

WHAT IS A BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN?

An abridged edition of "What is a Biblical Christian?" by Albert N. Martin,
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(Abridged by Dr. Jerry Nelson)

I want to set before you four strands of the Bible's answer to that question.

1. ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE A CHRISTIAN IS A PERSON WHO HAS FACED REALISTICALLY THE PROBLEM OF HIS OWN PERSONAL SIN.

Now one of the many unique things about the Christian faith is this—unlike most of the religions of the world, Christianity is essentially and fundamentally a sinner's religion. **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.**

A. We find that the Scripture tells us that each one of us has a two-fold personal problem in relation to sin. On the one hand, we have the problem of a bad record, on the other, the problem of a bad heart. What do I mean by 'the problem of a bad record'? The Scripture tells us plainly that we obtained a bad record long before we had any personal existence here upon the earth: 'Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned' (Roman 5:12). When did the *all* sin? We all sinned in Adam. He was appointed by God to represent all of the human race and when he sinned we sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression. We are all part of the race that is under condemnation.

Furthermore, the Scripture says, after we come into being at our own conception and subsequent birth additional guilt accrues to us for our own personal, individual transgressions. The Word of God teaches that there is not a just man upon the face of the earth who does good and does not sin (Eccles 7:20), and every single sin incurs additional guilt. Almighty God measures the totality of our human experience from the moment of our birth by a standard which is absolutely inflexible; a standard that touches not only our external deeds but also our thoughts and the very motions and intentions of our heart. And God is keeping a detailed record. That record is among 'the books' which will be opened in the day of judgment (Rev. 20:12). And there in those books is recorded every thought, every motive, every intention, every deed, every dimension of human experience that is contrary to the standard of God's holy law, either failing to measure up to its standard or transgressing it. We have the problem of a bad record—that is why the scriptures tells us that the entire human race stands guilty before Almighty God (Romans 3:19).

B. Has the problem of your own bad record ever become a burning, pressing personal concern to you so that you awakened to the fact that Almighty God has every right to summon you into his presence and to require you to give an account of every single deed contrary to His law, which has brought guilt upon your soul? Certainly we have the problem of a bad record but we have an additional problem -the problem of a bad heart. The Scripture teaches that the problem of our sin is one that arises not only from what we have done, but from what *we are*. When Adam sinned he not only became guilty before God, but defiled and polluted in his own nature. Jesus in Mark 7:21 names all the various sins that can be seen in any newspaper on any day--blasphemies, pride, adulteries, murder. Jesus said that these things rise out of this artesian well of pollution—the human heart. Our so-called sociological experts tell us it is 'the condition of society' that produces crime and rebellion. Jesus says it is the *condition of the human heart*. For from *within* of the heart, proceed these things--lies, selfishness, self-centeredness, total pre-occupation with my feelings and my desires and my plans and my perspectives. The disposition of every human heart by nature can be visually pictured as a clenched fist raised against the living God. This is the inward problem of a bad heart—a heart that loves sin, a heart that is the fountain of sin, a heart that is at enmity with God.

And such is the problem that every one of us has by nature.

Have *your* bad record and *your* bad heart ever become a matter of deep, inward, personal, pressing concern to you? Have you known anything of real, personal, inward consciousness of the awfulness of your guilt in the presence of a holy God? - the horribleness of a heart that is 'deceitful above all things and desperately wicked'? A Christian is a person who has in all seriousness taken to heart his own personal problem of sin.

Now the degree to which we may feel the awful weight of sin differs from one person to another. The length of time over which a person is brought to the consciousness of his bad record and his bad heart differs. There are many variables, but Jesus Christ as the Great Physician never brought his healing virtue to any who did not know themselves to be sinners. Are you a Bible Christian, one who has taken seriously your personal problem of sin?

2. A CHRISTIAN IS ONE WHO HAS SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED THE ONE DIVINE REMEDY FOR SIN.

In the Bible we are told again and again that Almighty God has taken the initiative in doing something for man the sinner. You see, the unique feature of the Christian faith is that it is not a kind of religious self-help where you patch yourself up with the aid of God. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own boot-strings. God in mercy breaks in upon the human situation and does something which we could never do for ourselves.

A. *First of all, that divine institution remedy is bound up in a Person.* Anyone who begins to take seriously the divine remedy for human sin will notice in the Scriptures that the remedy is not in a set of ideas, as though it were just another philosophy, nor is it found in an institution, it is bound up in a *Person*. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son' (John 3:16). That one divine remedy is bound up in a Person and that Person is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is God's provision for man with his bad record and his bad heart, a Saviour who is both God and man. Your personal problem of sin, and mine, if it is ever to be remedied in a biblical way will be remedied only as we have personal dealings with that Person.

B. *Second, the divine remedy is centered in the cross upon which that Person died.* When we turn to the Scriptures we find that the divine remedy in an unique way is centered in the cross of Jesus Christ. You see, God's gracious remedy for sin is not only bound up in a person, it is centered in the cross of that Person. The cross was the place where God heaped upon his Son, by imputation, the sins of his people. It is not the cross as some nebulous, indefinable symbol of self-giving love, it is the cross as the monumental display of how God can be just and still pardon guilty sinners; the cross where God, having imputed the sins of his people to Christ, pronounces judgment upon his Son as the representative of his people. There on the cross God pours out the vials of his wrath, unmixed with mercy, until his Son cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why have you forsaken me?' (Psa 22:1; Matt 27:46). There in the visible world at Calvary, God, as it were, was demonstrating what was happening in the invisible spiritual world. He shrouds the heavens in total darkness to let all mankind know that he is plunging his Son into the outer darkness of the hell which your sins and my sins deserved. Jesus hangs on the cross in the place of an undefended guilty criminal. There in the theater of what men can see God is demonstrating what he is doing in the realm where we cannot see. He is treating his Son as a criminal, he is causing him to feel in the depths of his own soul all of the fury of the wrath that should have been vented upon us.

C. *Third, the divine remedy is adequate for and offered to all without discrimination.* Before we have any felt consciousness of our sin, about the easiest thing in the world is to think that God can forgive sinners. Once we take seriously the truth that it is a holy God who sees the foul, corrupt human hearts, which are yours and mine, then we say, 'O God, how can you be anything other than just; and if you give me what my sins deserve, there is nothing for me but wrath and judgment! How can you forgive me and still be just?' When you begin to take your sin seriously, forgiveness becomes the most knotty problem with which your mind has ever wrestled. It is then that we need to know that God has provided in a Person, and

that Person crucified, a remedy that is adequate for and offered to all without discrimination. When God begins to make us feel the reality of our sin, if there were any conditions placed on the availability of Christ, we would say, Surely I don't meet the conditions, surely I don't qualify', but the wonder of God's provision is that it comes in these unfettered terms: 'Come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; he who has no money, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price' (Isa 55:1-2). Oh, the beauty of the unfettered offers of mercy in Jesus Christ! We do not need to have God step out of heaven and tell us that we, by name, are warranted to come; we have the unfettered offers of mercy in the words of his own Son, 'Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'

3. A CHRISTIAN IS ONE WHO HAS WHOLEHEARTEDLY COMPLIED WITH THE DIVINE TERMS FOR APPROPRIATING THE DIVINE PROVISION

The divine terms are two - repent and believe. Now because we have to speak in terms of one word following another, or preceding another, we must not think that this repentance is ever divorced from faith or that this faith is ever divorced from repentance. True faith is permeated with repentance, true repentance is permeated with faith.

What is repentance? The definition of the *Shorter Catechism* is an excellent one: 'Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of (that is, a laying hold of) the mercy of God in Christ does with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.'

Repentance is the prodigal down in the far country coming to his senses. He left his father's home because he could not stand his father's government Everything about his father's will and ways irritated him. It was a constant block to following the desires of his own foul, wretched, sin-loving heart. But the Scripture tells us in Luke 15 that down in the far country he came to himself: 'And when he came to himself he said, 'I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him, Father I have sinned against heaven, and before you, and am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants'. And then the Scripture says he did not sit there and think about it, and write poetry about it and send telegrams home to his Dad. It says, *he rose up and came to his father*. He left all those companions who were his friends in sin; he loathed and abominated and abhorred everything that belong to that life-style. He turned his back on it. And what was it that drew him home? It was the confidence that there was a gracious father with a large heart and with the righteous rule for his happy, loving home. He did not send a telegram saying, 'Dad, things are getting rough down here; my conscience is giving me fits at night; won't you send me some money to help me out and come and pay me a visit and make me feel good?' Not at all! He did not need just to feel good, he needed to become good. And he left the far country.

It is a beautiful stroke in our Lord's picture when he says, "While he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran, and threw his arms around him and kissed him." The prodigal did not come strutting up to this father, talking about making a decision to come home. There is a notion that people can come strutting into enquiry rooms and pray their lime prayer and so do God a favor by making their decision. True repentance involves recognizing that I have sinned against the God of heaven, who is great and gracious, holy and loving, and that I am not worthy to be called his son. And yet, when I am prepared to leave my sin, to turn my back upon it and to come back haltingly, wondering if indeed there can be mercy for me, then -wonder of wonders! - the Father meets me, and throws the arms of reconciling love and mercy about me. I say it, not in a sentimental way but in all truth, he smothers repenting sinners in forgiving and redemptive love.

But note, the father did not throw his arms around the prodigal when he was still in the hog pens and in the arms of harlots. Do I speak to some whose hearts are wedded to the world, who love the world's ways? *Repentance is being sorry enough to quit your sin*. You will never know the forgiving mercy of God while you are still wedded to your sins.

Repentance is the soul's divorce from sin but it will always be joined to faith. What is faith? Faith is the casting of the soul upon Christ as he is offered to us in the Gospel. *Forsaking All I Take Him*. That is Faith! 'As many as received him to them gave he the right to become the sons of God, even to them that believe in his name' (John 1:12). The Bible uses many analogies and the sum of all of them is this--that in the nakedness of my need I cast myself upon the Saviour, trusting him to be to me all that he has promised to be to needy sinners. Faith brings nothing to Christ but an empty hand by which it takes Christ and all that is in him. And what is in him? Full pardon for all my sins! His perfect obedience is put to my account His death is counted as mine. And the gift of the Spirit is in him.

What is a Christian? A biblical Christian is a person who has wholeheartedly complied with the divine terms for obtaining the divine provision for sin. Those terms are repentance and faith. I like to think of them as the hinge on which the door of salvation turns. The hinge has two plates. One that is screwed to the door and the other screwed to the door jam. They are held together by a pin and on that hinge the door turns. Christ is that door, but none enter through him who do not repent and believe, and there is no true hinge made up only of repentance. A repentance that is not joined to faith is a legal repentance. It terminates on yourself and on your sin.

A professed faith that is not joined to repentance is a spurious faith, for faith is faith in Christ to save me, not *in* but *from* my sin. Repentance and faith are inseparable, and except you repent you will perish. He that believeth not shall be damned.

4. A CHRISTIAN IS A PERSON WHO MANIFESTS IN HIS LIFE THAT HIS CLAIMS TO REPENTANCE AND FAITH ARE REAL

Paul said that he preached that men should repent and turn to God and do works, consistent with, repentance (Acts 26:20). Wherever there is true faith in Christ there will always be implanted genuine love to Christ and where there is love to Christ there will be obedience to Christ True faith always works by love, and what does it work? A life of obedience! 'He that has my commandments, and keeps them, he it is that loves me' (John 14:21). We are not saved by loving Christ, we are saved by trusting Christ, but a trust that produces no love is not real. What is a Christian? Not merely one who says, 'Oh, yes, I know I am a sinner, with a bad record and a bad heart. I know that God's provision for sinners is in Christ and in his cross, adequate, freely offered to all, and I know it comes to all who repent and believe.' That is not enough. Do you profess to repent and believe? Then can you make that profession stick, not by a life of perfection but by a life of purposeful obedience to Jesus Christ? Not everyone who says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven', Jesus said, 'but he who is doing the will of my Father who is in heaven' (Matt 7:21).

Can you make your claim to be a Christian stick from the Bible? Does your life manifest the fruits of repentance and faith? Do you possess a life of attachment to Christ, of obedience to Christ and confession of Christ? Is your behavior marked by adherence to the way of Christ? Not perfectly – No! every day you must pray, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who trespass against us.' But you can also say, 'For me to live is Christ.' That is what a true Christian is.

Are you a real Christian? I leave you to answer in the deep chambers of your own mind and heart. But, remember to answer with an answer that you will be prepared to live with for eternity. Be content with no answer but that which will find you comfortable in death and safe in the day of judgment.

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