

Being a Christian

What does it mean to be a Christian? We shall focus upon the basics. A good place to start is the Bible. Christians call the word of God. All Christian groups make this claim. Why?

First, and very importantly, because of ***the claims made by Jesus Christ***. See (1) what he did when he was tempted by the Devil (*Matthew 4*); (2) how he used the Bible in debates (e.g. *Matthew 19.1ff, 21.42, 22.29*); and (3) his claim that specific events were predicted in Scripture (*Matthew 26.54-56; Luke 24.27*). The way he used the Bible on each occasion shows he was convinced that the 39 books which make up the first part of the Bible (commonly called the Old Testament) are (a) God-given, and have (b) a unique authority.

Secondly, because of ***the claims made by the apostles***. Peter describes the letters of Paul as God-given Scripture (*2 Peter 3.16*); Paul frequently mentions the authority of the Scriptures (*Romans 4.3; 9.17, 10.11, 15.4, 1 Corinthians 15.3f, Galatians 3.8 & 22, 4.30, 1 Timothy 4.13, 5.18*); James does something similar (*James 2.8 & 23, 4.5*); and Paul asserts all Scripture is 'breathed out by God' (*2 Timothy 3.16, cp 2 Peter 1.21*). In other words, the origin of Scripture is God and not mankind.

Thirdly, because of ***the testimony of the Holy Spirit***. The Lord Jesus teaches his people will listen to his voice (*John 10.16*). He also says the work of the Holy Spirit is to take what belongs to Christ's and make it known to his people (*John 16.14*). Furthermore the consistent witness of Christians down the years is that the Holy Spirit witnesses to them that the Scriptures are not man-made but God-given.

It is not surprising that the Christians boldly affirm the 66 books of the Bible to be Scripture. But we can, and must, go further. At least four more affirmations may be made.

First, ***we need the Bible.*** Why? Without it we would remain in a state of uncertainty and ignorance. An encyclopaedia of religion and ethics is a useful tool. Its main use is to help us see that numerous religious ideas exist. Many are very old. In fact there are so many competing belief systems in the world that some think it is impossible to know which is true and which is false.

Is it possible to discover truth from error, or fact from make-believe? The answer is, Yes. Why? Because the teaching of Jesus Christ is authoritative.

We know it is because he rose from the dead. What he said he would do (die and rise) he did. The resurrection of Jesus Christ conclusively demonstrates the truthfulness of his claims. If he is not risen faith in him is futile. Why? Because it would be built upon a 'dream' (a false notion), not a fact (or decisive event) of history. But Christ did rise - just as he said he would.

This Christ, as we have seen, claims the Scriptures to be God's Word. We are to be thankful they are, for if

they are not we would still be in a never ending state of spiritual darkness.

It is God's word alone that enables us to discover the difference between truth and error, fact and fiction. Because that is so we say we need the Bible.

Secondly, ***we need nothing other than Scripture.*** History shows some people do not rely upon the Bible alone. They put something alongside it. Some add tradition, others a message they claim to be from God. Some add the ideas of a person; others add their own ideas.

We are to avoid this temptation. Instead we are to assert the sufficiency of Scripture. It is all that God wants us to have as our authority in all matters of faith and conduct. It alone can function as a 'lamp to (our) feet and a light to (our) path' (*Psalm 119.105*). It is all we need.

Thirdly, ***we need to grow in our knowledge of Scripture.*** The author of Psalm 119 shows in numerous ways the value of knowing

the Word of God. Because he knew God's Word he was able to teach his teachers (*verses 99f*). Those who are like him are able to do the same. That is why the apostle Paul advises us to 'let the word of Christ dwell in (us) richly' (*Colossians 3.16*). And that is why Peter instructs Christians to 'grow in the grace and knowledge" of Jesus Christ' (*2 Peter 3.18*).

Fourthly, ***we need to acknowledge our dependence upon Scripture.***

Some imagine we can get by without the Bible. They rely on their own understanding. They may even seek promptings or signs from the Holy Spirit without reference to Scripture. It does not act as a control for them.

If the Bible is God's Word, and if God wants us to live by every word that comes from his mouth, then we should not and must not sideline Scripture. Instead we are to recognize living the Christian life is not a matter of following *either* Scripture *or* the Spirit of God. It involves being led by *both* Scripture *and* the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit never contradicts what he caused to be written long ago. He does not ignore the word he has given for our instruction. He uses it for our growth

and spiritual well-being. We are to keep his commandments (*John 14.21*).

Two further points may be underlined. Both naturally emerge from what we have seen.

First, ***Christians are to be radical people.*** What does that mean? To be radical means to get to the root of things. That is what believers seek to do. Jesus Christ teaches that we cannot live on bread alone. We need the Word of God. We need to know it.

The Christian life is (in one sense) a life of growing in understanding how the respective elements of the truth God has revealed relate to each other. Believers are never content with mere summaries or superficial explanations of what the Bible teaches. Like confident swimmers they launch out into the deeps. They seek to discover more about God.

As Jim Packer shows in the title of the modern Christian classic he penned, the Christian life is about 'Knowing God'. It is not merely a matter of gathering information about him. It is about growing in our relationship with him.

Our knowledge of him matures as we grow in knowing and understanding his Word. The more we discover in it about him, ourselves, and the wonderful salvation he provides, the more we delight and rejoice in him.

Secondly, ***Christians are submissive people***. In the power of the Holy Spirit they submit themselves to be ruled by Scripture. Those who love Christ keep his commands (*John 14.21*).

They also hold together those truths which at first sight may appear to contradict each other. For example, in the Bible we see repeatedly asserted the fact that God sovereignly overrules all things and secretly works out his purposes and will. We also see asserted mankind's ability to make choices and his duty to act responsibly.

Instead of trying to argue away the problems associated with how these truths relate to one another, the Christian allows them to stand together. He or she submits to God's Word and allows it to be heard above, before and after the ideas of people.

The primary, decisive and final authority for the Christian is the Bible rightly understood. The Bible is its own interpreter. Christians are not to impose their interpretation upon it. Instead they are to let it speak for itself. And they are to submit humbly to its authority and teaching (*see Articles 6, 7, 18, 19, 20 & 21 of the 39 Articles of Religion*).