

What is a Christian?

by T. Austin-Sparks

Chapter 1

"And Agrippa said unto Paul, With but little persuasion thou wouldest fain make me a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

Let us say at the outset that we are using the word "Christian" strictly according to what is found in the New Testament, and it is assumed that this will be accepted. Our enquiry will take the form firstly of a process of elimination, and we shall observe

What a Christian is Not

(1) To become a Christian is not to become 'religious', or to adopt a new 'religion'.

Among non-Christian peoples, a turning to Christ is often referred to as 'accepting Christianity', and in what are called Christian countries conversion is frequently referred to as 'becoming religious'. Such expressions, with their associated ideas, are altogether inadequate and indeed fundamentally false. There was no more religious man on the earth, in his time, than Saul of Tarsus. Read what he says of himself in Acts 22 and 26, and Philippians 3. Here was a man who was just aflame with religious zeal and passion. No argument is necessary, with history before us, to prove how wide of the mark religion can be.

And that is true of 'Christianity', when it is merely a matter of religion. To be a true Christian is not to accept a creed or statement of doctrine, to observe certain rites and ordinances, attend certain services and functions, and conform more or less diligently to a prescribed manner of life. All this may be carried very far, with very many good works; but those concerned may still be outside the true New Testament category of 'Christian'. Herein lies the danger of an assumed acceptance with God, which may bring that bitter disillusionment foretold by our Lord Himself in those startling words: "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not... by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me (Matt. 7:23,24).

No, religion is not Christianity, either more or less; it may be only a deception. So that when we seek that people should become Christians, we are not asking them to change their religion, nor are we asking them to become religious. Religion, as such, has never made this world happier or better.

(2) To become a Christian is not to join an institution called 'The Church'.

If the truth were known, there is no such thing as 'joining' the Christian Church. We never took any steps, either of word or deed, in order to get our limbs to become members of our bodies. There is no distinction between our members and our bodies - our members comprise our bodies; but they do so, not by organization, invitation, examination, interrogation or catechism, but simply by life. So, in the Church of Christ, provided that a true life-relationship exists, a 'membership' in the technical sense is a superfluity, and may be a menace. If there is not that relationship, then no 'membership' can constitute the Church of Christ.

There are multitudes, we fear, who have 'membership' in what is called the 'Church', who are not able to stand up to the test which will be presented when we come to speak of what a Christian is. But let us say here that when we appeal to people to become Christians we are not asking them to 'join the Church'. And it must be realised that Christianity is not just one more institution or society. You may go to many places called 'churches', and never really meet Christ, or find satisfaction.

Of course, that is negative. We must realise, however, that when we become Christians we share one new life in Christ with all other born-again believers, and thus we become one in Christ. That really is the Church. It is for us, then, to cherish that relationship and jealously watch over its sacredness. There are immense values in it.

(3) To become a Christian is not to become a part of a new movement.

It is true that there is a sense in which Christianity is a movement, a Divine movement from Heaven. But there are very many who conceive of Christianity in terms of a great enterprise for world betterment or even evangelization. The appeal is so often made that people will come and associate themselves with this great 'work'. There is that in most people which makes a response to such an appeal, and would like to be in a great movement. But such a way of approach is to court trouble, or at least to be found sooner or later in a false position. Moses got the 'movement' idea in Egypt - and then had forty years' inaction in the desert.

There is that which comes before the 'movement', and the movement is with God, not with us. The greatest value in movement, when God's time comes for it, often is that we have learned not to move without Him.

We do not appeal to you to join a movement. We do not invite youth, saying, 'Here is something into which you can throw all your natural powers and youthful enthusiasm!' We would say: 'God has a purpose: you are of concern to Him in relation to that purpose. *But*-you cannot even know or enter into that purpose until something has happened in you which has made you another person. In that purpose you will need much more than natural powers and youthful enthusiasm.'

That brings us to the positive side

What a Christian Is

In seeking to show what a Christian really is, we can do no better than take the case of one who not only was a great instance himself, but whose experience has been that of every true Christian since. We refer to the one who was addressed by a Roman 'King' in the words at the head of this chapter - the Apostle Paul. While the method of his conversion may not be the usual or general one, the principles are always the same.

Here, then, are the first three principles and realities of a true Christian life.

(1) "Who art thou?" "I am Jesus."

The first thing is the inward realisation that Jesus is (not was) a living Person.

The very first words of Paul when confronted by Christ were: "Who art thou?" To which the answer came clear and strong - "I am Jesus!" It was a startling discovery, and Paul might well have exclaimed, 'What, Jesus alive?' Jesus had been put to death, crucified. All that remained to do was to blot out the memory of Him and destroy what represented Him. To this work Paul (then Saul) had committed himself. We can hardly imagine, then, what a startling and paralysing thing it was to be confronted with the fact that Jesus was not dead, but alive, and in glory. And not only with the fact, but with the Person Himself.

All that this implied and involved has been the teaching of many centuries since. But for those to whom these present lines are addressed, this can be resolved into a very simple matter. We begin our Christian life by an experience of this living reality. Not a Jesus of history, but a Jesus of heart experience. That He really is alive is the one thing which is open to be proved by us, and it is the most serious matter as to our eternal destiny. We have only to drop our traditions, our prejudices, our suspicions, our questions, our mental problems, and, quietly kneeling, speak to Him (although unseen) as we would speak to one whom we could see; telling Him out of the honesty of our heart what we would tell Him if we were face to face. The first step is definitely to *speak* to Him, as to a Person.

This is the way of a discovery. We learn from the New Testament that the Spirit of God is abroad in the world just to bring about this discovery - to make real that Jesus lives to save and be our very life. This wonderful realisation, that *Jesus lives*, comes to the heart of every one who honestly turns and puts it to the test; and everything springs out of that.

There is only one way, really, of knowing Jesus, and that is by coming to Him. It may seem very unreal and foolish to say something to someone of whose existence you have no inward proof; but might this not be the same in other circumstances? You have heard of a physician. What you have heard makes you feel that he is just the man for your case. Will you say that you don't believe that there is such a person? Will you say that there is plenty of evidence available that he was killed some time ago? Will you go as far as going to his house and seeing the man spoken of, and then telling the man that you don't believe that he is the physician? If you will do this, then either your case is not very serious, or you are refusing to admit its seriousness. If you are really alive to your need, the very least that you will do will be to go to the physician, tell him your trouble, and say: 'I am advised that you can meet my need, and I ask you to do so. My coming to you represents an honest enquiry and committal, in spite of many doubts and questions.'

My friend, Jesus Christ was ever ready to make the desired gesture to an approach like that. The discovery that Christ is a living reality is the first thing in the Christian life. This is a test as well as a testimony.

(2) *"What wilt thou have me to do, Lord?"*

The second thing - in Paul's case, as in every true Christian life - is represented by one sentence: *"What wilt thou have me to do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10).*

This represents a new position and a new relationship. How very different from that of the old Saul! Hitherto his life and activity had been out from himself - what *he* thought he would do, what *he* proposed, purposed, planned, determined, and desired. Self-determination had been his way of life, although he would have said that it was done in a good cause - even done for God. What an example Saul was of the fact that a man's very best intentions and devotions, in what he believes to be God's interests, may yet be doing God the greatest

disservice - and he himself be totally blind to the fact. We shall speak of this again later (chap. 2, sect. 2).

We see here, then, that one thing is a clear evidence of a life truly acceptable to God; it is the absolute *Lordship* of Jesus Christ. Paul first used that word, "Lord", at his conversion; it came out spontaneously when he realised that *Jesus lives!* From that moment Jesus was his Lord, his Master. We know from his life afterward how utter was that surrender and change of government. Everything from that hour was on the basis of "What wilt Thou?"

Yes, it is the hall-mark of a true Christian life when, with the same inward realisation and abandonment, we say to Jesus, "Lord", and thenceforth have our whole lives governed by Him as Master.

(3) "*Christ in you*".

There is one more indispensable mark and feature of the Christian life to which we will point at this time. It is shown in the words addressed to Paul by one Ananias: "*The Lord Jesus... hath sent me that thou mayest... be filled with the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 9:17).

The consummation of this basic work, by which we become Christians in the true sense, is that everything which is true of Christ is made an *inward* thing with us. Up to this point, although everything has been very real and deep changes have taken place, it has been mainly as in an *outward* relationship with Christ. But it would have been fatal to have left it there, however great the discovery. We cannot live upon something which happened at a certain time. We cannot meet all the tremendous forces of evil which will oppose us, in the strength of a mere memory, however vivid. We shall never live triumphantly, or serve effectively, or satisfy God truly, on any basis of what is merely outward and objective.

The fact is that only Christ can really satisfy God; only Christ can do God's will and God's work. Only Christ can overcome the spiritual forces of evil. Yes, only Christ can really live the Christian life. Hence, the one great inclusive and crowning reality of a Christian is - Christ Himself WITHIN! Paul later put this in these words:

"*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (Col. 1:27).

This becomes true by a definite *act* when we believe. The Holy Spirit takes possession of us in an inward way. This indwelling of Christ had never been known by any man in history until Christ had died and risen and been glorified. It is therefore the peculiar wonder and glory of the Christian. It is this very thing that explains the New Testament term - "*born anew*". There was nothing like it before.

So, then, in a word, our question, 'What is a Christian?' is answered in three initial things.

(1) *Realising* that Jesus is alive.

(2) Enthroning Him as absolute Lord.

(3) Having Him as an inward presence and power by the Holy Spirit.

The testimony of a true Christian must ever be -
'He lives! He lives!

*Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me, He talks with me
Along life's narrow way.
He lives, He lives,
Salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives?
He lives within my heart!*

Chapter 2

"Thou wouldest fain make me a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

"I heard a voice saying unto me... Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 26:14).

The above words, spoken to the same man - Saul of Tarsus, later Paul the Apostle - in the first case by a ruler under the Roman Empire, in the second case by Jesus of Nazareth, contain the essentials of a true Christian experience. This Paul was a truly typical Christian, both in the way in which he became one, and in his life as one. While there may not be many who become Christians with the same *form* or *accompaniments* of their conversion: we may not have been smitten to the ground by a blinding light as we went on some journey, and heard an audible voice from heaven calling us by name: yet the *principles* are always the same. Let us look into these words for the principles.

1. Something Absolutely Personal

"I heard a voice saying unto *me*... Saul, *Saul*..." There were others travelling with Saul on that day; how many, we do not know. Paul speaks of them as "all" - "when we were all fallen to the ground." It would seem that there were quite a number. But Saul was singled out, and what happened was so directly personal that it was as though he were the only man on the earth. He ever afterward spoke of his experience as something extremely personal. The amazing thing to him was that Christ knew him by name, and knew all that was going on inside him.

It is a fact, and a fact which we must realise, that God has a personal and direct interest in us, and a very personal concern for us. The writer had a friend who visited military hospitals. He always carried in his pocket some texts to leave with men who might be in need of a little bit of God's Word. Before starting out he used to pray that he might be guided to give the right text to the right man.

On one of these visits, when entering a ward, he looked around, and up in the corner was a bed with a form bandaged so completely that only nose, mouth and ears were uncovered. He was about to approach the bed when the nurse said that it was useless - the man was too far gone to be spoken to. He paused a minute, and then decided to leave a text on the bandaged hands. This he did, without looking to see what the text was. As he was moving away from the bed, a muffled voice said,

'What's that?'

'Oh,' said my friend, 'it is only a little bit of God's Word.'

'What does it say?' asked the dying man.

'Let me see - yes, here it is, Proverbs 23: 26. It says: "*My son, give me thy heart*".'

'Who said that?' asked the soldier.

'That is from God's Word - the Bible!'

'Read it again,' said the wounded man.

"My son, give me thy heart".'

Silence for a moment, and then -

'Did you say that is in the Bible?'

'Yes, and God says it to you.'

The soldier heaved a sigh, but there was a question in the sigh. My friend waited a moment and then asked what was perplexing or surprising him.

'Look at the card over my bed,' said the soldier.

My friend did so, and was amazed to read, on the card giving his Army particulars, the name

JACK MYSON

Do you say 'Accident!' 'Coincidence!?' That man was about to pass into eternity, and God spoke to him by name. Again, it may not always be in just the same way; but the fact remains that God has a personal concern for each one of us, and a true Christian is one who has come to have such a personal relationship with God as to make it possible for him - or her - to say, as did Paul:

"He loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*" (Gal. 2:20).

"I heard a voice saying unto *me*, Saul, Saul..."

Then Saul came to realise that his inner history was all known to Christ. The other people could see what was going on outwardly. He was going in hot haste to Damascus. He had certain documents authorising him to arrest Christians and take them bound to Jerusalem. He was doing his business with a will, and those other people would put it down to his religious zeal. But there was One above who knew something else. He disclosed that knowledge when He said -

"It is hard for thee to kick against the goad." (Acts 26:14).

So, really, he was like an ox harnessed to a plough, which, unwilling to go in a certain direction, and being goaded against its wishes, was letting out in rebellion, and kicking against the goad. What a different picture this was from what others would have had of him, and how different from what he was trying to make himself believe! But that One above knows things that we are not prepared to admit or accept. He sees through us, through all our pretensions and self-deceptions and resistance.

Saul was striving desperately to establish the falsehood of Christ and Christianity, but the truth was that he was not so sure of himself as he had hoped. Something had touched him, and it would have been fatal to his position if he had given that something a chance. So he had to gird himself up and resist with all his might. Inwardly he was kicking, in effect saying, 'I don't want Christ! I won't have Christ! I am not going to be a Christian!'

Well, Christ is a reality, and sooner or later we shall *have* to have Him. There are different times and ways in which that may be.

We can have Him *now*, as our Lord and our Saviour, and, like Paul, enjoy a life of wonderful fellowship with Him and useful service for Him.

Or we might have Him at the end of our life, whether that be sooner or later. But that will mean the unspeakable regret and grief that we have no life of service to lay at His feet - an eternally forfeited life of fellowship with Him in the great purpose with which He is now occupied.

Or, alas, when this life is past, we shall have to have Him - not as our Advocate and Friend, but as our Judge.

God has determined that eventually "every knee shall bow" to His Son, but His desire is that it shall be as it was with Saul: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This is what it means to be a Christian. But there is yet more in the words that we have quoted at the head of this chapter.

2. Christianity - Not a Religion, but a Person

"Why persecutest thou me?" asked the glorified Christ. What an idea! Here was a man just going 'all out' in religious devotion. So far as his reason was concerned (even if his heart had some lurking and bothering question), he was convinced that he ought to do this thing in the interests of religion. He was really a divided man inside, but in his zeal for traditional religion, and, as he would have argued, for God's sake, he was suppressing every question and relentlessly forcing himself on. And yet, all the time, he was working against God, against God's Son, and against Heaven! What a state of confusion!

Much could be said about this: as to the difference between being religious and being a genuine Christian; as to how it is possible for people to be passionately devout and devoted to what they believe to be of God - or for God - and yet to be rather obstructing His real interests by that very devotion. But we must resolve it all into one inclusive issue.

A Christian is not a person who is religious, either *more* or less. A Christian is not a person who has taken on a lot of 'dos' and 'do nots'. God is not going to deal with us on these grounds. Neither is He going to judge men on the basis of the number or nature of their sins. He has one basis of judgment, than which any other basis would be unfair, because everyone, by his or her birth, upbringing, advantages, temperament, and so on, would be either favoured or otherwise. That one basis of judgment is, and will be: *What are we doing with God's Son, Jesus Christ?*

God sent His Son, and by Him we are all brought to a common position. He is presented as God's appointed Lord and Saviour for *all* men. God will never say in the judgment, 'How many sins did you commit?' 'What kind of sins did you commit?' - but, 'What did you do

with My Son?' It is not necessary to be violent in our rejection, or actively and vehemently to fight against Christ, as did Saul. We can - with exactly the same eternal loss - just reject Him; say 'No' and close ourselves to Him; or simply ignore Him. We are lost just the same. There is no need to dash to the ground the saving medicine in order to perish. It is only necessary to leave it where it is and not take it. But it is a terrible responsibility to have known that it was there, and to have just failed to take it.

We see, then, that all questions of life and death, sin and righteousness, Heaven and Hell, time and eternity, are bound up - not with 'religion', 'church', 'creed' - but with a living relationship to the Son of God; and a Christian is one who has himself come into such a living relationship, and has found all these questions answered in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Hast thou heard Him, seen Him, known Him?
Is not thine a captured heart?
Chief among ten thousand own Him,
Joyful choose the better part.*

*Idols, once they won thee, charmed thee
Lovely things of time and sense.
Gilded thus does sin disarm thee,
Honeyed, lest thou turn thee thence.*

*What has stripped the seeming beauty
From the idols of the earth?
Not a sense of right or duty,
But the sight of peerless worth.*

*Not the crushing of those idols,
With its bitter void and smart;
But the beaming of His beauty,
The unveiling of His heart.*

*Who extinguishes their taper
Till they hail the rising sun?
Who discards the garb of winter
Till the summer has begun?*

*'Tis that look that melted Peter,
'Tis that face that Stephen saw,
'Tis that heart that wept with Mary,
Can alone from idols draw*

*Draw and win and fill completely,
Till the cup o'erflow the brim:
What have we to do with idols
Who have companied with Him?*

Anon.