that they are one. Is it just walking down an isle? Is merely being baptised? Does it mean joining a Church? Can one be saved and yet not ever join any organized church? What about the love and the peace of the hippies? Is it different being a Christian in 1971 than in 100 AD? What is a Christian now?

These are very legitimate questions. If any one spends a life time professing a particular belief or religion he deserves to know what means to profess that particular religion. The day of "Jr. be quiet, accept it and don't ask questions," has passed and maybe passed forever. Thus, if this is the case we need to look at this question and try to come up with some answers.

One question needs to be answered prior to answering our main question--Is Christianity the same as it was in the time of the early Christians in the New Testament? There are many many changes from that time to the present. The Church has taken a great change and it would have to be concluded that the church is probably not the same. The persecution is not quite the same nor in the same degree. Yet Christianity, this problem of what is a Christian, is still the same, for Christianity is based on Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. With this in mind, we can now turn to the Bible our guide for all our Spiritual questions and find out the kind of a person that is called a Christian.

The term Christian is found three times in the Scriptures.

It appears first in the eleventh chapter of the book of Acts. The Bible says the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.² These were people who were promoting the Christian faith, preaching Jesus Christ, and engaging in missionary activity. They were not a static group. They were growing as a community of believers.

The second reference to the word Christian is found in Acts 26: 28. Paul the apostle appeared before King Agrippa. He was asked to make his defense. But instead the apostle gave a glorious and brilliant apology for Christianity. He calmly asserted that Jesus Christ was indeed the very Son of Almighty God. When he had finished telling of his conversion experience and of the marvelous way that Christ died for all men, he then turned to Agrippa and said, "Agrippa, I would that you and everyone here were as I am, except these bonds."³

Agrippa then responded, "Almost persuaded me to be a Christian."

Paul quickly retorted, "I wish that it were not almost, but I wish that it were altogether. I wish it were not just you, but also Festus and Bernice and everyone else here who would be exactly like I am."

A Christian then according to Acts 26 is one who has had a transforming experience with Jesus Christ, who tries to persuade others to receive Christ as Saviour, and who is willing to give a reason for the hope that is in him.

The third reference to the term is found in I Peter 4: 16. Peter was writing about the trials that believers have in this life. He said, "Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf."⁴ In the mind

of Peter, to be a Christian was to be the target of persecution. In the mind of Peter, the word Christian carried with it a stigma and a reproach from society.

In these three passages of Scripture we have clearly delineated exactly what a Christian is.

One Who Has Repented of His Sins

What is a Christian? A Christian is one who has repented of his sins. When Paul was before Agrippa, he preached to Agrippa of his need for repentance. All men need to repent, because all men have sinned. The difficulty is that sin sometimes is very appealing and pleasant to the eye and looks as if it would promote our prosperity. The Bible says the pleasures of sin last for a season. All of us constantly fall short of God's wishes for our lives because we are drawn by the appealing lure of sin. Eventually it begins to degrade, to destroy, and to draw us down to nothingness. The only way that man can ever succeed is to repent of sin. Paul said a Christian is one who has repented of sin.

Repentance is the launching pad where the soul is sent in its eternal orbit with God at the center of the arc. When our hearts are bowed as low as they can get and we truly acknowledge and forsake our sins, then God takes over and like the second stage of a rocket, he lifts us toward his Kingdom. The way up is down. Man got into difficulty when he lifted his will against God's. He gets out of trouble when he bows to the divine superiority, when he repents and says humbly, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Man's extremity then becomes God's opportunity. A Christian is one who has repented of his sin.

Believe in Jesus and Witness

What is a Christian? A Christian is one who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ with all his heart and tries to get others to do the same. Agrippa said to Paul, "Your're an accused man, but you are permitted to speak for yourself."

Paul responded, "I was on the road to Damascus. Suddenly at midday there was a blinding light that fell from heaven. I dropped to the earth, and all those that were with me. As I fell to the earth, I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.' In that moment I lifted my voice and said, 'Who art thou, Lord that I persecute?' And the answer came back, 'I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.'"

Paul continued, "Whereupon, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. And with this vision of Jesus Christ in my heart, I went forth to preach to all men that Jesus is Saviour Lord and King."

A Christian is one who believes with all his heart in Jesus and who does his best to persuade other people to become Christians. In Paul's defense of the faith he gave a threefold apology for Christianity.

First, he relied upon personal testimony. He said, "Agrippa, this happened to me. I met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, and I was transformed."

Second, Paul said, "Agrippa, this thing of which I tell you--this crucifixion and resurrection of Christ--was not done in a corner. It is a historical fact. You are a well informed man.

You are a contemporary of Jesus. You know that the record of Rome says that he died. You know the record of Rome says that the stone was rolled away from the tomb. You know that the record of Rome says he was resurrected."

History is a strong witness to the validity of Christianity. Just as there was a George Washington who was president of the United States, so there was a Jesus Christ who is the Saviour of the world.

Third, Paul appealed to prophecy. He said, "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. You know that Isaiah said that Jesus would die on the cross. You know that the first books of the Bible states that the serpent would bruise the woman's seed. You know that throughout the Old Testament there is a crimson thread that points to the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world. Read the Psalms. They speak of the suffering Saviour. Agrippa, I appeal to prophecy."

A Christian is one who believes in Christ with all his heart and seeks to lead others to trust Christ.

Mrs. Florence Gravett, who lived in Washington, D. C., was concerned for souls and decided that she would start a new Sunday School class in her church. She went to a pool hall and interrupted a game saying, "Young men, I'm going to start a Sunday School class at the Baptist Church next Sunday. I want you to come and be in my class." She then gave them some literature and departed.

The boys stood in amazement for a moment. Then one of them said, "Why don't we go to Sunday School next week? We'll give her such a difficult time that she'll never ask us back again." The others agreed.

The next Sunday seventeen hoods were in the Sunday School class. Mrs. Gravett opened the Word of God and spoke to them with such love and compassion that they could not disrupt the class. The boys kept coming back to church, and all were saved. Of those seventeen boys, four became preachers, three became ministers of education, one became the president of the Citizens National Bank,

and all the others became reputable citizens in Washington That is what one woman did with seventeen boys because she taught them about Jesus Christ.⁵

We ought to pray constantly,

"Lord, lay some soul upon my heart,
And love that soul through me;
And may I bravely do my part
To win that soul for Thee."⁶

A Changed Person

What is a Christian? A Christian is one who is a changed man or woman. When Paul gave his defense before King Agrippa, he said, "As I was going to Damascus, I had letters in my hand with authority from the chief priests so that I could chain and imprison the Christians; but on the road to Damascus there was a blinding vision. I could not disobey the heavenly vision. Ever since that day my life has been different." It was Paul's way of saying that he was a changed man.

Zacchaeus experienced the remarkable power of God. Jesus called Zacchaeus from the sycamore tree, "Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house." When Zacchaeus stood in the presence of Christ, he who was a thief became honest. He said, "... if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him four-fold."⁷ The Bible says, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."⁸

When Paul spoke to the Philippian jailer about belief in Jesus, the jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved. . . ." The same jailer who had lacerated the backs of Paul and Silas began to bathe their wounds. He now was a changed

individual.⁹

When a person is a changed individual, he has a new orientation. The Bible says that our citizenship is in heaven. The Bible says that we now are children of light. We are sons and daughters of the Kingdom.

This orientation affects us in a fivefold direction. First, we have a new orientation in so far as the world is concerned because now we are oriented toward Jesus Christ. Before conversion, a man was oriented materialistically. He was oriented toward the body and secular pursuits. After a man becomes a Christian, he is oriented toward the Lord. He is oriented spiritually.

Secondly, we have a new motivation. When a person becomes a Christian, he now has the motivation of God's will. Prior to being converted, he was motivated by selfishness.

Third, when a person becomes a Christian, he has a new direction. Before his conversion, he was going away from God. After his conversion, he goes toward God. Prior to his conversion, he was on the road to destruction. After his conversion, he is growing in grace until ultimately he reaches heaven.

Fourth, the Christian has new growth. The Bible says that once we are born into the Kingdom of God, we are to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."¹⁰ It is imperative that we teach our people how Christians grow. You do not grow as a Christian by a remarkable experience whereby you shoot from one foot to six feet. You grow as a Christian by accretion. Jesus said, "Consider the lilies how they grow"¹¹ How do the lilies grow? They grow by absorbing the material elements around them until those elements make them strong internally.

The Christian grows the same way. As we read God's word, as we pray, as we attend church, as we witness, as we seek to live for Christ, as we exercise faith, day by day, slowly, spontaneously we grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ. It requires a life time for complete spiritual growth.

Fifth, the Christian has a new social concern. Before conversion, we tended to our own business. After conversion, we tend to the business of God. That involves our neighbor, our business associates, every one with whom we come in contact. That involves people we do not even know. We now have a social involvement so that we are concerned about the world. But it is not enough to be merely a moralist. A moralist is not necessarily a Christian. The Christian is moral, however, and is concerned about the world around him.¹²

A man was riding along in his old Ford, which suddenly stopped. As he was looking under the hood in déspair, a new Lincoln pulled alongside the Ford; and an impeccably dressed man asked, "What's the trouble?"

The man said, "My Ford won't run."

The gentleman replied, "Let me take a look." He made a few adjustments and then said, "Now turn the key."

The man turned the key, the motor started, and the man said, "Well, I don't understand. How is it that you can fix my car so quickly and I couldn't do a thing?"

The gentleman smiled and said, "Because, sir, I am Henry Ford."¹³

The one who made the Ford knew how to make it run. God made you and me, and he alone knows how to run your life and mine. God knows all about you. He knows your inner workings. If you will open your heart to him, he will transform your life and make of you a new person so that you will find you are living in a whole new world. A Christian is one who is a changed person.

Distinguished by a Godly Life

Finally, what is a Christian? A Christian is one who is distinguished from other people so much that he sometimes suffers persecution. We read in the Scriptures, "Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf."¹⁴

Now Peter does not say that we ought to suffer as a lawbreaker but he says that if any man suffer as a Christian, if any man suffer that kind of persecution, then let him glorify God on this behalf.

The Christian is to be different. Because of this he may suffer persecution because the Christian is in the world, but the Christian does not have the world inside him. And this brings us to the true secret of the Christian life.

All of the things mentioned up to this point are all true and are scriptural. Yet they still do not tell the true secret of this so called "Christian life." The real secret can be found in two more Scriptures that do not even mention the word Christian.

Paul says in his letter to Galatia, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."¹⁵

John might have had a similar idea when he wrote in Revelation: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, 'Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.'¹⁶

It is then in the dying to self that we find the secret of the Christian life. As Paul said we must be crucified with Christ.

We must kill our self with its selfish motives and ideas and begin to make our being available to the will of God. We live a Christian life only by letting Christ live in us. We really begin growing, we really begin to be the Christian Christ wants us to be, the moment we take Christ not only as Saviour but also as Lord and begin to let Him live through us. We can not live the Christian life, we can grow in the Lord, we can do nothing to please God--save what we allow Christ to do through us. The sooner "Christians" quit trying to be Christians and begin to let Christ live the Christian life through them, the sooner we will be able to accomplish the other things brought about in this paper.

The Christian life is like a glove. As long as the glove lays on the dresser it can do nothing, go nowhere. As soon as you put a hand in that glove, it gives that glove life and the glove can be made to work and accomplish works for the hand that now controls its very being. Thus here lies the true secret to being a Christian, wheter it is in the first century or the twentieth century.

To answer our initial questions--It does not require joining a church, yet Christ living in a person will want to be associated with other Christ filled souls. And if we are going to follow the wills of God, the first thing the Bible teaches that He wants us to do is to make your committment public and follow in baptism. Again it does not require this for salvation. Can a hippy be a Christian? Yes, if he has Christ in His heart and if he allows Christ to live in Him. Again, this is the secret. Christ can to save all who were lost. It is is the dying to self, and the life through Christ that makes us a Christian today. When Christ is allowed to live within us we then aquire love and peace and joy. We become concerned

about our fellow man. We witness to others. We have faith in every aspect of life. Not because we can love, not because we can witness, not because we can have faith alone. But because we have Christ within loving, witnessing, and believing through us.

For to have in the heart is to act out the part
To receive is to give; to believe is to live.
That's what it really means 17
If a Christian one would be.

FOOTNOTES

¹Landgrave, J. Philip, Purpose: A Contemporary Musical For Youth, Nashville, Tennessee, Broadman Press, c. 1968.

²Acts 11: 26.

³Acts 26: 28.

⁴I Peter 4: 16.

⁵Barnard, Floy M., Christian Witnessing, Nashville, Tennessee, Convention Press, c. 1959.

⁶McKinney, B. B., Lord, Lay Some Soul Upon My Heart, c. 1940 by the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention for use in the Baptist Hymnal.

⁷Luke 19: 2-10.

⁸II Corinthians 5: 17.

⁹Acts 16: 30-33.

¹⁰II Peter 3: 18.

¹¹Luke 12: 27.

¹²Haughter, Rosemary, Why Be A Christian?, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott Comany, c. 1968.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴I Peter 4: 16.

¹⁵Galatians 2: 20.

¹⁶Revelation 14: 13.

¹⁷Landgrave, op. cit.

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Scripture:

Acts 11: 26; 16: 30-33; 26: 28.

II Corinthians 5: 17.

Galatians 2: 20.

Luke 12: 27; 19: 2-10.

I Peter 4: 16.

II Peter 3: 18.

Revelation 14: 13.